

## ABHIPRAYAN: STUDYING THE HINDU AND MUSLIM DIASPORA IN POST-PARTITION (WEST AND EAST) BENGAL

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**Abstract:** In this paper, an attempt to visit and discuss the Hindu and Muslim diasporic communities in Bengal (East and West), that were formed as a result of the Partition of India and Pakistan, in 1947, will be made. A deliberate, gradual process whose seeds had been sown in 1905, Partitioning resulted in the loss of a massive piece of one of India's most well-knit communities – the Bengali community. In the paper, how important a role religion plays in the formation of a diasporic sphere, such that culture is sidelined, will be addressed. The mass migration of Bengalis who were Hindus, to India's 'West Bengal', from what was earlier simply known as the state of 'Bengal', and the migration of a majority of Bengali Muslims from what was cartographically a part of India, to 'East Pakistan' (now known as Bangladesh), destroyed a community that was united by their mother-tongue. The focus of the paper will concentrate upon the diasporic Bengali-Hindu community of Bangladesh and Bengali-Muslim community of India, who were compelled to migrate to the others' local sphere, and find their own space in a known land that was intentionally made foreign to them. The phenomenon of migration, done by choice, or under compulsion, constitutes the loss of land, material wealth, acquainted points of references in a known physical space, and most importantly, exposes the transience of one's identity. The aim of the paper is to gauge and establish whether individual and communal identity depend on the mother-tongue and/or the religion, or if mother-tongue and/or religion play no role in the migration of a people and formation of two separate communities that have been culturally congruent for centuries, but are divided by a seventy years old geographical border.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Diaspora, Geography, Language, Mother-tongue, Partition, Religion.

**Introduction:** True to its colonial heritage, the largest democracy in the world, and its immediately eastern and western neighbours, has seen each other arm themselves greatly in the recent past. Two generations of people in all three countries were affected by the polity of 1947, either immediately, or as an extended consequence of the same, such that their mass-migration across the then-charted border was not optional. If we attempt to understand how the increased import of armaments and ammunition, and forced migration of a people to a land made alien to them, depending mainly on their religious faith, are interlinked, we need to look back at India, in 1905, when Lord Curzon first proposed the Partition of Bengal. Having sown the seeds of Partition one hundred and eleven years ago from the present day, the nation versus nationality battle was lost by people who had no choice but to abandon their homes, properties and most importantly, identities and reference points, in the locale they had grown up in – that of their ancestors. It is essential to study the Partition of Bengal because it reveals how the most basic of diasporic communities are formed – by force. The movement of Hindus in the now-Bangladesh to West Bengal, and Muslims in Bengal to Bangladesh, can be compared to exilic movements in history such as the deportation of Jews from Babylon, the migration of the people post-Partition of Poland, the Central Tibetan Administration (in exile), and so on. With close reference to *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, and *Nationalism without a Nation in India* by

G. Aloysius, an attempt to identify and study the Hindu-Muslim diasporas in West Bengal and Bangladesh, after the Partition of India in 1947, will be made.

*"The events of 1947 were only the beginning of serial mass displacements caused not only by physical civic and state violence, but also by a bureaucratic form of state violence. This violence was enacted in the ways that the state institutions of India and Pakistan planned and administered rehabilitation programs and enforced the Indo-Pak border as a political boundary within the territorial borders of the states."<sup>(1)</sup>*

The Partition of India serves as an example of one of the largest voluntary and involuntary migration of a people in modern history. K. Hill observes that the unofficial number of dislocated migrants and refugees in Bengal, Assam, and Punjab, from 1947 to 1951, exceeded 17 million. Hill writes –

*"In the period 1941 to 1951, the Hindu populations of East Bengal districts all contract, though by very variable amounts, whereas the Hindu populations of West Bengal tend to grow somewhat faster than 1931 to 1941, as would be expected given the migration of over 2 million people, presumably predominantly Hindu, from East Bengal into West Bengal. ... These patterns of growth suggest a more substantial relocation of the Hindu population about the time of Partition than of the Moslem population."<sup>(2)</sup>*

Most commonly referred to as the 'Big March' of the 'Great Divide', given that the Partition was taking place on grounds of religion, it was only predictable

that in-migration was far less in comparison to out-migration. However, it is essential to understand that migration and diaspora are not synonymous - the latter is a by-product of the former.

*"Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal, but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory, and home, which such displacement produces."*<sup>(3)</sup>

Out of the 14.49 million migrants who were forced to move to India, West Pakistan, and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), official data reveals how over 2.2 million went "missing". It is crucial to note the vast number of migrants who went "missing" during Partition, because the mass 'abhiprayan' (which translates to 'migration', in Bengali) leading to the formation of a displaced, Hindu diasporic community in India, and a dislocated, Muslim diasporic community in Bangladesh, cannot be analysed quantitatively.

Although the legislative decision to divide India ensured dire consequences of being ostracized, in the least, within one's own religious community, most people did not travel too far from the border of the new land (this is commonly known as the 'distance effect'); many ensured that they settle in the locales which had a large amount of out-migration, consequently replacing the migrating population (known as the 'replacement effect'); the rest migrated to the cities.

The horror of migration which followed the Partition of India, eventually leading to the formation of cocoons of Hindu diasporic communities in Bengal and Assam, was and has been since, glossed over in records.

*"In the Indian census the term used for such migrants was "displaced persons," while the Pakistani census uses the term "muhajir." Displaced and muhajir specifically measure people that moved from India/Pakistan due to partition. Internal migration is not measured by this variable and therefore it provides a good measure of the number of people who moved into both countries due to the Partition."*<sup>(4)</sup>

For all diasporic people, the words 'home' and 'identity' carry a weight that is inexplicable to those who have not been, or do not feel, dislocated. A close study of Amitav Ghosh's memory novel, which tries to explain the purpose of physical boundaries, reveals through the character of Thamma (the narrator's paternal grandmother) the problem of a diasporic citizen. She is unable to accept Calcutta as her home, and is equally confused when she sees the Dhaka of her memories and the Dhaka that she lands in, with Tridib and May Price, are starkly different from one another. Paul de Man<sup>(5)</sup> (his 1940's letters establish him as a 'Nazi collaborator') discussed class consciousness, and memory of the 'homeland', as "*the retrospective recording of failure to overcome the power of time*".

When she reaches Dhaka, the narrator's Thamma is unable to grasp the fact that the boundary between India and Bangladesh runs inside the airport, and that it is not a physical border. She questions the authorities and Tridib about the same, her argument essentially comprising of what purpose had the Partition of India served if 'they' had failed to build even the most basic signifier of a partitioned land - a border.

The narrator, in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, confides in the readers how -

*"They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment off lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other."*

**Transcript of a telephonic conversation with Mrs. Minati Gupta out-migrant from Khulna, Bangladesh, in 1947:**

**AG:** When and where were you born?

**Minati G:** 1937. (inaudible) Bagerhat district in Khulna, Bangladesh.

**AG:** Where were your parents from? Did you have any siblings?

**Minati G:** Maa is from Kumartuli, Calcutta. Baba was Bagerhat, Khulna. Two brothers and seven sisters, including me. [sic]

**AG:** What did the older members of your family do? Did all of you live in a joint family?

**Minati G:** My baba was a school teacher, my uncle was a lawyer, and eldest brother was a sales tax officer. We did. All of us cousins grew up together. [sic]

**AG:** Do you remember travelling to India, with your family? What can you tell us about the Partition?

**Minati G:** I remember it vividly. My family sold off some of our land. (pause) We were a family of zamindars, and it was only from my father and uncles who worked elsewhere. We couldn't sell the rest of the land or the ponds we owned, so we travelled with (inaudible) only essential things. [sic]

**AG:** How did you make it to Calcutta? Where did all of you settle?

**Minati G:** We took the train. ...*naam* I don't remember. Kumartuli, where my mother was from. Maa and Jethi'ma sold their jewellery and we ate bananas and *muri* (puffed rice) till we reached Kumartuli.

**AG:** Did any member of your family decide to stay back in Khulna? Siblings, cousins...?

**Minati G:** One *kaku* wanted to stay back and sell the rest of the land so that we would be financially okay. He was beaten up by a mob and got gangrene. He died, and a (counting) cousin also went.

**AG:** Were you close?

**Minati G:** Yes. She married a Muslim and Jethu disowned her. She became a writer - Nilima Ibrahim.

**AG:** The author of 'Satabdi'r Ondhokare' (The Darkness of the Century)?

**Minati G:** *Hyan...* (inaudible) She sent letters, but stopped after 1972. Partition cost our family two members, and we had to build a house from the scratch. At least, we were successful. (inaudible) Many of my friends couldn't come to Calcutta and I haven't seen them since '47. [sic]

In his work, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, G. Aloysius discusses the negative aspects of Indian nationalism and how, on evaluating the post-1947 Partition scene historiographers have concluded the 'historic failure' and inability of the India and Bangladesh to come to terms with the permanence of Partition. The divide between the formal and the substantial has been explained by Aloysius as the conflict between a given religious ideology, and a longing for familiar surroundings and home. One of the major reasons why the Hindu and Muslim communities in both the two Bengals survive in trifle tussles, and armed action at the border, both, is because of the same cultural identity they used to share before a new map was charted by Cyril Radcliffe, in 1947. Even the most basic of arguments between *bangaals* (a Bengali diasporic people who migrated from Bangladesh to India; they have an East Bengal ancestry) and *ghotis* (a Bengali people whose ancestry is rooted in West Bengal itself) about which of the two – Hilsa (a type of fish) of the river Padma, of Bangladesh (usually preferred by the *bangaals*), or, prawns (preferred by the *ghotis*) tastes better.

The after-effects of Partition, felt by the out-migrated diasporic, Hindus of 'East' Bengal, who moved to West Bengal, and the Muslims of West Bengal, who moved to 'East' Bengal, was not restricted to merely a few years after 1947. Not only did the displaced populations either feel out of place, or attempted to 'fit in' and find their own personal centres (although, according to Jacques Derrida, locating a centre is difficult in the sense that it is both within and without a structure, because it is the governing force), which in the given case(s) is their homes and identities.

One of the more significant examples of Post-Partition conflicts between the Hindu-Muslim diasporic communities in the neighbouring Bengals, addressed in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, and scarcely in modern history, were the riots of 1964 in Calcutta (West Bengal) and, Khulna (Bangladesh). Less than twenty years after the Partition of India, the *Moi-e-Muqaddas* (the hair of the Prophet, Muhammad), a protected relic, disappeared from the Hazratbal Shrine, in December 1963. This resulted in a furore in Jammu and Kashmir, where the Hindu and Muslim communities came together and protested, demanding that the government take immediate action to locate and restore it. In January 1964, the

sacred relic was found. It was this hurried restoration of what was the 'apparently' the *Moi-e-Muqaddas* and rising mistrust, which sparked an antagonism between the two communities. This acted as a linchpin for what eventually turned out to be an 'ethnic cleansing' of Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh, by the Muslim community. Forced conversion, abduction, rape, murder, had become rampant. A representation of this incident is present in Ghosh's novel, where the old Jethamoshai, riding Khalil's rickshaw, is being taken to Mayadebi's house, such that the family can take Jethamoshai to India. Unwillingly, Jethamoshai is put on the rickshaw and Khalil follows the *Dutta-Chaudhary family's car*. *When the driver notices a mob gathering at the end of the road, he cautions the others about trouble. Later, towards the end of the novel, May Price confides in the narrator what really happened on that fateful afternoon. Tridib, in his attempt to rescue Jethamoshai from the angry mob, had pushed May Price away and rushed towards the rickshaw. The mob had gathered around him and dispersed within minutes, with Tridib, Khalil, and the aged Jethamoshai's bodies lying on the road, with throats slit from ear to ear. As a reaction to the violence of the Khulna riots of 1964, mobs gathered in Calcutta as well. Laterally opposite to the anti-Hindu riots in Bangladesh, anti-Muslim riots snowballed in India. Over a hundred people were killed, and thousands put in prison.*

The Hindu and Muslim communities in Post-Partition Bengal, India and Bangladesh, is a struggle to establish an identity that has been imposed on its people. While some criticise the policies, others longingly look back at their past. One of the unifying agents of both diasporic communities is the 'baul' tradition. The wandering minstrels of Bengal, in both India and Bangladesh, *bauls* comprise a syncretic people who rejoice and sing songs of Bengal, disregarding the religion of the place, and their lyrics are strongly influenced by the works of Rabindranath Tagore. However, such a soulful unison of language and home is not a popular practice in Assam. It is essential to mention Assam, when discussing these Post-Partition diasporic communities, because the migrants who were unable to find asylum in West Bengal, sought refuge in Assam.

*"The effects of the displacement of peoples-their forced migration, their deportation, their voluntary emigration, and their movement to new lands where they made themselves masters over others, or became subjects of the masters of their new homes-reverberate down the years and are still felt today."*<sup>(6)</sup>

The population strength of the community of Displaced Bengali Hindus (DBH) is very high in Assam. Furthermore, with over 7000 Bangladeshi immigrants moving to Assam every day, and appropriating management of the land, forests, and

farming, leading to the indigenous tribal population feel resentful towards the former, the Hindu and Muslim diasporic communities of and from Bengal affect a large portion of the social, economic, as well as political structures of the present day.

The '*abhiprayan*' of the Bengals' Hindu and Muslim communities to their neighbouring Bengals, as a result of Partition of India, in 1947, continues to be a fulcrum that directs not only the formation of a diasporic people, but also makes people diasporic on an individual level.

However, it must be noted that the cultural identity of both the communities are so congruent, that even in their intricate differences in practice, resonating the idea of what they think 'their Bengal' is, irrespective of what is used to be pre-1947. Just like the fractals that are similar to their multiple selves in geometric patterns, the diasporas of the Hindu and

Muslim communities in Post-Partition Bengal, dislocated as a result of the last blow of the '*divide and rule*' agenda, are, despite their out-migration to known lands that were made foreign, seeking refuge, settling in and building a new life for themselves and their families and fellow survivors of the horror of Partition, such as loss of land, conversion, rape and murder, are essentially reflections of each other. While both the countries, India and Bangladesh, maintain strong bilateral ties to serve one another's political and economic interests, the Bengali communities who out-migrated seventy years ago, and even the two generations that followed (Hindu and Muslim, in India, and mainly Muslim, in Bangladesh), continue to share their displaced identities, the way they shared the land during the rule of the Pal dynasty since 10<sup>th</sup> century AD – together.

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