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The Refugee Settlements in ‘Calcutta’ and the Changes in the Refugee Colonies of ‘Kolkata’

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Abstract:

The partition of the Indian subcontinent not only killed thousands of people, but also uprooted and displaced millions from their traditional homeland – their ‘desher maati’. The severance of India’s unity, which has been described as the ground-breaking incident of reconfiguration of this nation, did not simply break the bonds between people or create territorial splits, but also partition of neighbourhoods, villages and cities. Gradually it caused rift between communities and families who had lived in harmony. In Bengal, the trauma of this divide reshaped the entire outlook. This paper traces how along with strong economic implications the act of Partition had a deep psychological impact on the settlers in an out of Bengal.

Keywords: partition, Indian subcontinent, Bengal, economic implications.

“the geography of partition is not that of a mountain amid plains, but of a thousand plateaus.”¹

The recapturing of that schizophrenic moment of the partition of India is a daunting task, fraught with complexity, given the much-contested nature of ‘post-colonial’ subject. Thus the formation, rather the transformation of any city, especially Calcutta (now Kolkata), is mirrored in the multifaceted activities that surrounded the brink of colonialism and the onset of post-colonial era.² The city of Calcutta was admittedly a social product and an economic construct, and as such it was brought into being by forces external to it. Calcutta has continued to retain its distance from the power centre and therefore its inherited, highly-fractured postcolonial identities have provided ample opportunities for ‘dominating’ and ‘controlling’ global forces. We come to a position of understanding the predicament or the dilemmas that were faced by the colonized, only when looking from a post-colonial vantage point.

Observing from a distant standpoint and looking at areas of mechanical damage, we surely come to see that Punjab was deeply ravaged and wrecked as fleets of people travelling across borders were herded like cattle and often mutilated before being able to reach their destiny, as has been beautifully portrayed, among others works, in one of Khushwant Singh’s most heart rending novels: *A Train to Pakistan*. The plight of Punjab, though immense, was constrained within the specifications of time, whereas Bengal had to participate in the tedious course of

¹ Sanjay Chaturvedi, “The Excess of Geopolitics: Partition of ‘British India,’” *Partitions: Reshaping States and Minds*, ed. Stefano Bianchini et al, (U.K: Frank Cass. 2005), 125

² Swati Bhattacharya and Jayesh G, “Postcolonial global cities: The Indian experience,” *The Newsletter*, 57, http://iias.asia/sites/default/files/IAS_NL57_040506.pdf

these events, since the year 1905, and continued even after many years of the country's independence. The country was divided on religious lines and split at its two flanks comprising of the two distinct classes of people. The emotional collapse that the natives of Bengal went through is nearly impossible to comprehend by someone who hadn't been part of that course of action. The formation of refugee colonies in Bengal, was embarked upon with the advent of this division of the subcontinent, and this created not just a different class but a different, sect of people, who differed from the indigenous residents of the city in almost every way. In Bengal, the influx continued for many years after partition, and continued in different forms. Some of the critics, in *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, have correctly indicated 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."³ Therefore, the displacement and migration from East to West, is still an inescapable part of our reality.

In the erstwhile city of Calcutta, the journey of the East Bengal refugee, culturally and psychologically, was a one-way journey. They came to the city and never went back. In the years immediately after the Partition, the people coming over to West Bengal were government servants who opted to work for the Indian government and well to do people who had families and kin in the city. Writers have often taken the movement of the 'East Bengali' as intriguing as they have entered the city, creating almost a poetic space for others— of fraternal closeness and anguished competitiveness, of filial tenderness and estrangement— within the Bengali identity itself. Countless documentaries, autobiographies and other forms of literary pieces have been dedicated to the event of the Partition.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, illustrate the boyhood experiences of Ghosh which he has retrospectively gauged. It can, by no account, be said that Ghosh was part of the plitude of people who had migrated and taken refuge of camps and then struggled to build up an existence in hostile environments. He clearly states that they were residing in the considerably respectable, though perhaps not absolutely upscale, quarters of the city. This is explicitly depicted, as he talks about a journey that he had undertaken with his family in search of a long forgotten relative, who lived in the colony of Garia:

"We sped off past the open fields around the Jodhpur Club and down the tree-lined stretch of road that ran along the campus of Jadavpur University. But immediately afterwards we had to slow down to a crawl as the road grew progressively narrower and more crowded. Rows of shacks appeared on both sides of the road now, small ramshackle structures, some of them built on low stilts, with walls of plaited bamboo, and roofs that had been patched together somehow out of sheets of corrugated iron. A ragged line of concrete houses rose behind the shacks, most of them unfinished."⁴

³Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, eds. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, (Kolkata: Stree, 2003), 2.

⁴Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, (Delhi: Penguin Publishers, 1998), 144-145.

This long passage is quoted to serve my purpose of expressing how glaringly different the scenario was and how vividly the city was divided among these two sects of people. The aristocrats who, although had roots in the faraway land on the other side of Bengal, had comfortably, if somewhat nostalgically, adjusted to the way of life here. A more fitting term to describe this class would be '*Bhodrolok*'—the educated Bengali middle class which looked up to itself as the standard bearer of Bengali modernity, which included the privileged migrants from East Bengal as well. The commonly used antonym for this was '*Chotolok*'—the illiterate and uncivilized associated, in some cases, with the refugees, especially the lower classes of them. As more and more refugees began accumulating, claiming for themselves these outskirts of the city that has remained untouched by the ones born in it, these financial and social superiors began looking upon them as an intrusion upon the city's resources. These émigrés, came as some unwelcome accident stupendously out of proportion within the sophistication of the elect few in the city.

Ritwik Ghatak, in his partition movie trilogy: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komol Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1965) shows us how the refugees from the East Bengal tried to cope with a culture, where they were the social and economic underlings. As in most of his films Ghatak used surrealistic sound effects and camera movements to portray the agony of these herds of people who were left to fend for themselves in an inhospitable environment. Although the tone of the films is eloquently tragic, the undercurrents of the post partition era is flamboyantly revealed. It piqued my interest since they also depict the living quarters of the people in such colonies. It upholds a pictographic scenery that enables our subconscious to drift into that age amidst those people.

One has to record the myriad sensations and diversions that take place in the process of its creation. The vision of the modern city of Kolkata is complete, with its multitudes of claims and activities that is taking place in every nook and cranny. And now the colonies like Bikramgarh and Bapuji Nagar house a considerable part of Kolkata's population. So far, the stress has been on the reception towards the refugees. However, it should be remembered that the people who came to Calcutta to settle down were also, not a homogenous group. The people who moved in before the partition were upper caste Hindus. The inflow of the refugees of peasants, or the term very often used in post-colonial literature—subaltern groups, happened only after a definite amount of time had passed since partition. The early migrants settled inside Calcutta. People with any form of association in the city found shelters within the bustling life of the prime areas, and those without any connections had to struggle in the ghastly situation inside the government transit camps. And some decided to support themselves without the aid of the state. Therefore, began the formation of the colonies, which in due course would become the principal signposts of refugee settlements in Calcutta.

After so many years, if someone were to analyse the integration of refugees in Kolkata, it will present a motley of scenarios—from those occupying positions of great eminence and distinction in several reputed institutes to the gaunt and skinny vendor at the frequented market place. For the educated refugee, it has been a journey towards Calcutta's elite society that was always ready for the inclusion of those men, who harmonised their way of living,

and for the vast ranks of the impoverished section, living in threadbare circumstances, the democracy has offered a political and social space to these communities which cannot be crushed by the protean way of life that has kept on moving.

A dawn breaking text has been written by Manas Ray, which upholds every struggle, as well as the achievements that the refugee in Calcutta had undergone. This literary document narrates the typical habits and occurrences inside of the squatter colonies. The colony named Bijoygarh was the first to become a fully established resident quarter for the emigrants and thus it became the focal point of all activities surrounding the refugees. Moreover other squatter colonies such as Netaji Nagar sprang into existence surrounding it. These were essentially wastelands consisting of marshes, wild shrubs and occasionally ditches. Every refugee family was allotted a condition for residency which must have a room, in an allotted plot. The rural hinterland was slowly integrated into the urban sprawl of Calcutta. The inhabitants of these colonies had arrived from adjoining districts of East Bengal; it automatically gave rise to a spirit of brotherhood and a general parity among them, in all their endeavours to make a decent living situation. Primarily the people who lived in these clusters were middle classes and the marginal sections, comprising of fishermen or carpenters, accommodated themselves on the outskirts or a particular corner of the locality.

These colonies often became peripheral, in that, the populace that resided within these colonies was concentrated within a world of its own. They became a microcosmic exemplification of the city at large, having all the amenities as and when required built within the boundaries of the colony itself. They felt comfortable and safe within the precincts of the colonies, since it reminded them of the close-knit existence that they shared in their homeland. While the middle classes soon formed a lifestyle that was respectable within the colonial existence and sustainable on the outside, the subaltern groups found a way of subsistence in conditions which were hostile to them. Some of the women from these groups started working as domestic help, in the houses of the affluent, who were able to hire them. These diverse communities developed a symbiotic relationship with each other.

People who had been pushed by Fate towards a complete rebuilding of their lives had to overcome the sweaty and damp surroundings, on one hand, and the unspeakable fecundity on the other, which were the by-products of the innumerable minute changes on the macrocosm surrounding them. Gradually it gave way to a bigger life, composite of the difficulties and simplicities as a result of the extravagant experiments that had been adopted. In the beginning of these settlements individuals went out in search of diverse and varied forms of securing revenues. Some of them had to adopt means, hitherto unknown to them. Some became proprietors of small shops, while others went to academic institutes to offer teaching services. In such a heterogeneous milieu, the only factor that kept them close knit was the kinship of having lost their identity. This concept of alienation, ironically kept them bound to one another. Hence began a new era of camaraderie and companionship among neighbours, and distant relatives, who were now clustered together. This form of friendship was unfamiliar to the native citizens of Calcutta, who had access to the comforts of city life to keep them busy in their personal domain. These native people of Calcutta, often found the East Bengalis rather brash and bawdy in their disposition. The natives were soft spoken and generally

courteous. This earned them a bad reputation among the sojourners from across the border. A popular phrase that ran through the circles and widely believed as the profound truth, was that the people of Calcutta had honey on their lips and poison in their hearts.

In the beginning years, some local goons would often cause disturbances in the evening, or at nights. It was the menfolk who dealt with these crisis situations, while the women would be indoors. The government was reluctant to become too involved with the problems faced by the refugees, and remained abstruse in implementing any policies. As a result it was some of the enthusiastic and industrious men who assumed the responsibility to stop these uncouth troublemakers from creating raucous. Eventually it was these men of the respective colonies who undertook the arduous task of attaining sanctions for the establishment of schools for young boys. Slowly all of this paved the way for further enhancement of social activities such as a community club, where men would gather to relax after a taxing day, and play a game of cards, over cups of tea, or engage in heated debates while the radio broadcasted the updates of the performance of the 'East Bengal Club' during football matches on holidays. People from East Bengal, often referred to as '*Bangaal*', though criticized for their somewhat boisterous behaviour, are also credited for having a flair for different cultural aspects. And without a doubt, within some days, the people engaged themselves in performing plays, on any given festivity where the community would get together. These '*natoks*' could be in the form of street plays, or performed in pandals during events like 'Durga Puja'. Some of the performers emerged prominently by way of genuine acting skills, and connected themselves with the Indian People's Theatre Association, which was the platform for performing arts, especially stage theatrics under the realm of the formerly undivided Communist Party of India (CPI). Though Calcutta was at the time under the rule of Congress, these colonies increasingly aligned themselves to the ethos and traditional customs of the left-wing. Their ideas comfortably blended in with the colony settlers.

This inflexible way of life, however was not to go for very long. The political panorama changed radically in 1970. The discontent among the sharecroppers in the arid Naxalbari area at the foothills of North Bengal snowballed into a putative Maoist movement and took the youth of Calcutta—especially those of refugee background—by storm. For the next few years, between 1969 and 1973, the city became a site of bizarre fratricidal carnage, when the uncoordinated spontaneity and self-righteous idealism on the extreme left (popularly known as the Naxals), matched the lethal violence from the state apparatus backed by professional killers, under the patronage of the Congress. These colonies eventually came under the vigilance of Central Reserve Police (CRP), and raids became common in the localities which assumed a combative look. Eventually, as the Communist Party of India, fought the negative effects of both these forces, this is when the anti-congress sentiments were overwhelmed, in favour of the communists.

Manas Ray tells us in the form of a memoir about the immediate encounter he had with the political turmoil that was brewing in these areas. He narrated the account of one afternoon that embarked the beginning of such upheavals in their locality:

“Some twenty people marching quietly. They carried knives, pipe guns, spears and iron rods. Their looks signalled they were on a mission. They

were brisk and soft and soon out of sight. We heard of the fights between Naxals and Congress for quite some time. They took place on the other side of the main road, away from our locality. It did not affect us much. We belonged to a different political terrain. I was not much concerned about what I saw that afternoon.”⁵

The descriptive passage sums up the entire era of bloodshed and violence that characterized Calcutta in the decade of the seventies. The pattern in which the killings took place is depicted in the correct way, albeit somewhat ruthlessly. This also re-enacted the systems of politics that had been practised in schools and colleges to attract the attention of the youth. The crude effect that politics can have on the life of an intelligent young man with a bounty of life's experiences awaiting him, was penned by Tagore many decades earlier, in his seminal novel *GhareBaire (Home and the World)* which clearly critiqued the nationalist propaganda in India. Once again it began in full throttle during the Naxalite movement. Young boys were called off from classes to participate in rallies and they went on chanting the ‘mantras’ of revolution that was given to them, at times, not even fully comprehending its meanings. At times there could be heard the slogans like ‘Amar naam, tomarnaam, Vietnam, Vietnam’⁶—which broadly meant that Vietnam has come to emblemise you and me enmeshed into a single entity. Most of the young revolutionaries did not know the location or the existence of Vietnam, for them it became the symbol, an expanse or a different world where the people were shedding their blood to bring about the change in the existing order.

Nevertheless, the burden of this new disorder had to be again borne by those who had after long decades of struggle finally been recompensed with a steady life in the small constellations of their colonies. They had been bombarded with these socio-political changes, since it was their families who were most affected through this. For the generation that succeeded the immigrant refugees, were highly and in large numbers drawn into the spirit of change and revolutionising the current state of things. They crushed the foundations built with the toils and labours of their predecessors, as they chose to rid themselves of responsibility to their families in favour of responsibilities towards the new swing of political beliefs which emerged. They took pride in being jailed for causes of rebellion. This was the time when young men were most brutally tortured and murdered by both ends of the rival parties claiming for power. It caused a major setback to the steady progress that these colonies had been making over some years.

During this time, disappearances became common, even the womenfolk were not spared. Some colonies went to the extent of barricading its boundaries. The main market areas were cordoned off, and there seemed to take place diminutive partition amongst the colony dwellers. This walled off existence was not just a separation from the neighbours or immediate houses, but it stretched like an endless ribbon that had marked an estrangement, or more appropriately, a disjuncting of the settlers. It carried on, far beyond the proximate domain of remoteness into the mess of the present life's ‘reality’. Nonetheless, something,

⁵Manas Ray, “Growing up Refugee,” *Memory's Gold: Writings on Calcutta*, ed. Amit Chaudhury, (Kolkata: Penguin Group Publication), 167

⁶<http://kolkatasounds.org/sounds-of-public-rallies/>

irrespective of its consequences—whether for the better or worse—that happened was, as these colonies became alienated and divided from each other, they as a whole came nearer to the fuller existence of the city, Calcutta. They understood that Calcutta was their destiny; and there was no room for any opaqueness. Something that had remained flexibly in the minds and thoughts of men as some imperceptible reality, now became a force of life that had to be tackled and engaged with. The shaping of the communities as conflicting precincts had profound effects on its social structure, particularly in terms of collective guardianship. People who had been familiar, even cordial to each other, suddenly took the garb of indifference. Some houses were blown up, but such damages were more often inflicted upon public properties, like school, colleges and sometimes even the places of worship, to create the sensation of fright and fear. These localities at times housed the refugees of its own creation, the party members who had failed some undertaking assigned to them, or the ones who had been ousted by the rival colonies. By providing these outcasts a place to stay, these colonies made themselves vulnerable to attacks from various infuriated political groups. The Central Reserve Police caught hint of these activities and the raids became a recurrent affair. These underground activities were exposed, and put a stop to. The colonies of Bijoygarh and Netaji Nagar, gradually became weighed down with a desolate look.

People from East Bengal had carried their ‘homes’ on their backs. As they spoke, their dialects reflected these landscape, which in turn brought out their history. The next generation has been brought up in the midst of that landscape; the sensual density and solidity of that has made them ignore the rest of the world so far. Harmony and haphazardness or the dialects and stories or the curves and bents: all have collectively given this new land an essence of the long-lost nativity, and the settlers are contentedly enveloped within it. The partition had harshly awoken them to the truth that the home, no matter how strong and ancient, can be tossed away overnight. Defensively, they had chosen to shut the world out. But the violence of the 1970 demolished all that. Once again, the contingent awareness of helplessness resurfaced. These two forms of violence were results of completely different causes. But to the people in the colonies, this disruption seemed like a grotesque aberration to the natural order they had established. The air was heavy with conspiracies and plotting, as if to deprive them of their lives and founded dwellings.

The years of violence were certainly a seminal moment in the history of the squatter colonies; directly or indirectly it had touched one and all. However, as with every event in history, the fire of revolution fizzled out with time. When the elections were called and CPI(M) rose to power in 1977, the killings or the threats became infrequent, and again it was not unsafe to venture out of home, at will. Another crucial event that took place with the communist party’s rise to power is that the refugees now gained legal ownership of their land; the earlier middle class houses which were trademarked with bamboo thatched huts, now transformed into quite respectable looking structures.

The aftermath of the magnificent change in the political purview left the settlers to cope with the economic impediments that was one of its lingering consequences. Steadily everyone in their own way amended these impediments and moved on. As the years have rolled by, the colonies have become more and more differentiated. These alterations are visible with respect

to the spaces of existence —with the advent of the apartment houses, and also with reference to time—the fondness of nostalgic past differed in various degrees between different people. However, the piercing distinction was now in terms of class, the people who established themselves and those who failed to do so.

Globalisation has reformed the tranquil existence of remote and unconnected localities into the contemporary urbanity. The process has mapped the geographical location of every colony which came into existence since partition. The cultural profusion that marked the beginning years and had also been instrumental in neighbourly bonding, has almost completely waned. In the present times, the annual functions in the colonies are held in the cross section of the by lanes, since they are unable to attract any crowds. The local residents have been replaced by locally popular city personalities, to perform on stage. The spectators mostly comprise of domestic help. The community members prefer watching it from the view offered by their bedroom windows, or verandas.

As these men, have been tempered with the ravages of time and harsh experiences that life has offered, they have also become more mature from their Western counterparts, in the city, who did not have to be drawn against such suffering. The present generation has dropped the weight of melancholic longing to the other side of the border (most of us never having been their), and moved on with the pace of the ever-changing city. Similarly the ones who inhabited the colonies, have been drawn out of their cocoons and made to see what exists outside the psychosomatic life of past. Whilst education became modernised —after the failure of the Naxalites to eradicate the ‘bourgeois’ form of teaching, imbibed from the colonizer (!) —it also became more readily available to the middle class. Academic accomplishments made way for better careers, and soon the people who had acquired enough wealth, and by extension, sophistication, moved out of the houses in the colonies to classy and high-class localities of South- Kolkata. The rechristening of Calcutta to Kolkata literally obliterated any traces of imperial imprints on the city. So, Kolkata took upon an altered continuation.

Nonetheless, had this amalgamation of east and west not taken place, we could not have enjoyed the literary and cultural richness that we claim to. Also fascinating are the flirtations with both emblematic and literal forms of homelessness; like the fiery lyrics of Shakti Chattopadhyay or the quiet, subterranean and dry prose of Sandipan Chattopadhyay. These writers have their roots in the East, and their fiction invariably reflects that. However, their writings have been nurtured and welcomed by the West. In the end, thus it becomes a product of consolidation of the two ethos. Perhaps the most interesting component of this East-West merger is the hybridity of the respective cuisines. The endless verbal flagellations that one community showers on the other with respect to their cooking has been absolved, as the strict distinctions eventually paved way for an alliance for the formation of innovative recipes that again have augmented our ethnicity.

The academic sphere has undergone a major modification which has enabled it to become much more inclusive. The recent spate of interest in partition literature gets deeply fascinated with the story of the Indian subcontinent. It has taken place at a point of time in Bengali national life when the word ‘displacement’ has become more of a euphemism for betterment,

and not so much the sad plight of millions ousted from their erstwhile homes. The despondency that had been caused with the partition had been deepening into a gnawing reflection of the economic slump that has devoured Bengal and the loss of its face in the overall political structure. Hence the inhabitant of Kolkata today is wrapped up irredeemably into a constant celebration of its past achievements. The 'gentleman' is being pushed and shoved into a corner with the swelling demands and escalating dominion of the subaltern groups. Consequently, this is just another form of co-existence that this already heterogeneous city must accommodate within itself.

To conclude the paper with reference to the 'refugees', one vital point of contention would be to establish that it is improper to insinuate that their stature is that of outsiders anymore. They are much a creation of this city as those living in older northern parts of the city. As we look at the history of the uprooted, those who had to accomplish for themselves the rights and privileges which they thought they deserved, it needs to be discussed with some poignancy. It has touched upon such an enormous spectrum of events that their story cannot be discussed in seclusion. The desire to understand them is an attempt for anyone who tries, to live through or recapture symbolically, what they had lost. In the end, it cannot be labelled good or bad: the happenings as Sunil Gangopadhyay perceives them, with the recurrent phrase in one of his poems:

"Each day for us was a day of changing birth..."⁷

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⁷Sunil Gangopadhyay, "Neera, Don't Get Lost," *Poetry International Rotterdam*, <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/21108/auto/0/NEERA-DONT-GET-LOST>