

Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence

Nilanjana Chatterjee
Department of Anthropology
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Introduction

In this paper I am interested in analyzing the self-representation of Hindu East Bengali refugees as victims of Partition violence so as to historicize and politicize their claims to inclusion within India and their entitlement to humanitarian assistance in the face of state and public disavowal. I focus on the main components of their narratives of victimhood, which tend to be framed in an essentializing rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim difference and involve the demonization of “the Muslim.” I conclude with a brief consideration of the implications of this structure of prejudice for relations between the two communities in West Bengal and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism nationwide. A story I was told while researching East Bengali refugee agency and self-settlement strategies in West Bengal bring these issues together for me in a very useful way.

Dr. Shantimoy Ray, professor of history and East Bengali refugee activist had been sketching the history of the refugee squatter colony Santoshpur, referred to the enduring sense of betrayal, loss and anger felt by East Bengalis after the partition of Bengal in 1947: becoming strangers in their own land which constituted part of the Muslim nation of Pakistan, being forced to leave and rebuild their lives in West Bengal in India, a “nation” that was nominally theirs but where they were faced with dwindling public sympathy and institutional apathy. Spurred by their *bastuhara* (homeless) condition--a term which gained political significance and which referred to their Partition victimhood, groups of middle and working class refugees began to “grab” land and resettle themselves in West Bengal. Santoshpur was one such colony which was founded on the outskirts of Calcutta in 1950. Dr. Ray had not mentioned anti-Muslim sentiment in the colony although India’s Partition is synonymous with sectarian violence.

Then he began to speak of an incident in 1964. A relic of the Prophet Muhammad was rumoured to have been stolen from a shrine in Kashmir and this was followed by attacks on Hindus in East Pakistan, and rioting against Muslims in India. Thousands of Hindu East Bengalis began to seek refuge in West Bengal.

Some local Muslim families who still lived scattered around the colony--they were mostly agricultural labourers, carpenters --poor people, came to our compound in terror. Colony youth had destroyed their huts and were out to slaughter them. I let them in and locked our gate. Our household was overwhelmed. We had over forty people in our care--bereft, wounded, fearing for their lives. And then I saw the boys approaching. I knew them well. We all knew each other in those days. I had seen them grow up here. Kanu, Romesh, Madhab--they were unrecognizable in their hatred. They were armed with sticks and knives and screaming about avenging the murder of Hindus in East Pakistan. Slaughter them as they slaughtered us, they shouted. I was stunned by

the insanity of their words. But I knew that if I did nothing, they would kill the Muslims cowering behind my flimsy walls. I opened the gate and shouted for quiet. I did not know if they would strike me down but something made those boys hesitate. Perhaps they were still a little in awe of an old schoolmaster. I told Kanu to come forward and asked him when he had come to this country. He looked bewildered and said impatiently, You know it was 1950--during the riots in Barisal. Yes, I said and did you lose any members of your family during your journey here? No he replied, but others did. Those Muslim pigs made the rivers of Bengal run with Hindu blood. And now they are doing it again. Except this time we'll take care of them. His eyes were red and I could see he would not humour me much longer. Quietly I asked him how he had come to Calcutta. By boat, by bullock cart, on foot, he shouted, what does that matter? And who drove the cart? Who ferried the boat? I shouted out for the first time. His belligerent glare wavered as he said, I remember one-- *Rahimchacha* (uncle). So *Rahimchacha* saved your lives, did he? And now you have come to repay him? Well, come in then. I stood back with the gate open. Silence. One of the boys began to weep. Kanu stood still as stone and then dropped to my feet. Forgive me, he mumbled. It is not my forgiveness you need, I replied. Go home and let these poor people go home as well. Gradually the crowd dispersed and the Muslims were able to return to their neighbourhood (Interview with Shantimoy Ray, June 1994).

One of the reasons Dr. Ray told me this was to explain the successful role of Communist activists--mostly East Bengali refugees themselves--in blunting anti-Muslim sentiment among refugees and directing their sense of victimhood away from the "communal" towards mobilization as "have-nots" for rehabilitation in keeping with their Marxist politics. But while he saw the youths' hesitation as acknowledgment of the resilience of local bonds between Hindus and Muslims in East Bengal, I was struck by the strong hostility toward Muslims evinced by these East Bengali refugees and their selective memory. The fact that they had "forgotten" individual Muslim saviours speaks to the erasure of the Muslim in their nostalgic conceptualization of East Bengal. Dr. Ray's appeal to their memories and their consciences worked this time, but memories are sites of construction and contestation, and in this case the refugees' attitudes about Muslims were structured as much by experience as by a hegemonic discourse about "bad" Muslims in Bengali culture. In what follows I will deal with the East Bengali refugees' construction of the image of Partition victimhood--the self-conscious insistence on the historicity of their predicament as patriots and subjects of "communal" persecution, which challenged their marginalization after Partition and legitimized their demand for restitution.

First a note on communalism. Unlike its Anglo-American sense which conveys community feeling and obligation, in its Indian usage has a specific history. It refers to collective identity defined by religious identification and expressed in chauvinist, exclusivist and oppositional terms vis-a-vis other communities seen to be similarly defined. "Communalism not only produces an identification with a religious community but also with its political, economic, social and cultural interests and

aspirations” (Kakar 1996: 13). The category “communalism” was a product of British Orientalist ideology and practice which “systematically institutionalized a nation of communities, above all what were deemed to be the two great communities of Hindus and Muslims” (Metcalf 1995: 951, Pandey 1990) through enumeration and classification which in turn shaped the emergence of interest groups, their demands for political representation, employment quotas and so on, in the colonial period. In addition to the reification of “Hindu” and “Muslim” as ahistorical essences, “communal strife--conflict between people of different religious persuasions--was represented by the British colonial regime in India as one of the most distinctive features of Indian society, past and present (Pandey 1990: 94) and attributed to instinctive difference and animosity. In postcolonial liberal-left discourse, communal ideology and action is cast in negative terms and associated with intolerance.

This paper locates itself within two sets of ongoing academic discussions: one, which focuses on the lived and remembered experiences of Partition as distinct from what might be called its “high politics”(Sen 1990); and a second, more general one, which involves the exploration of refugee agency and questions hegemonic representations of them as victims and passive objects of intervention. While a review of gendered, subaltern and partial or fragmentary perspectives on Partition history is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that these intellectual approaches are productive in several ways: they challenge official nationalist history and examine the operation of power/knowledge in postcolonial context, seek to recover the voices and silences of the subordinated, prioritize the particular, and seek to develop a new language for understanding ethnic and sectarian violence. While much of the new work in this vein is oriented to Punjab and North India (Butalia 1998, Das 1990) Menon and Bhasin 1998, Pandey 1992), it has gradually expanded to include perspectives on Bengal (Bose et al 2000, Chakrabarti 1990, Chakrabarty 1995, Chatterjee 1992, Ghosh 1998) and Assam (Dasgupta 2001), and is not merely confined to the experience of the *bhadralok*¹. Another crucial referent for me is the anthropological literature on refugees which makes central the linkage of displacement to national belonging and exclusion, and refugee identity to hegemonic nationalist ideologies; the construction of refugees not only through the languages of law and humanitarianism but by the institutional management of “the refugee problem”; the silencing of refugees by humanitarian rhetoric and practice as dehistoricized victims so that their own assessment as historical actors is bypassed (Malkki 1996); and most importantly, the agency of the displaced--appropriating, transforming and contesting hegemonic discourse and interventions.

Mistrusting refugees

The partition of British India and the emergence of the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947, is linked to the largest recorded population dislocation in history. The two-nation solution negotiated by the competing nationalist movements led by the Congress Party and the Muslim League produced a territorial settlement linked to the principle of religious majoritarianism. Pakistan came to consist of the North West Frontier Provinces, Baluchistan, Sind, and West Punjab, separated by

¹ The Bengali word *bhadralok* means a respectable person of middleclass background--landowners or professionals, usually but not exclusively upper caste, and distinguished socially by education, non-manual labour and a refined lifestyle.

nearly thousand miles from East Bengal and the Sylhet district of Assam. Though two-third of India's Muslims became Pakistanis, both nations included numerically large yet vulnerable minorities. In Punjab, nearly 12 million Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were displaced and 1 million lost their lives (Zolberg et al 1989) during the so-called "exchange of populations". In the case of Bengal however, Partition was predated by sectarian violence in 1946 which spurred the initial two-way movement of Hindus to West Bengal and Muslims to East Pakistan, and unlike the situation in Punjab, the flight of Hindu refugees eventually overtook that of Muslims and has continued sporadically through the brutal civil war in Pakistan in 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh into the present. Not only is Partition associated with national and personal trauma for many Bengalis, the presence of over 8 million refugees from former East Bengal irrevocably shaped West Bengal's political economy and popular imagination and is seen to be symptomatic of Bengali decline.

The Government of India's conservative and disputed schematization of population dislocation from East Pakistan over nearly a quarter century helps situate the refugees' own assessment of their predicament. Among other things, it does not include the 9 million Hindu and Muslim refugees from the war of 1970-71 in East Pakistan (Luthra 1971)². The United Nations estimated that the majority of these refugees returned home--an assessment disputed by the Government of West Bengal with regard to the displaced Hindus (Government of West Bengal 1980).

Initially, the Government of India attempted to discourage the migration of East Bengalis to India by exhorting them to pledge their allegiance to Pakistan, offering temporary and limited relief rather than permanent rehabilitation, and signing a series of agreements with Pakistan aimed at assuring the minorities of security and preventing mass migration. But as the migrations became a persistent and irreversible reality, the state attempted to regulate them. The border in the east was left open until 1952 to give people time to decide on their citizenship, and then passports were introduced to reduce further migration from East Pakistan. As the population movement continued, an additional barrier of permits and migration certificates was instituted in 1956. Then from 1958-64, the Indian government tried to deter East Bengali Hindu migrants by refusing to recognize them as "refugees" and thereby making them ineligible for relief and rehabilitation assistance. This changed with the riots of 1964 in East Pakistan, and the displaced were given permanent refuge in India through the civil war of 1970-71 in Pakistan after which East Pakistan seceded as the independent state of Bangladesh. Post-1971 migrants were declared ineligible for settlement assistance in India, a "deterrence" that seems not to have affected migration in subsequent decades. Border watchers seem agreed that displacement in the 1980s was mainly due to economic privation in Bangladesh and included Hindus and Muslims, while the early 1990s saw a rise in the numbers of East Bengali Hindu victims of communal violence following the demolition of the medieval Babri mosque in India by Hindu nationalists. The chart is interesting, not only because it reflects the Indian state's failure to stop the migration of East Bengalis, but a cursory reading of the causes of displacement indexes the latter to diplomatic ruptures in Indo-Pakistan relations, tensions between East and West Pakistan which finally culminated in the east's separatist movement for Bangladesh, and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in each nation which sparked retaliatory violence in the neighbouring country. This is a representation of events which while not disputed in its details by the East Bengali Hindu refugees, is linked by them to one originary cause--Partition on religious lines--which, they contend, made all

²Muslims who migrate to India from Bangladesh are labeled "infiltrators" by the Indian state.

East Bengali Hindus homeless in a Muslim dominated nation.

Refugee rehabilitation was designated a national responsibility by the postcolonial Indian government and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru explained in a public speech that this was not merely a humanitarian act on the part of the state for the welfare of the displaced alone, but a pragmatic one

Refugee Influx from East Pakistan, 1946-70

Year	Reason for Influx	Total
1946	Noakhali riots	19,000
1947	Partition	334,000
1948	Police action in Hyderabad	786,000
1949	Khulna, Barisal riots	213,000
1950	idem	1,575,000
1951	Agitation over Kashmir	187,000
1952	Economic conditions, passport scare	227,000
1953		76,000
1954		118,000
1955	Unrest over Urdu in E. Pakistan	240,000
1956	Pakistan's Islamic constitution	320,000
1957		11,000
1958		1,000
1959		10,000
1960		10,000
1961		11,000
1962		14,000
1963		16,000
1964	Hazrat Bal incident in Kashmir	693,000
1965		108,000
1966		8,000
1967		24,000
1968		12,000
1969		10,000
1970	Elections in Pakistan	250,000
Total		5,283,000

on which the future and welfare of India depended (*The Statesman*, 25 January 1948). But the primary object of this early initiative was the resettlement of refugees from West Pakistan. The national leadership was ambivalent regarding its responsibilities toward East Bengalis--unwilling and unable to block migration altogether, but afraid of “inviting” millions of East Bengali Hindus into the country

and alienating Pakistan as a result, undermining India's foundational principle of secularism, and burdening the fragile economy. Nehru's letter to the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Bidhan Chandra Roy reflects this quandary: "It is wrong to encourage any large-scale migration from East Bengal to the West. Indeed, if such a migration takes place, West Bengal and to some extent the Indian Union would be overwhelmed... If they come over to West Bengal, we must look after them. But it is no service to them to encourage them to join the vast mass of refugees who can at best be poorly cared for" (Chakraborty 1982: 106). A half century after Partition, reviews of the Central Government of India's record on East Bengali refugee rehabilitation suggest that it was not only inadequate but discriminatory in view of its policy toward West Punjabi refugees of Partition (Estimates Committee 1989, Govt. of West Bengal 1980).

The East Bengali migrants' access to rehabilitation assistance in India rested on their recognition as "refugees"--and therefore eligibility for assistance by the state. A "refugee" or "displaced person" was defined as A "person who was ordinarily resident in the territories now comprising East Pakistan, but who on account of civil disturbances or the fear of civil disturbances or on account of the partition of India has migrated" (Ministry of Rehabilitation 1957: 86). But while acknowledging that "fear" of persecution or violence was a valid justification for migration, the official definition was imprecise about the preconditions of fear that the state would accept as meriting shelter in India. Increasingly the Indian government tuned its antenna to spectacular worse-case scenarios in Pakistan and tried to ignore complaints of "everyday" insecurity--quick to declare that it was "not aware that the East Bengali Hindus had problems" or it knew of no "incidents" in East Pakistan to justify a population displacement (*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 21 February 1948). This euphemistically termed "incident" was an incontrovertible and immediate event of life-threatening violence--the quintessential case of which was taken to be a "communal riot". In other words, the state sought to distinguish between "voluntary" and "forced" migrants.

A distinction was also sought to be made between "economic" and "political" refugees. In 1948, the provincial Government of West Bengal issued a press note stating that they would discontinue registering East Bengalis coming to the state as refugees because "whatever might have been the cause of the exodus in the past, similar conditions do not now prevail. There is hardly any communal disturbance in Eastern Pakistan... Therefore, the present exodus is due to economic causes" (*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 26 June 1948). This assumption was challenged by the president of the East Bengal Minority Welfare Committee in Calcutta: "The Press Note... lightheartedly refers to the 'economic causes' of the steadily continuing exodus. These 'economic causes' are a direct consequence of partition on a communal basis" (ibid). There can be little doubt that he considered the government's hairsplitting, specious and his explicit linkage of refugee status to Partition victimhood will be shown to be a part of a resistant discourse of entitlement among displaced East Bengali Hindus.

The government's "mistrust" of the refugees (Daniel and Knudsen 1995) reflected that of the general West Bengali population's. Cartoons appeared in Calcutta newspapers revealing public apprehension regarding the costs of assisting a large population of East Bengali refugees. In one, West Bengal was depicted lying in a hospital bed with various ailments including "refugee-itis". A worried visitor was shown asking the attendant doctor, Chief Minister B.C. Roy, if the case was "hopeless" (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 January 1950). West Bengalis associated the influx of thousands of East Bengali refugees with every malaise from overcrowding, squalor, social disintegration and soaring crime rates to unemployment and the rising cost of living. It was anticipated that the Hindu refugees would stoke communal violence against the Muslims of West Bengal or be manipulated by political

parties seeking constituencies. And the refugees' acts of trespass on private and state property as they attempted to resettle themselves, only confirmed popular misgivings. Communist workers trying to build up a following among the local poor and the refugee testify to the anger of the rural West Bengali landless over the distribution of precious agricultural land among the refugees, and occasions when refugees were prevented by locals from settling on land that the government had allocated for their resettlement (Interview with Bijoy Majumdar, 1988). There were several clashes between industrial worker striking for higher wages and improved working conditions, and refugees eager to work for a pittance. Against this background, it becomes clear that the West Bengali joke that back "home" every East Bengali was a *zamindar* (landlord) reflected suspicion about the authenticity of the refugees claims to be victims. But there was considerable sympathy as well which acknowledged this public reluctance to engage with the humanitarian burden signalled by East Bengali claims of victimhood. Another cartoon by the same artist whose work I referred to earlier showed a sword-wielding Liaquat Ali Khan, the Premier of Pakistan, standing over mutilated bodies while a Congressman pulled away in a boat while pleading with folded hands: "There is no space, this boat is small." It was an unambiguous representation of the East Bengalis as victims--both of physical violence in Muslim Pakistan and of epistemological denial in India.

The refugee discourse of "Historic Rights"

East Bengali migrants were quick to counter the power imbalance inherent in the state's attempt to determine eligibility and the reservations on the part of a section of the local population regarding the validity of their claim to refugee status. The politico-social category of the "refugee" and its Bengali synonym *sharanarathi* (someone who seeks refuge from a greater power) were initially the topic of intense debate. For many East Bengali Hindu migrants the image conveyed was a derogatory one, conflated with the act of begging, dependence on the charity and compassion of strangers and demeaning supplication. As one East Bengali commentator noted, "Those who roamed the streets of Dhaka soliciting support for the Partition didn't even dream that, as a reward for their gesture in agreeing to leave, they would be forever labelled 'refugees', a word that does more violence to the idea of a home than any other in any language"(The Sunday Statesman, 2 March 1986).

But increasingly, it was this word "refugee" with its powerful connotations of loss, that was appropriated by the displaced as they collectively sought to represent their interests on a political platform. A pamphlet issued to commemorate a refugee convention organized by the Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council--the refugee wing of the Revolutionary Socialist Party in West Bengal--makes it clear that the migrants were determined to establish their entitlement to protection and assistance in India as an inalienable right--not subject to the host people or government's pity or whim:

The East Bengalis expelled from Pakistan, can demand to build their homes on every inch of Indian soil on the strength of their *adhikar* (own right). They are not *sharanarathi* (supplicants) but *kshatipuraner dabidar* (claimants to compensation for losses) (RCRC n.d.: 1).

Consider the following excerpt from a pamphlet entitled "*Aitihashik Adhikar*" or "Historic Rights", published by the East Bengal Minority Welfare Association which advocated refugee rights for post-1971 migrants who were denied state assistance.

The partition left us homeless, bereft of everything. We did not fight for independence in order to lead the lives of

beggars. Those of us who cannot remain in East Pakistan are not doing anything wrong by seeking shelter in India. Why should the police push us back? Why should we live in hovels next to rail-tracks? Why should we be the object of people's mercy? ... it is only right that those who struggled and sacrificed for independence be repaid (EBMWA n.d.: 8-9).

Rehabilitation with dignity was not to be seen as an act of charity but as the repayment of a national debt to the East Bengali Hindus represented in this passage as historic agents--freedom-fighters and victims of Partition which consigned them to minorityhood and therefore subordination in a Muslim-majority state.

Identification as a refugee was important since this entitled them to relief and rehabilitation aid from the state or a least recognition of their special history and needs. It came to be used interchangeably with “displaced person” and “migrant” which are part of the official vocabulary of humanitarian assistance in India; and also with the more evocative “*udbastu*” and “*bastuhara*” of Bengali public discourse. “*Bastu*” means foundation of a house, and is associated with originary, foundational, ancestral and sacred. The prefix “*ut*” means “out of” and thus the word “*udbastu*” signals loss of home and by extension homeland; as does “*bastuhara*.” Both these no longer simply index a lack of shelter but bear the weight of the trauma of Partition. What is significant is that the migrants appropriated the signifiers, investing it with a positive repertoire of meanings, turning a lack into a strength, a powerful moral claim to victimhood which would have to be assuaged. Especially with the transformation of the displaced into voters, those who turned to the Left for redress took to the streets with the slogan “*Amra kara? Bastuhara!*” (“Who are we? Refugees!”) a signal of their presence and predicament. And in later years those who continued to define themselves as “refugees” did so in a spirit of critique, as a commentary on the failure of the government to rehabilitate them.

In addressing the ideas embedded in the concept “historic rights”, I would like to talk briefly about the refugees’ representation of themselves as exemplary nationalists and move on to considering the question of Partition victimhood. I draw here on documented evidence such as public speeches, press notes, letters to newspapers³, pamphlets/circulars, depositions to “fact” finding commissions, as well as personal interviews and auto-biographical or literary sources. The text of a letter to the editor of the Bengali-language newspaper, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* in 1948 by self-proclaimed East Bengali refugee is revealing:

The dissection of India and division of Bengal has prevented the enjoyment of our hard-won independence. Hindus and Sikhs have left their homes in the Punjab, North West Frontier Provinces, Sind, and Baluchistan and the Indian government have helped to evacuate them and are trying to solve the complicated problem of resettling them. But it is our

³The readership of papers like the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* which were based in Calcutta, continued to span the two Bengals as late as 1950-1. They published news on and letters from East Bengalis, and were perceived as a window into the condition of the Hindus in post-partition East Pakistan--where they were first censored and then banned for inciting communal animosity.

misfortune that those who have undertaken the greatest *atmatyag* (self sacrifice) and given the most blood in the independence movement are neglected at home and abroad. The West Bengal government is ashamed to think of East Bengali Hindus. The Government of India neither are nor feel the need to be informed about them. And this, even though the first to dream of freedom was the sage Bankimchandra and the first general in the battle for independence was Bengal's Surendranath. (5 January 1948)

In the 19th century, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee instructed Bengalis through his historical, nationalist novels into a consciousness of themselves as a proud and virile *jati* or race, capable of future greatness. Surendranath Banerjee, also mentioned in the letter, was a founder of the Indian Association which later merged into the Indian National Congress--the political organization which dominated the nationalist movement for an independent India. By invoking these two names, the writer was tapping into a self-image that is widely prevalent among all Bengalis--that as torchbearers to the rest of India, they had initiated the nationalist movement against the British, radicalized it, and lost the most in its cause. Bengali intellectuals and activists had been prominent in the nationalist movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but in the 1930s, Bengal's leadership was eclipsed by the Gandhian faction in the Congress. With the attrition of Bengal's power, developments like Partition came to be cast by the people of the region as an anti-Bengali plot or rationalized as a sacrifice willingly borne by the East Bengalis for the greater good of India⁴. The argument continued that they had struggled for a life of emancipation in India, not of subordination in a Muslim nation not of their own choosing, and therefore had a right to live in a Hindu homeland.

The patriot proved to be an evocative signifier in terms of which East Bengali Hindus made claims about the distinctiveness and exemplariness of their nationalism, contradicting the disparaging allegations of non-migrants and Indian officialdom, that migration was an act of passive cowardice and burdensome disservice to the inhabitants of both India and Pakistan. The self-referential use of the allied image of the *shahid* or martyr was also a authenticating gesture that drew on the traditional Indic concept of "generative sacrifice" (Das and Nandy 1985: 178) as and projected East Bengali Hindus as historical agents to whom the nation owed a collective debt--asylum and resettlement. Finally, this discourse of patriotism and sacrifice included each East Bengali Hindu in its address, serving to unify and mobilize the refugees into a community of solidarity and expectation by smoothing over the unevennesses of caste, class and interest so that every refugee became the historical heir of the *swadhinata sangrami* or "freedom fighter." The ultimate act as true nationalists was to go to India--the destiny of Hindu East Bengali refugees who must abandon their ancestral homes for a Hindu

⁴Having played a key role in the anti-colonial movement in Bengal, the Hindu elite had hoped to replace the British in the postcolonial order and rejected the idea that a united Bengal would be included in Pakistan, unwilling to be subjected to the rule of a Muslim majority in the province. Thus the partition of Bengal was actively proposed by West Bengali politicians--of both the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. And while Bakarganj was the only East Bengal district to endorse the partition campaign, many East Bengalis considered the redrawing of boundaries preferable to losing undivided Bengal to Pakistan.

homeland of the spirit. A doggerel that a refugee interviewee remembered being taunted with by Muslims in the days leading up to Partition, drew on this structure of feeling: (Interview with Mahendra Mondal from Barisal, 1989)

On the excuse of Noakhali,⁵
They made Bihar into Karbala⁶.
Bihar has become Hindustan.
Bengal has become Pakistan.
Go away--each to his own address.

The refugees as Partition victims

As we have seen earlier, in the government's scheme of things "partition" was presented as the reason for the refugee influx of 1947 alone, "communal riots" were recorded as the official reason for the migration of 1950--each episode in the massive and protracted flight from East Pakistan was related to a different cause. The reason for this was to attempt to establish a sliding scale of true or deserving displacement to ease the state's humanitarian responsibility. But in the refugees' own accounts of their displacement it was "*desh bhag*," literally the "division of the homeland" or Partition which is the dominant reference. There is of course the detail of year and "immediate" cause, but as a schoolmaster interviewee pointed out, the "underlying cause" for the insecurity of Bengali Hindus in East Pakistan and their ultimate exodus was Partition (Interview with Nirmal Chandra Sarkar, 1989). I found when I asked my interviewees the question, "Why did you leave your *desh* (homeland)?" the answer was often on the lines of "After *desh bhag* we could no longer remain there", and sometimes an outraged "Don't you know!" I was seen to be casting doubt on what the refugees assumed to have been established beyond question--that the East Bengalis were victims of the partition of India on the fundamental basis of religion, which uprooted them psychologically and then physically. Was I trying to imply that they had left their ancestral homes "for fun?" Partition functioned as a structuring device, describing one original trauma and a shared experience of misfortune. It provided a central and awful image that had the power to explain the migrants' collective predicament. The description of their victimhood in terms of Partition-induced homelessness, minorityhood and Muslim communalism reflected their opposition to the Indian leadership's scepticism about their allegations of post-Partition insecurity in East Pakistan and reluctance to accord them refugee status.

Saadat Hasan Manto wrote on a note of mordant prophecy after the bloody partition of Punjab in 1947, "...India was free. Pakistan was free from the moment of its birth. But man was a slave in both countries, of prejudice, of religious fanaticism, of bestiality, of cruelty" (1987: 6). This equation of the moment of independence with the unfreedom of fear and prejudice, of nationalism with exile affords us an insight into the condition of insecurity and degradation experienced by the religious minorities in India and Pakistan. Nationalisms with their declared affiliation to a place, a people and a past arrogate truth exclusively to themselves and assign falsehood and inferiority to others. The presence of 40 million Muslims in India, and over 12 million Hindus in Pakistan--as visible religious

⁵This is a reference to the Noakhali riots of 1946 in East Bengal.

⁶The Imam Husein was martyred at Karbala--a powerful symbol of the triumph of evil over good for Shia Muslims--and a shorthand for the slaughter of innocents.

minorities, proved to be a source of friction as nationally guaranteed rights came to be equated with rights guaranteed only to “nationals,” or the majority community. And the Hindu minority in Pakistan and the Muslims in India came to be perceived as political misfits or worse--enemies of the state.

The minorities in Western Punjab have known at their cost what partition means, and if there is any such thing as political experience, we should be under no illusions about our future. ...there is a fundamental flaw in the policy of the Government of India. The division has been accepted on the basis of the two-nation theory which obviously implies the elimination of non-nationals from each state... That being so, the minorities of East Bengal have a right to demand a place in India. ...We are tired of the platitudinous effusions of leaders who in most cases do not even live here among us (A.B.Chaudhuri of Dacca, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 March 1948).

There was a creeping awareness of fear among us, as if we were criminals of some sort ...Our position was like that of a servant suspected of theft. Even if he is innocent, he has no way of asserting that. He has to submit to being beaten up, and often has to lose his job. The misconceptions of a few leaders turned millions of people into servants. (Gangopadhyay 1987:49)

After Partition the *babus* of the village left. The *shastras* (holy texts) say that the upper castes are the head of Hindu society and we Namasudras⁷ are the hands and feet. How long does a headless body survive? In our village in Khulna, we bit the earth and clung on. But the Muslims stole our land, cut our paddy, refused to pay for fish we caught. The police called us *kafir* when we went to complain and beat us. They told us we were sitting on land which was rightfully theirs, eating food that was theirs. (Prafulla Gharami of Khulna, who left with his family after the riots of 1964 in East Pakistan.)

The Muslims became very arrogant after Partition. They said, *Charaler po* (son of an untouchable), come eat with us. Let your girls marry our sons. Then the son of the President of the village union--he was Muslim--molested one of our *Namasudra* girls. Someone from our side could not take that and the president's house burnt down. Of course after that we were finished. The Muslims told us they would teach us how to enjoy ourselves in Pakistan and attacked the Hindu neighbourhood. Many were murdered. Some of us hid in the canal

⁷Low caste peasants and fishermen.

holding water hyacinth over our heads. We heard one woman drowned her crying baby because she did not want her other children to be found and killed. That night we left. We managed to escape to Narayanganj where there were more Hindus and then to India. This was five years after Pakistan (Interview with Jadunath Mondal from Bariba, Dacca, 1988).

We came after *Joi Bangla*⁸. You may ask why we stayed so long. Bangladesh is my homeland. I come from a family of schoolmasters. I was determined to prove their two-nation theory wrong. We withstood every riot and humiliation. I worked in the language movement because I believed that Muslim or Hindu, we are Bengalis. My son worked for the Awami League⁹. He was killed by Pakistani soldiers. They castrated his dead body. So many people were slaughtered. We became refugees in India but I went back after Mujib became leader of free Bangladesh. I could not stay. The Pakistanis are gone but the *maulavis* (religious teachers) have poisoned the minds of Bengali Muslims. Bangladesh is an Islamic state. The two-nation theory was right. (Interview with Nirmal Chandra Sarkar of Faridpur, 1989).

From the available public “evidence” it seems East Bengal Hindus left their ancestral homes for contingencies of varying compulsions and at different times because of riots, the fear of riots, economic privation, political targeting, insecurity about the maintenance of their cultural lives, an attrition in their numbers, the existence of pre-partition family and business connections in India--because they felt they had no choice.

Their recourse to Partition as the historical explanation for their victimhood as a minority and then a displaced population has to be seen as partially determined by their experience of migration laws which created a hierarchy of acceptable causes for migration in order to determine aid-worthy “authentic” refugees and by which logic, Partition, was represented as the definitive instance of sectarian violence. By linking themselves to this paradigmatic “communal incident”--the refugees constructed themselves as “involuntary” political refugees, dramatized and legitimized their condition. They were also responding to the strand of public scepticism they encountered in West Bengal which dismissed their accounts of Partition-related displacement as exaggerated, and unreliable. According to this mode of thinking, the reason for the migration of East Bengalis was not life-threatening

⁸The term means “Hail Bangladesh!” and refers to Bangladeshi independence from West Pakistan.

⁹The Awami League was the Bengali party which led the nationalist movement for an independent Bangladesh, and included Muslims and Hindus among its members.

violence. It was in this vein of distrust that a prominent Calcutta intellectual wrote “Exodus” to disabuse Hindus of the widely held belief, “that most of the Muslims in Pakistan are communal fanatics and that all Hindus were forced to leave East Pakistan due to riots” (Maitreyee Devi 1974: ii). After the 1964 riots in Dhaka and Narayanganj, she visited the refugee resettlement site at Dandakaranya in central India in search of people who had been “directly involved” in a riot. She reported a “typical” exchange in which an elderly refugee woman answered her question “Why did you come to India?” by saying, “For fear of the *mian* (Muslim men), what else?” Maitreyee Devi’s next query was “What did they do?” and the answer, “They kidnap our daughters, burn our homes, stab us, kill us”--the response particularly remarkable for the use of the present tense. She continued, “Were any of your relations’ or friends’ houses burnt?” and was told, “No, nothing happened in our village, but in other villages there was trouble.” Maitreyee Devi concluded that “socio-economic reasons were the real cause of the exodus, more than riots” (ibid). In rejecting the migrants’ claim to be victims of violence as symptomatic of extreme prejudice, and untrue, the writer was not only minimizing the gravity of their predicament in Pakistan but in effect, questioning their eligibility to refugee status.

The refugees, for their part, insisted that Partition set in motion a telos of annihilation of the Hindu minority community in Muslim East Pakistan (and in Bangladesh). The president of the revolutionary nationalist organization Anusilan Samiti¹⁰, an East Bengali, wrote in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*:

Ever since independence on the basis of partitioned rather than a united India, the condition of the minorities of Pakistan is becoming unbearable with every passing day. If something is not done soon the minorities of East Pakistan will cease to exist (*astittwa bilop*) The wealth, lives and honour (*dhon, pran, man*) of the minority community in East Pakistan are endangered in every way. (Nalini Ranjan Bhattacharya, 2 January 1948)

This attribution of a sort of murderous intentionality to the Muslim majority was, as critics contended, contradicted by accounts of Hindu-Muslim friendship, of aid and succour, of political solidarity during the anti-Urdu language movement in East Pakistan and the struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh. In other words, inter-community relationships which depended on bonds other than those of religious affiliation, and identities which encompassed religion but were not reduced to it. But since the characterization of the political effects of Partition as physical obliteration and cultural erasure, a planned and certain assault on the wealth, life and honour of the Hindu community was a recurrent one, it is necessary to examine the key elements of this narrative of victimhood.

(I) Threat to *dhon* (wealth)

In the years immediately after Partition there was a movement toward redressing the stark

¹⁰At the turn of the century in Bengal, anti-colonial organizations with a terrorist-nationalist agenda such as *Jugantar* and *Anusilan Samiti* emerged as a militant alternative to the moderate politics of the Congress. They were ultimately absorbed into the Congress as radical cells, or formed Left parties outside it like the Revolutionary Socialist Party.

inequalities of wealth in East Pakistan--though the Muslim underclasses may not have benefitted as much as the West Pakistani and to a smaller extent, the emerging Bengali Muslim middleclasses. As part of its programme of national reconstruction, the Pakistan government took steps to abolish landlordism without compensation, to review the process of granting licenses for industries and commercial ventures, raise income tax, and requisition houses for refugees--all of which hit the Hindu propertied classes the hardest and not unexpectedly, drew strong complaints of discrimination. The minority community also felt itself to be singled out for routine attacks on their property and economic security by the majority community--which the perpetrators might have described as redistributive justice--the non-payment of rent, boycott of Hindu businessmen and professionals, and larceny. The minority's attempts at obtaining redress were apparently less than successful and only reinforced their conviction that the "criminals" were backed by the authority of the state.

In his speech to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 28 March 1952, Bhupendra Kumar Dutta, a "Minority member" stated the "basic problem" to be one of "livelihood":

Practically all sources of livelihood have been ...closed to them. Government jobs, jobs in private firms, they are not to have. In the professions there has been a silent campaign of boycott.. Control shops, licenses for motor buses and taxis the Hindus have been quickly deprived of. Formerly, some of them had agencies for various oil companies, The Imperial Tobacco Company ...and such other firms. They have almost all changed hands. If they are professors or school masters, as soon as a fresh graduate is available to replace an experienced M.A., some fault is found with the latter, in the long run he would be accused of anti-State propensities. If he does not get into other troubles, he must, give up his job and run for safety across the border. Even the poorer folk, the peasant, the fisherman, prove no exceptions. A peasant is busy ploughing by a riverside, a constable appears and asks him to ferry him across, the peasant points to a bamboo bridge nearby, the peasant gets a sound drubbing not only there but subsequently in the police camp. A constable asks a fisherman for some fish for the Havildar and when somebody takes up the fisherman's case for payment the intermediary is taken to the thana on a false charge and given such a beating he is rendered disabled for the rest of his life. A villager's paddy is attempted to be reaped by some neighbours of the other community. For resisting them, he is falsely charged by a sub-inspector, not produced before any court but assaulted severely. None of these are merely imaginary instances. They are all concerned with the Scheduled Castes¹¹ and happened in recent months around various Police camps near

¹¹Name given to low castes and "untouchables" in India following their inclusion in a schedule or classificatory list.

Gopalganj inspite of the Delhi agreement. (Indian Commission of Jurists, 1965: 13-14.)

The deliberate inclusion of lower caste Hindus in the constituency of injured minority is interesting because a class-based analysis of anti-Hindu sentiment is sought to be deflected by positing the conflict in purely religious terms. In the early phase of the migrations--through the 1950s, the majority of the refugees were upper and middleclass in origin--landlords, a wide range of rentier interests, people in the services, large entrepreneurs and to a lesser extent petty traders and artisans. Peasants made up the bulk of migrants after 1964. And while some workingclass refugees remembered their displacement as driven by the migration of the *babus*--on whom they were dependent for patronage, others attributed it to their experience of plunder by Muslims who coveted their property--the product of their industriousness.

(II) Threat to *pran* (life)

These accounts were primarily tied to Hindu-Muslim riots in East Bengal in 1946, 1949-50, 1964 and the war of 1970-7, as well as routine and random acts of violence. East Bengali refugees for the most part were very aware of the retaliatory character of the cycles of violence on either side of the border but in many tellings the aggression attributed to Muslims in Pakistan was described as opportunistic, incited by baseless propaganda and fueled by communal exclusionism. According to Prafulla Kumar Chowdhury of Dacca, an East Bengali journalist,

The Muslims wanted an Islamic state all along right from the time of the League. They formed the provincial government in 1946 when the Great Calcutta Killing took place and thousands of Hindus were massacred. Then again in Noakhali. In 1950, after they got Pakistan, they claimed that Muslims were being murdered in India and began to murder the Hindus in Barisal, Dacca, Chittagong. I remember papers like the *Azad* saying that Hindus cannot be trusted, they would kill their mothers and fathers. They would throttle Muslims to death if not watched. Our family left then but the genocide continued. In 1964, they used the excuse of the theft of a relic from Kashmir to incite communal violence in Khulna. And of course during the war of independence of Bangladesh, the West Pakistani army targeted Hindus as anti-nationals. Even after the Awami League's victory, Muslim communalists have gained the upper hand and Hindus are still under suspicion (Interview with Prafulla Kumar Chowdhury, 1988).

Other commentators were more nuanced in their analysis of violence against the Hindu minority in East Pakistan, arguing that non-Bengali Muslims were the actual perpetrators of such violence, or that "reactionaries" used the "weapon of communalism" to destroy East Bengali unity and the struggles for social justice. But in general, Muslim nationalism and mobilization for statehood--such that led to the birth of Pakistan and Bangladesh--was perceived as having disastrous consequences for Hindus. In the refugees' narratives of victimhood, the violence they were subjected to was the work of outsiders to the local community, raging mobs, criminals, representatives of the state, and

treacherous neighbours--the impression conveyed was that no Muslim could be trusted. Thus the Muslim who helped the Hindu was cast as an exceptional figure--isolated and inexplicable, implying survival to be an exceptional outcome as well. A deposition to a "fact-finding" committee by a refugee named Mohendra Dhali conveys this impression.

I witnessed the terrible mass killing by Muslim rioters at Khulna Launch Ghat on 3rd January 1964 when I arrived there in a launch from the village. I was with Sushil Kumar Biswas, a doctor...and Faik Mia, a locally well-known person. It was dark in town, which frightened us. ..We saw at least fifty men dressed in black with daggers in hand waiting on the jetty to start killing Hindus. We were about sixty among three to four hundred Muslim passengers...We wore lungis for it was unthinkable to move in public in Khulna in Hindu attire. We begged Faik Mia to save our lives..We were on the deck from where I saw a few Muslims drag one Hindu on to the jetty where they butchered him with a dagger... there were innumerable dead bodies. Then came two notorious *goondas* (criminals) of Khulna--and Faik too lost all hope for us. ..one cut me on the left side of the neck with a dagger. Had it not been for Faik again who caught the dagger in motion, I would have been slain. Dr. Biswas and I jumped into the river ..hiding ourselves behind water plants for two miles. We saw villages burning. I believe that night on the Khulna Launch Ghat alone Hindus numbering two to three hundred were killed. The river water turned red..@ He pointed out the cut on his neck to the investigator. (Indian Commission of Jurists 1965: 68).

The refugees tales are of rivers reeking of rotting corpses; factories bolted from the outside to prevent the escape of panic-stricken workers and set ablaze; faceless, marauding Muslim mobs screaming that they would make shoes out of the skins of Hindus; the "disappearance" of radical Hindu student activists who were involved in the Bangladeshi nationalist movement; of men and women bayoneted to death in front of their families during the civil war and of attacks on trains and river as terrified Hindus sought to flee to India. The image of the Muslim as aggressor is leached of historicity and particularity, reified as a Hindu-hating barbarian--a knife-wielding, blood-thirsty "butcher." A typical example of this was an account, which with minor variations, involved a Muslim's physical assault on a Hindu woman--her helplessness signified by her pregnancy or the infant at her breast, which also identify her as a Hindu man's property and means of reproduction, followed by the slashing off of her breasts, and the act of placing the foetus or child at the dead woman's mutilated nipple. This was taken to be a cruel travesty of the nurturing implication of a "normal" maternal gesture, as the woman and the dead or dying infant were converted to symbols of the physical, generational annihilation of the Hindu "race" or *jati*. Only one ex-refugee admitted to actually having witnessed such a scene, others ascribed it to hearsay--but in choosing to retell it to me, most insisted that the attack was an established practice. The narratives of physical violence against East Bengali Hindus were not only a register of the refugees' cultural prejudice, of the effects of political mobilization on sectarian lines during the anti-colonial, nationalist movement, but also an

index of their insecurity as a minority. And the reiteration that their predicament was one of life-threatening insecurity--a historical correlate of Muslim communalism--constructed the refugees as political sufferers.

(III) Threat to *maan* (honour)

In his semi-autobiographical chronicle of refugee rehabilitation, the Indian Commissioner of Rehabilitation, Hironmoy Bandyopadhyay described an encounter with an East Bengali refugee while touring a relief camp in Jalpaiguri in 1948. He asked the man why he left East Bengal when there were no outward signs of unrest. The man burst out: "It is true we have experienced no beatings or murder, but all people do not have the same degree of endurance." He then recounted his reason for leaving East Bengal. One evening, he had heard a loud call outside his house, "*Ho korta* (master of the house)! Are you home?" Thinking it was a neighbour or distinguished member of the village he stepped out and was surprised to see a Muslim tenant. The man smiled, "*Korta*, the English have left, the country is free, and we have our Pakistan. So I came to make friends with you." Angered by his tenant's loud tone of voice and familiar manner, the man remembered how, not too long ago, these very same people would have stood ten yards away to pay their respects. But it was "the time of Pakistan," so he pretended pleasure. The tenant proceeded to walk right in to the man's home "as if the house was his own property--and not to the sitting room outside, but right inside to the sleeping quarters." Sitting down on the man's bed without his permission he said in an unmistakable tone of threat, "*Korta*, this is Pakistan. Don't forget (and he no longer used the respectful *apni* but the familiar *tumi*) we are no longer your inferiors (*chhoto*). Remember, from now on we have to be friends as equals." The refugee exclaimed accusingly to Bandyopadhyay, "After all this, how can you still expect us to stay in Pakistan!" (Bandyopadhyay 1970: 13-4).

For the *bhadralok*, escape to West Bengal seemed the only way to "keep face"--avoid assimilation and humiliation by those they had considered their social inferiors. This was also partially true of the gentry of smaller means, and even of the Namasudras who had their own stories of Muslim "insolence": Muslims proposing inter-community marriages; contravening pollution laws by "accidentally" touching the Hindus' bodies, their food and water, or entering their homes or ritual spaces; "tricking" them into eating proscribed food (beef); speaking without deference--all these turned out to be common complaints. Minority organizations repeatedly drew the Pakistani administration's attention to threats' to the Hindu community's religious integrity. An example of such a "threat" was the text of an anonymous letter sent to the residents of Newa village from Bare Bara-Id, both in the Narayanganj subdivision of Dacca and published in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 4 January 1948 at the urging of the Dacca District Minority Association.

Become Musalman and perform *namaz*¹² ...There are many educated Musalman amongst us who wish to marry your girls. Become Musalman and eat beef. It is very tasty. Let us know whether you will vacate your houses soon. If you do not, come to our League office to accept the faith of Islam and eat beef. We will take your women, you may have ours. We will visit your houses,

¹²The formal prayer Muslims are required to perform five times a day.

you will come to ours. Signed--your well wishers.

The destruction and defiling of temples and shrines and threats of conversion, were seen as attacks on the very core of Hindu identity and integrity, and there was a heightened sensitivity to the experience of religious minorityhood or “second-class citizenship” in an Islamic state. The obsession with this compromised condition are evident from the many comparisons of the Jinnah Fund--to which all Pakistani citizens were expected to donate as part of the effort to rehabilitate the refugees from India--with the *jizya* or poll tax which used to be paid by non-Muslims in medieval times to the Islamic state for the privilege of living under its protection. The Hindus also emphasized their sense of religious subordination by referring to themselves as *zimmis*--to denote subjecthood, and to communal riots as *jihad*. According to a pamphlet issued on behalf of the refugees from Noakhali in India, “Repeated declarations that Pakistan is an Islamic State make both the Hindus and the Muslims think alike that Pakistan is ultimately meant exclusively for the Muslims” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 December 1948). The implication of this was that the migration of the East Bengali Hindus was constructed as inevitable.

Besides religion, the other elements of their identity that the East Bengali Hindus said they were anxious to protect from Islamic influence were their historical and cultural achievements. Pakistan was seen as a betrayal of secular and/or Hindu nationalist aspirations and labelled a “theocratic” state bound to destroy and deny Bengali Hindu culture and nationalism, and to celebrate Muslim victories. Thus Dhirendranath Roy Chowdhury told me, “The Barisal town hall had been named in the memory of Aswini Kumar Dutta whose leadership in the nationalist movement forced the British to revoke the first partition of Bengal in 1911. After 1947, the Pakistani authorities made that glorious symbol of Bengali nationalism into an office for the Muslim National Guard and the Ansars¹³. They butchered a cow in the courtyard” (Interview with Dhirendranath Roy Chowdhury, 1988). There was no doubt in his mind that the choice of that space was deliberate and the act a brutal reminder that the Muslims of East Bengal had won the struggle for independence. The refugees boasted that East Bengal once had the most advanced and numerous institutions of learning in India--a pre-eminence that they feared would be dismantled with the introduction of Islamic education, the supersession of traditional Hindu teachers, and the marginalization of the Bengali language in favour of Urdu. A story that is symptomatic of their cultural and nationalist anxiety concerns the rewriting of history books. In keeping with the new post-independence syllabus students in Pakistan were apparently asked the following examination question: “What role did the *kafirs* (non-believers) play in helping the British gain an empire in India?” (Interview with Rasaraj Goswami, 1988). The imputation of “treacherous” collaboration with British imperialists was perceived as a calculated slur on their “nationalist” heritage.

The “chastity” of married and unmarried Hindu women seemed to symbolize most potently, the honour, exclusivity and continuity of the community--and to represent its site of transgression. Violence against women featured widely in the Hindu minority's complaints of ill-treatment in Pakistan and as a matter of concern in West Bengal--the sexual possession of Hindu women by Muslim men being seen to stand for Muslim domination, “miscegenation,” the loss and humiliation of the (male) Hindu self. Such acts compromised the “purity” of the community, contravening prescriptions enjoining endogamy. When Suresh Chandra Banerjee, President of the West Bengal Provincial

¹³Muslim para-police made up of volunteers and constituted after the birth of Pakistan.

Congress Committee apprised party activists in the state on the condition of Hindus in East Bengal, he claimed that as an East Bengali himself--albeit one who had been living in Calcutta for twenty years--he could vouch that they were leaving because they “prized their self respect and the honour of their women above everything else” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 October 1948). The violent acts commonly referred to were rape, abductions, forced marriages and the deliberate flouting of rules of seclusion. For example much was made of rumours that Muslim boys were taking photographs of Hindu girls on their way to school--the appropriation of the image by the camera's lens being construed as violation by the gaze. The “outraging of female modesty” was described by the refugees as an attack on the individual Hindu and the community as a whole, since women were “responsible for the continuity of tradition and the race” (Interview with Prafulla Kumar Chowdhury, 1988). It bears noting here, that the rhetoric of sexual assault was not so much concerned with the plight of the women in question--who were usually abandoned if they returned to the Hindu community--as with the protection of patriarchal Hindu society.

The dissolution of social barriers in a classist-casteist, denominationally segregated world ostensibly in favour of the erstwhile underprivileged--was life-threatening for some and disquieting for others. In explaining why his father left their home, Anil Sinha, a veteran Communist activist, said simply, “It was sheer thin-skinnedness.” His father had been incensed when the local Muslim cobbler offered to “protect” him should there be any communal trouble in their neighbourhood, and announced his refusal to live in a country where he was beholden to the charity of *chhotolok* (lower classes). The upper and middle castes' inability to command deference was a painful indication of their disempowerment, while being hailed as “*charaler po*” or “son of an untouchable” by Muslims they considered lower in the caste hierarchy was interpreted by Namasudras, as a sign of their relative decline. According to Anil Sinha the tragedy was that though many East Bengali migrants justified their escape as the preservation of “Hindu” identity, the experience of refugeehood forced them not only to “turn their backs on caste rules”--his father was forced to live cheek by jowl with “untouchables” in refugee colony--but even to forgo their much vaunted “Bengaliness” as they were dispersed all over India (Interview with Anil Sinha, 1989).

The East Bengali Hindus' discourse of Partition victimhood reflected their acute sense of insecurity with regard to life, livelihood and honour as a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim-majority nation, as much as it reflected entrenched anti-Muslim prejudice. Since the self-image of Hindus in East Bengal was founded on a racialized asymmetry with the Muslim conceptualized as the opposite and inferior of the Hindu--even progressives reacted negatively to becoming a “minority”--with its connotations of secondariness. As inheritors of a colonial revisionist-nationalist historiography that denigrated the medieval or “Muslim period” of Bengal's history as the “dark ages,” the East Bengali Hindus were in agreement with their supporter, the eminent Bengali historian Jadunath Sarkar, who asserted that East Bengal was “lapsing into barbarism”—“going the way of Palestine without the Jews” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 August 1948). By representing Pakistan as an icon of ossified backwardness and fundamentalism, East Bengali Hindus were being told that they owed it to their national and cultural heritage to save themselves from cultural annihilation. The East Bengal they left behind was depicted in commemorative literature as “dead without a vibrant community of Hindus. ..The villages, markets, settlements of East Bengal are today speechless and without life, their consciousness wiped out by the horrors of the end of time... mice and cockroaches have probably built their world in the leather drums of the Harisabha

devotees”¹⁴ (Chakrabarty 1995: 128).

Migration to India was therefore an imperative--the realization of East Bengali Hindus aspirations for postcolonial national reconstruction. In his speech at the University Institute Hall in Calcutta in 1948 referred to earlier, Sarkar told his audience that like the Jews--paradigmatic refugees--who would convert Palestine to “a spark of light in the midst of the mess of Muslim misgovernment and stagnation,” the East Bengali refugees would vivify WestBengal's moribund culture and economy. Drawing positive parallels between the East Bengali diaspora and the migration of English Puritans to Holland and France, and then to Massachusetts; and of the French Huguenots to Holland and England, he declared that their going was a loss to their native countries and a boon for their countries of asylum. “However crushed and benumbed they may look when they are unloaded from their third class wagons at Sealdah Station yard, the refugees are the most valuable elements of the population of East Bengal,” he said, and urged West Bengalis “...to engraft this rich racial branch upon its old decaying trunk and rise to a new era of prosperity and power” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 August 1948).

The Communal East Bengali refugee?

I have tried to show that East Bengali claims to victimhood used the language of Muslim communal violence--to life, property and honour--to legitimize their claim to be political refugees and to gain public sympathy in India. But it also revealed deep antagonism toward Muslims in general and Bengali Muslims in particular. Drawing on his reading of *Chere Asha Gram*, a compilation of essays written by East Bengali refugees in a nostalgic vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that the home/homeland remembered was a Hindu one. Bengali Hindu nationalism “had created a sense of home that combined sacredness with beauty. This sacred was not intolerant of the Muslim. The Muslim Bengali had a place created through the idea of kinship . But the home was Hindu which the non-Muslim League Hindu was a valued guest...What had never been thought about was how the Hindu might live in a home that embodied the Islamic sacred” (Chakrabarty 1995: 129). Herein lay the unexamined structure of prejudice evident in this public discourse which ostensibly avoids a “low language of prejudice” (128). In an autobiographical essay on growing up in a refugee colony Manas Ray refers to this prejudice, “The Muslims were a constant presence in ...stories but only in the figure of the eternal peasant, hardworking, obliging, happy with his marginality, part of Hindu domestic imagery. No space was allowed to his rituals, his universe of beliefs nor did the middleclass Muslim ever figure” (Ray 2000: 168).

¹⁴Meeting place for Hindu devotional singing.

If this strand of elite East Bengali public discourse is implicitly dismissive of Muslims, the refugee testimonies of victimhood across class tend to be overtly anti-Muslim. In recognition of this, the Government of India instituted an investigation of “social tensions” among refugees from East Bengal in 1950 under the direction of the Anthropological Survey. The report noted “marked tension” against Muslims irrespective of caste status and sex, though found it “softened” among upper castes because of their education and stronger among women across caste because of their “identification” with “traditional ideology” (Guha 1959: ix). The negative stereotype of the Muslim which emerged in this study included such characteristics as cruelty, crudeness, lust, cow-killing, treachery, dirtiness and fanaticism. According to the researchers, the most significant feature about the stereotype was its “nonpolitical and nonreligious nature”--its emphasis on what they termed the “behavioral.” “The political ideology of the Muslim League or features of Islam as a religion found no place in it. Though aggravated by political conflicts in recent years, the basic roots of tension lay in deeper trends of personality structure which prevented Hindus from identifying with Muslims” (ibid). The suggestion is that the refugee rhetoric of victimhood constructed the East Bengali Muslim as the ontological “Other” of the Hindu--both superhuman in ferocity, strength and rampant sexuality, and subhuman because of dirtiness--associated with the moral pollution of beef consumption--rather than the physical, and with treachery and sexual transgression. And while I would question the analytical relevance of “personality structures” the broader point the report made is that the opposition between Hindus and Muslims was cast in essentialized terms rather than in those of historical or local context. This hegemonic narrative about “the Muslim,” systematically circulated in the press, pamphlets and commemorative literature and repeated in private in story and rumour, both erased the Muslim’s docile presence in an idyllic Bengali past and demonized “his”¹⁵ antagonistic presence in a language of excess.

What was the immediate implication of this refugee rhetoric of prejudice and antipathy? While East Bengali refugees who sought asylum in India represented themselves as victims of Muslim communalism to claim refugee status and thereby humanitarian assistance, they found it very difficult to influence the state’s rehabilitation intervention and experienced both relief and long-term rehabilitation policy as painfully inadequate. Large numbers of frustrated refugees took matters into their own hands and began to “resettle” themselves by squatting on land they argued to be unoccupied and unused. The words they used were “vacant,” and the Bengali equivalent “*khali*” as well as “*patit*” or abandoned, and “*jola jami*” which meant marshland. The impression these words conveyed was clearly that such lands were marginal and available for settlement--which was referred to as “colony” construction. In some cases this land belonged to the state, but for the most part the refugees squatted on privately owned property including that belonging to local West Bengali Muslims. Particularly in the areas around the city of Calcutta, many refugee settlements were established on land “formerly inhabited by Muslim labourers and artisans” who were “replaced by displaced Hindus from East Pakistan” (Bose 1968:33). Many Muslims were dispossessed of their homes in the city leading to their “ghettoization” in a few neighbourhoods (Deb 2000:68). It could be argued that East Bengali refugee settlement across West Bengal affected the minority Muslim community most adversely. While

¹⁵The negative and totalizing image of the Muslim in East Bengali refugee stories is explicitly gendered as male.

researching refugee self-settlement strategies I visited colonies on the outskirts of Calcutta as well as along the Hooghly river. It was not uncommon for me to be told while I was being shown around a colony by a refugee settler, that a soccer field or community gathering point was once a “Musalman” eggplant field or graveyard, or that when the East Bengalis arrived the land was “overgrown with weeds, home to jackals and mosquitos, and a handful Muslims whose homes consisted of shacks” (Interview with Paresh Haldar, 1988). There were a few instances when I noticed the contours of a mosque or Muslim saints’s shrine in the foundation of a refugee home. The need of the refugees’ for new homes pitted them against local West Bengalis, but the widespread dispossession of West Bengali Muslims must be seen as a manifestation of East Bengali refugee communalism driven by as much revenge, as a racist consciousness that marginalized or erased Muslim presence in the new refugee homeland of West Bengal.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM emerged as the main political opposition to the ruling Congress regime in West Bengal after Partition, and as the “old guard” like to tell it, party workers recognized the destabilizing force of East Bengali refugee anger against Muslims and the imperative to resettle them. This prompted the Left’s inclusion of the refugee cause in its broader programme of redistributive justice--a move which they claimed to have “neutralized” refugee communalism, helped prevent large-scale violence against West Bengali Muslims and minimized the ir migration to Pakistan (Interviews with Bijoy Mazumdar, Anil Sinha, 1988-89). Gyan Pandey has argued that the history of sectarian violence “has been treated in the historiography of modern India as aberration and absence” (1992: 27). In the Left’s master narrative of successful leadership of subaltern movements, the material or economic has been stressed as an explanation for Hindu-Muslim conflict. In this version the East Bengali refugees’ communalism--and expropriation of Muslims--is represented as an aberration, a distortion of the normal condition of inter-community harmony., cultural syncretism and class solidarity, corrected as it were by the Left successful efforts at consciousness raising. This erases the recent history of East Bengali communalism, and marginalizes Muslim victims. The fact that the Congress and the CPM insist on a small figure for Muslim out-migration to Pakistan (relative to East Bengali Hindus) and take pride in the state’s apparent restitution of property to Muslim “returnees,” posits secularism as normative in India as a policy and an objective condition. I return here to the story of “thwarted communalism” that I began this paper with. In that story, East Bengali refugees’ “momentary” communalism--cast as an aberration--was ostensibly corrected by a liberal appeal to the East Bengali refugee rioters to remember the “good” Muslim. Manas Ray writes, “Today the Left draws its rhetorical force from an act of remembrance: it asks not to forget the early days of hardship and achievement of the colony people” with the support of the Left in the face of Congress indifference. For those too young to remember, there is another “brand of the politics of memory that gestures at the treatment meted out to Hindus by the Muslims in undivided Bengal. Those born after the Partition are more eager to subscribe to this thesis of the past.” (188).

It is my submission that not only was the good Muslim itself a product of condescension and erasure--and therefore of communalism, but as I have tried to show in this paper, East Bengali refugee identity was predicated on the claim to communal victimhood which explicitly demonized Muslims. Even if one were to accept the argument that Bengali Hindu communalism has been muted relative to north and west India and that the politics of Hindu nationalism have not gained much ground in West Bengal despite the presence of the second largest populations of Muslims after Uttar Pradesh and a porous border with Bangladesh (Ruud 1996), I would suggest that the case of the East Bengali Hindu refugees demonstrates the existence and elaboration of a collective cultural memory of “bad”

Muslims, a particular history of Hindu communalism, and a past which may seed anti-Muslim politics in West Bengal in the years to come. While acknowledging East Bengali Hindu refugee agency, it is important to research further its communal effects on the Muslim minority in West Bengal; to examine the dynamics of Bengali refugee communalism, its distinguishing features and self-location relative to the Bharatiya Janata Party and its “family” of Hindu fundamentalist organizations; and to probe for alternative stories--perhaps those that tell of shared experiences and solidarity among Hindu and Muslim Bengalis.

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