

The Displaced Woman

Narratives from Survivors of the Partition of Bengal in 1947

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Memory and age are usually inversely proportional. Time can be a monumental opponent, often in favour of erasing details till a sharp mental image is reduced to a blurry, edgeless memoir of what was. This paper was conceptualised in 2017, 60 years after the Partition of India in 1947 to document the narratives of women who found themselves on the wrong side of the line; and had to abandon life as they knew it on the other side of the border diving West Bengal and East Pakistan. It was a race against time to record memories of the last generation of survivors who have personal experiences with the largest mass displacement in the world. The objective was to contribute to the effort of acknowledging and accounting for displacement induced trauma, not limited to sexual violence. This paper broadly categorizes women's journeys across the border into 'sheltered' and 'unsheltered' migration, and looks into the implications of both on their rehabilitation, social class and access to life opportunities. Since it is an Oral History research endeavour, it retains the fluidity of the narratives, including the respondents' lives before, during and after the Partition-induced displacement.

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A class of 18 students sat in a circle on their first day in a Master degree programme. “Why did you choose to study Peace and Conflict?” I was chewing on my pen, trying to think of ways to justify my admission to this course with my political science background, when a fellow student spoke up. She was born amidst conflict, made to internalise and normalise the presence of armed men and army-men all around her; living through bandhs, boycotts and bans on the internet like those were nothing extraordinary. Before she could finish, another chipped in, recounting the horror of arbitrary raids on their locality carried out by the forces, where young men were called out to the paddy field and strip-searched for weapons. To my surprise, the men and women present in that classroom, that day, picked up exactly from where the last one had left. Fifteen minutes into the class, I looked around and saw a whole new world. My classmates had endured terror, violence, loss of loved ones to ethno-national conflicts: things that I never had to confront in my 24 years of being. Strangely, that day, my privilege stood high and mighty in front of me. It was as fundamental to my identity as conflict was to theirs.

The city of Kolkata, where I have lived my entire life until 2016, saw its last large-scale violent conflict in the 1970s. It burned and bled as the Naxalite uprising clashed with state repression. The highest casualty came from the university-going youth. The following years that led up to my birth and upbringing were not completely placid, but my childhood looks not one bit like the ones narrated by my classmates. Mine was shielded by my identity, the position my family name is accorded in the society, and the position my ‘people’ are accorded in the Union of India.

What, then, does privilege do in a conflict?

61 years ago, Kolkata was not a stranger to grotesque outbreaks of communal violence; triggered by the imposition of the Radcliffe Line that divided the British-Indian province of

Bengal into the newly sovereign states of India and (East) Pakistan. The Partition of India in 1947 generated one of the largest cases of forced displacement of people in the world. On the eastern front, the province of Bengal took the hit. Kolkata became the capital city of the newly carved out state of West-Bengal – which was imagined to be Hindu; while the eastern extension of Pakistan was created out of the land that constitutes present-day Bangladesh. It was imagined to be inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Muslims. Since the Partition was designed on communal lines, it had no space for cohabitation of the ‘two nations’. The people who suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the line scurried to the safety that they hoped to find in their now ‘nation-states’.

In that massive upheaval, how did privilege negotiate with the experience of trauma?

I was not born amidst conflict. But two generations ago, my city became home to a tremendous number of people exiled from their homeland, whose lineage I carry.

While looking at the available literature on the Partition of 1947, what struck me as a recurrent theme across spatial differences in Partition history is the way women have been represented in it. I had undertaken this study to make an attempt at detangling the agency of the survivors from the overarching trope of helplessness in the existing narratives. This paper is an attempt at archiving the variegated individual memories of women who survived the Partition of 1947 on the Bengal border, and came to Kolkata from erstwhile East –Pakistan. This is not without an accompanying intent; for I wanted to understand, through the memories of the last surviving generation, if the experience of trauma of a magnitude this severe can be altered in any manner by economic and social privilege. In the course of recording the experiences of the seven ladies who graciously consented to be my respondents, I realised how everyone has a different story to tell about the same event. They were all evicted from their homeland, but each of the respondents had encountered the Partition in a unique way. Human agency is rarely absent from any disaster, and that makes all the difference.

Note: In this paper, the Partition of 1947 has been referred to simply as ‘the Partition’ in some instances for the purpose of convenience. It is not to claim in any way that it is the only event of bifurcation of the Indian subcontinent.

Collective Memory of Women in the Partition

Maurice Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory in Sociology. Collective memory is the shared memory of an event by a social group. (Halbwachs 1992) “Halbwachs' primary thesis is that human memory can only function within a collective context.” (Staff, The University of Chicago Press Books n.d.) Paul Connerton has traced the same trajectory of thought in his assertion that memory is “not only personal and cognitive but also socially habitual” (Sangmin 2010). Sangmin (2010) has quoted Connerton’s work extensively to assert:

“Since “all beginning contains an element of recollection” and “our mind is already predisposed with a framework of outlines, of typical shapes of experienced object”, even when a revolutionary event would occur and it is perceived as an historical rupture, we are not free from the bodily practices and the formal structure of commemorative ceremonies: “The attempt to establish a beginning refers back inexorably to a pattern of social memories” (ibid 2010).

This theorization was indeed innovative, but has been subjected to appropriate criticism of several scholars. One of the most relatable critiques is forwarded by Anna Green: “The conceptualisation of memory in this body of work either conflates collective and individual memory, or relegates the latter to a position of insignificance.” (Green 2004)

Since the Partition of 1947 was an event of spectacular proportions, the collective memory of it often glosses over the nuances of individual experiences. My issue with the collective memory of the Partition has to do with the way women are remembered in it; along with the narrow definition that kind of memory accords to trauma. “Collective memory, Halbwachs asserts, is always selective; various groups of people have different collective memories, which in turn give rise to different modes of behavior. [*sic*]” (Staff, The University of Chicago Press Books n.d.) In this context, the sphere of collective memory is an extremely gendered space. It is only recently that initiatives like the Oral History Project have begun to take account of individual experiences, especially that of marginalised groups (which is constituted by women in this discourse).

Any review of Partition literature shows an overwhelming intensity of violence, largely sexual in nature, directed towards women.

“...gendered violence in the communal riots that took place during the partition. This ethnic genocide witnessed two kinds of gender-based violence. Firstly, the violence inflicted on women by men of the opposite religious group that involved kidnapping, rape, and mutilation of the genitalia or public humiliation. The supposed aim of this kind of violence was to abase the men of the rival religion to which the women belonged. A second form of violence against women included the violence inflicted on women by their own family members. This could vary from honour killings to the insistence of male kin that their mothers, daughters, or wives commit suicide in order to safeguard the purity and chastity of the community. Both forms of violence substantiate the claim that women were not treated as humans but rather as markers of communal and national pride” (Dey 2016).

This, in fact, is the brutal reality and in no way can or should it be avoided. However, there is a flip side to this depiction, and that is the danger inherent in this monolithic description of women’s experience with Partition trauma. If sexual violence, community dishonour and objectification are allowed to become the only tropes of studying it, it will subsume individual agency and the unique coping mechanisms of every woman encountering the conflict. Also, it largely restricts the understanding of trauma to the physical and mental implications of sexual violence for women, sidelining the other aspects of loss associated with the Partition. Most of the respondents carry with them the loss of their homeland, something that has not been adequately highlighted in any of the literature that I have reviewed.

Forced displacement has a plethora of traumatic implications, and when only one of those is highlighted for an entire group, it also reflects what the larger collective thinks is important to remember for that group. My work is an effort to acknowledge the other facets of human experience with exodus and resettlement. Individual memory, in that respect, is used in my research as a tool of resistance to Halbwachs’ collective memory.

Conceptualising Trauma

Trauma is the human reaction to situations where the level of stress is too high for the psyche to cope with. It can be both physical and psychological.

“Psychological trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions, in which:

- The individual’s ability to integrate his/her emotional experience is overwhelmed, or
- The individual experiences (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity.” (Giller, 1999)

Such a definition does not allow a deterministic understanding of trauma, for no set parameters can preconceive what will be traumatic for an individual. It can be a single event of any magnitude – ranging from a car crash to the Partition; it can also be chronic in nature – for instance, intimate partner abuse or child abuse. Often, singular events have far-reaching implications that the sufferers continue to carry with them long after the event is over. In the context of the Partition of 1947, I found an interesting reflection in Jennifer Yusin’s focus on the newly imposed geographical borders as the site of trauma.

“...the division of British India signaled [*sic*] a unique rupture in which the creation of borders became the defining traumatic event of that history... From the borders of the 1947 Partition, the subcontinent inherited what I call “a geography of trauma” – a conceptual schema that is at once a geographical and national reality in which people live and an ungraspable experience that refuses boundaries” (Yusin 2009).

When there is a conscious effort to acknowledge subjectivity in conceptualising trauma, the same broad scope should be extended to all social groups – especially women. Even the women who did not encounter direct physical violence have told me about the lasting effects of the upheaval they had experienced at a very tender age.

How do, then, people adapt to their circumstances when confronted with trauma?

Understanding Resilience

Resilience refers to a *dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity*. Implicit within this notion are two critical conditions: (1) exposure to significant threat or severe adversity; and (2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process. (Sunia S. Luthar, Dante Cicchetti and Bronwyn Becker 2007)

This study discovered the positive adaptation of the survivors following their resettlement in Kolkata. A respondent has talked about the access to education and employment opportunities that she could not have expected had her family not been forced to relocate from East-Pakistan. The disruptive implications of the Partition shattered familial hierarchy in several cases; albeit unintentionally, it opened avenues of self-reliance for women. In some cases, the patriarch of the family was lost to violence or separated from the family for an extensive period, and the women had to step-up to decision-making roles, something that they had no primary control over under normal circumstances.

Resilience also implies recovery. Normal course of life is adversely affected in a severe way, and recovery is a completely subjective affair. While some women told me stories of beginning a new life laced with nostalgia, some could never dull the intensity of their loss in their mind, but continued to live on.

I began by reaching out to my acquaintances to identify women who migrated to Kolkata during the period of 1947-1952, from the erstwhile East Pakistan. I encountered my first challenge here, since the time lapse between the Partition and my research is a considerable period; most people who had lived through it were no longer alive. Even the surviving population is substantially affected by the perils of ageing. However, this only increased my urgency to record the nuances of the lived experiences of the very last generation of survivors to the existing body of literature on women in the Partition of 1947.

The only comparison this paper makes is that of the kind of trauma experienced by women who fled in a relatively 'sheltered' manner and who encountered greater physical risks in making the journey. Therefore, I selected my respondents by enquiring into their financial conditions at the time of their resettlement (in Kolkata) through a preliminary informal survey. I arrived at the final sample size of 7 respondents, out of whom 3 women had crossed the border under dire circumstances, and the others could afford to take relatively safer routes and modes of transportation.

Although there is no obvious mention of religious affiliation in my research, the nature of the very event, i.e. the Partition and my field site implies the official religion of my respondents to a large extent. This is a conscious reminder to the reader that the sentiments surfacing in the interviews stem from intensely personal encounters of violence and distress, and are not to be taken as determinants of the nature of any particular religion. My research could not encompass the stories from both sides of the Indo-Bangladesh border owing to practical limitations, and hence is lopsided in depicting the different aspects of Partition trauma. Therefore, I have relied on secondary literature to achieve a more holistic view of the conflict, and the irrelevance of religion – for the intersection of gender strangely united the experiences of the women of both religious affiliations.

THE PEOPLE

"The importance of oral testimony may not lie in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge." (Portelli 1998)

Storytelling is inherent to human civilizations. Prior to the emergence of the script, knowledge and cultural mores were passed down the generations orally; no wonder the study of folklores provide unprecedented insights into the community they belong to. With the advent of written documentation, the need to commemorate only the 'important' stories emerged. The free flow of stories was now put within the confines of pages, thereby necessitating scan and filter and the subsequent abandonment of what could not pass the test of importance in public psyche. I find this resonating in Halbwachs' concept of collective memory – what the collective remembers, exerts an overbearing force on individual memory. As Anna Green notes correctly, "the conceptualisation of memory in this body of work either conflates collective and individual memory, or relegates the latter to a position of insignificance" (Green 2004).

Collective memory is inherited by the subsequent generations of the society, who are oriented to the memorised event through historical and artistic expressions – sites and manifestations of collective remembrance are most frequently found in monuments, museums, movies and literature, poignantly called 'vehicles of memory' by Alon Confino. (Confino 1997)

Cultural historians and cultural theorists largely agree that contemporary society is in the grip of a memory boom, expressed in myriad ways from the building of memorials and expansion of museums, to retro fashions and popular representations of the past in film and television.

These multiple 'sites of memory' (the phrase, of course, is taken from French historian Pierre Nora) have led historians to think about whether another 'venue of memory and identity transmission ... operate(s) simultaneously and competitively with history, namely "collective memory" (Green 2004)

Storytelling is an effective path of resistance to this relegation of individual experiences, and I have resorted to it extensively to look into the uniqueness of every confrontation of human agency with a traumatic event. Also, it enables researchers to shift the discourse from obsessive pursuit of factual accuracy to acknowledgement of the subjectivity of truth; a critical contribution to the field of conflict research. The untamed quest for establishing the truth can lead to additional brunt on the psyche of a survivor who has experienced loss and violence already. Insensitive questions, even if unintended, violate the ethics of conducting research among survivors of traumatic events. Rested on the tapestry of trauma, storytelling is among the best-suited tools of recording the experiences of survival.

Thus, the emphasis on creating an archive of stories and acknowledging them as the bedrock of oral history can modify the collective memory of an event by adding the much required nuances of personal memory. "Stories are the basis for history, art, religion, politics, philosophy, and more, reflecting the ways in which we are uniquely separate, while revealing our interconnectedness." (Andrea Blanch, Beth Filson and Darby Penny with contributions from Cathy Cave n.d.)

On that note, this paper will narrate the stories of seven ordinary women who survived an extraordinary event of loss and uprooting, to find themselves building a new life from scratch. Here, it might be useful to note that there is a layering present in the narrations that I am presenting henceforth: the survivors have told me their stories that I, as a listener, am narrating to you. Their narrations are paused by my own observations in some cases, and I have pointed that out duly.

My seven respondents will be known hereafter as:

Namrata:

Presently at the 77th year of life, she is my first respondent and my source of inspiration for the subsequent framework of my research. Her memories of pre-Partition East Pakistan are not as pronounced, but the transit and resettlement in Kolkata are etched in her mind like the time lapse in between never existed at all. Her experience has been a decisive factor in assisting me in the pursuit of my research objectives.

Namrata came from a family that she defined as "having sufficient money, but not sufficient modernity". They were an affluent name in a village called Taltola in East Pakistan's Bikrampur district. "There was a river in front of my house. Dhaneshwari. I was very young then, so I get confused with names at times." A strictly patriarchal structure with her grandfather at the apex, Namrata told me that they were 'businessmen', and very good ones at that. "My grandfather had invested in a number of business ideas that had branches in Dhaka and Calcutta then. Even before the Partition, my father spent most of his time in Calcutta." Their textile shop in Kolkata¹ was the biggest. "It was a wholesale outlet. Another one sold utensils in Bikrampur, and there was a third shop in Kamala Ghat, but I don't know

¹ The names 'Calcutta' and 'Kolkata' have been used interchangeably, keeping in mind the time of such reference. My narration uses the latter, while my respondent referred to the city as it was known during the British Raj.

what we sold there.” When I asked her if she would tell me whatever she remembered of the 7 years of life spent in her village before the Partition, she told me that she remembered the structure of their house. “I remember how, during the famine in 1942, grains were stacked under our beds. My grandfather used to cook lentils with rice in a huge pot, and give it to those who had no food to eat.” She painted a mental image of a green, agricultural village where her mother took her to a pond with “very clear water” where she watched on while her mother washed clothes and went in for a quick swim. When I asked her about school, she told me that she vaguely remembers going to a ‘pathshala’ with a slate and chalk, but no more than that.

The impact of forced migration can perhaps be mitigated by one factor – that of money. If the victim of eviction can escape the situation with some money and movable property, the transit and the resettlement in a new place becomes more secure. Although no guarantee for security, economic privilege paves an easier way out from a traumatic situation like that of the Partition. My interaction with Namrata gave me priceless insights on the equation between security and money, and what it means for women, in particular. Namrata’s affluent background could not prevent her or her family from being forced out of their home, but her experience with the emigration is distinct from the dominant narrative surrounding women and the journey out of a conflict-zone.

“My father used to frequent Calcutta for buying supplies at wholesale rates from Barabazar². He had to take the train to Sealdah, and during the riot, he used to come back horrified. I was too young to understand what he was scared about, but I have vague memories of him telling my mother that the trains going out of Pakistan reached Sealdah loaded with dead bodies.” Her narration was a sharp reminder of William Dalrymple’s ‘The Great Divide’ (2015), where he described train stations in major cities on both sides of the newly imposed border in the North being washed with blood. “Special refugee trains, filled to bursting when they set out, suffered repeated ambushes along the way. All too often they crossed the border in funereal silence, blood seeping from under their carriage doors” (Dalrymple 2015).

Namrata told me that these trains were infamous for carrying corpses of women, bearing evidence of brutal sexual and physical torture. “I have heard that they used to torture and kill women in gruesome ways, inserting sticks and other objects into their vagina. My family could afford to avoid the land route altogether. We rented a steamer from East Pakistan to enter India through the Sundarbans. My grandfather brought a lot of people along with us. It was only much later that I understood why we came by water. One of my uncles had to stay back a little longer to organise the money and the documents. He had a narrow escape from death. Muslims sheltered him on his way. Not all of them are bad of course. Some saved people while the others set them on fire screaming Allah-hu Akbar. I cannot trust them, but I do know that not all can be bad, ever.” Namrata was out of the minority who could escape the violence without direct confrontation, and that was made possible by her family’s planned transfer of resources and people on the brink of communal riot.

She came straight into the city of Calcutta following the eviction from her home. Her memories of the life before and the transit may be foggy, but her reflections on the life after reaching Kolkata proved just as central to my research objectives. On being asked about her life after migrating to Kolkata, she said: “We rented a house in Taltola, a prime location of Kolkata – S.N. Banerjee Road. I can never forget that locality. Most of my memories begin

² The famous wholesale market in Central Kolkata that retailers and traders from all over the region come to buy goods from.

from here. I made friends there, went around a lot, even wandered into the police station a lot of times! We had to leave all our property behind. The house, our lands, the cattle we had, everything. My grandfather brought as many families with him as possible, especially the women and children. My father had already rented the place in Taltola when we came. It was a three storied house. Most of the men in our family came on a chartered plane a few days later. Most of our relatives who are not so well to do came to Kolkata in this manner, with us. Many of them settled in Assam and North Bengal.” I listened to her reminiscence before steering the conversation back to her life after the move, so I enquired about her education, friends, and anything else she would like to tell me. She poignantly wove her story with tropes of alienation, being treated as the outsider and gradual assimilation into the host society. “I am the first graduate from my family. I was admitted to Taltala High School as a Refugee. We used to eat the rice that came in the ration for Partition refugees. All our food was in fact sourced from ration supply. The Indian government doled out several benefits for us back then. Refugees had separate ration cards. We carried that status for a long time. In class seven or eight I changed my school. Throughout school, they ragged us by calling us 'Bangal'³. They used to look down upon us. We were considered second class citizens. They thought we made our way into their country to encroach upon their resources. We did not occupy anybody's land!”

Namrata went on to graduate school and get a Bachelor's degree, becoming the first person from her family to do so. She accredited that to their relocation. “Kolkata was the biggest city we had seen then. People were different, everyone focused on education. My family was affected by that, I think.” She laughed and remarked, “I still wonder how they started sending us sisters to college with such conservative attitudes!”

“It was horrible, the violence, the bloodshed, the losses. But I think my life would have been very different had I lived there.” She pointed to an old photograph of herself in a black graduation robe.

“That would not have happened, for sure.”

Chandra:

The senior-most respondent of this paper was not a person who dwelled on the past with lamentation. She was upright in her narration, carefully setting her emotions aside throughout our interaction. She discussed facts, what she perceived to be the political atmosphere at the time and who she thinks had made the most out of the tumultuous situation. She also altered my linear preconception about the migration from East-Pakistan into Kolkata, shedding light on the geopolitical dynamics of Partition-induced displacement. Chandra spent 18 years of her life in Rongpur, East Pakistan, harbouring much clearer memories of her life before the Partition than most others in this study. “I had just completed my school when they divided the country. Rongpur was a Muslim-dominated town; our house had two mosques on either side. But there was no division between us at the time. We lived together quite well. But after the Partition, we felt threatened. We started trying to move away from the mosques surrounding us and find a safer place to live.” She talked about the atmosphere of suspicion that plagued everyone following the declaration of the creation of Pakistan. “Rongpur was a fairly big town, and we were fairly urban.” Her family was not involved in agriculture or any

³ Among the Bengalis in India, especially in the city of Kolkata, a clear division exists between 'Ghoti'-the inhabitants of western Bengal prior to the Partition; and 'Bangal'- the refugee population from erstwhile East-Bengal who came to West-Bengal after the Partition. It should be noted that the categories are not explicitly religious, but mostly denote Hindus.

activity typical to “the rural economy”. Her father was a teacher, and her family emphasized the need for education for all their children. The Partition made her look for employment elsewhere, following her school final examinations. Chandra’s family was getting increasingly uncomfortable with the demography of their hometown Rongpur. She had just given her Intermediate examination⁴ and decided to look for a job somewhere else. The town of Siliguri had an opening for a school teacher. Chandra already had a part of her maternal family settled there, and went on to take up the said job to move out of Rongpur and shift to Siliguri in the newly formed Indian nation-state. “The locals in Siliguri used to give immense protection to refugees back then. It was a very good trait.” She came to India without any papers, and did not apply for the official status as a refugee. She told me of a relatively unhurried migration where she, along with her family, could deliberate and look for better opportunities in a ‘safer’ place before actually making the journey. She came by train from Rongpur to Siliguri, and told me of the easy permeability of the border she had crossed. Chandra moved to Siliguri by herself to begin with her new job as a primary school teacher, before bringing the rest of her family there. Throughout her narration, she maintained an objective distance from the political atmosphere of the time, refraining from making any comment on its impact. I did not probe further on the topic for ethical reasons. However, she pointed out that “the population of Rongpur had a high level of political consciousness. It was an urban space. Advanced. We had to migrate from a big city to a small town, in fact!”

She found a sympathetic and cooperative host population in the town, who offered “many of us protection and shelter when we crossed the border.” The school that she taught in went on to become a ‘refugee high school’, in her words. Following her settlement in Siliguri, her family had to sell their property under distress and join her on the Indian side of the border. They spent two years there, from 1948 to 1950 – when she moved to the city of Kolkata for better opportunities.

“All the hubbub surrounding ‘deshbhaag’⁵ paid off for the poorer class. The women who were forced to move to ‘Epar Bangla’⁶ got the opportunity to live a much better life. The worst sufferers were the middle class. Many of us had to discontinue our education.”

Chandra retired from her long career as a teacher when she turned 60.

Radhika:

I encountered in her the most severe manifestation of trauma that many, many survivors of the Partition had endured in their childhood. Her symptoms of hyperactivity, excessive anxiety and persistent depression were detected as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder⁷ (PTSD) long after she had settled down in Kolkata with her family. My conversations with her were out of the most difficult, for she was suffering from intense discomfort in her lungs at the time which made talking a challenge for her. However, she persisted and gave me the opportunity to understand what resilience looks like in person. Her life before the Partition was the only time that she lived without the anxiety that would go on to become an

⁴ Alternative term used to refer to Higher Secondary examinations in India; it is not common in contemporary parlance though.

⁵ A Bengali term translating literally into ‘split of countries’; used to refer to the Partition of India in 1947.

⁶ Literally means ‘this side of Bengal’, geographically refers to the state of West Bengal, India.

⁷ PTSD: is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, yet most people recover from initial symptoms naturally. Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they are not in danger. (Staff, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder n.d.)

unavoidable part of her existence. Radhika described a life where her father was a lawyer and a “well-respected man in society.” As the youngest child, she only spent the initial years of her childhood in the town of Barisal in undivided Bengal. “Our life was idyllic, at least what I remember of it. I had so many friends. My best friend, Fatehma and I would play with our dolls until sundown.” The Partition changed her life as she knew it. “I did not know why everyone would shut their windows before sunset. My mother did not allow me to play outside any longer, and all our neighbours were leaving one after the other.” Her father was “very reluctant to leave, and thus we waited until the day we could not anymore.” The nature of Radhika’s encounter with the violence set off by the Partition was more direct than most other participants in my research. As a sensitive individual by disposition, she narrated her lived horror in a manner that made the huge gap between then and now look irrelevant. Her family had tried to wait out the upheaval, thinking it to be a temporary lapse of judgement on part of people. Unfortunately, their wait resulted in worsening of communal riots and cost them precious time that Radhika said they could have invested in planning out their immediate future in an alien place. Only her elder sister was sent off to the relatives they had in Calcutta. Radhika’s 12 year old self watched close family members being butchered in paddy fields – when her parents finally realised that they could no longer wait in the hope for a better day. Without any preparation, her family had to escape a near-death situation and somehow reach Calcutta to the safety of their relatives. “The steamer-ghat was overflowing with people every day. I could not understand why. So many were leaving their homes with huge bags and pots on their heads, but my father kept saying that we could not leave. Everything was here, our entire lives...he could not imagine just abandoning it all and going somewhere else.”

She witnessed the loss of friends and family to the riot, and no longer felt an attachment to her own home. “I could not wait to leave.”Recapitulating the day they had left their home in Barisal, Radhika said “Finally, it was the day to leave. Hundreds of people were walking with us to the steamer-ghat. My parents, my niece and I walked over bodies of people butchered by their own neighbours, friends...I did not know my own home any more. The river was giving off such a pungent stench; and then I saw those heads – so many of them – floating on the surface. My insides were churning.”

Radhika’s family too, took the water route to reach Kolkata where their relatives received them. Encountering severe trauma at an impressionable age can have lifelong implications on the survivor’s mental health. Radhika was brought into India under the protection of her family, but she could never erase the images of violence and death from her memory. After reaching Kolkata, her family moved in with her maternal uncle and stayed till they rented a place of their own. Shortly after, she discovered a tremor in her right hand that would not go away. “I have always been anxious for as long as I can remember. One day, I do not remember that exact day, it was a long time ago; but one day I could not stop my right hand from trembling. I did not know what was happening.” Coupled with her heightened stress and reactions, the tremor hinted at the presence of PTSD, which was subsequently detected in her. Her entire narration was coloured by her condition, and she was the one who pointed it out to me. “Every time my son or daughter-in-law steps out of the house, I cannot help the sickening weight sinking in my stomach. I understand that I cannot, should not interrupt their lives, but I cannot breathe easy till they come back.” She is also hyper-responsive to sudden movement and loud noises.

An otherwise ‘normal’ course of life characterised by university education, marrying out of love and two children bore the scars of young Radhika’s memory of what the Partition had ushered in.

“I could never forget.”

Chhobi:

Listening to her made me reflect on the extent to which our memories are really constructed by what we are told. She was only three years old when her mother had made the journey across the border along with her siblings, but her narration sounded like she had vivid memories of the trauma. When I enquired, she let on that the traumatic experience during the transit was mostly of her mother, but it was as if she had inherited it from her. She focused mostly on her life in Kolkata, their struggle to build from scratch what they had lost on the other side. She was a toddler when the riots broke out in the Commilla district of undivided Bengal. Her grandmother was the ‘morol’⁸ of their Gram Panchayat. “Our house was known as the Thakur Bari of Beltola.” Soon after the declaration of the Partition, “the Mussalmans⁹ came to our house and told my father that we must escape right then, because they had come to know that the mob was going to torch our house that night.” The ‘good Muslims’ that came to warn them were privy to her grandmother. “But my mother, despite being educated and a highly practical woman, could not seek employment because her brothers did not approve of it.” She could not overstep the authority of her husband, brothers or brother-in-laws. “When my father heard that they wanted to burn down our house, he started assembling all the expensive utensils and other items to hide those in a pile of ash. But he would not leave his house.” It was Chhobi’s mother who had left that night along with her four children, without their father. Chhobi’s mother could not ignore the imminent threat to her children’s lives and left their home without her husband, who was not ready to abandon his home at any cost. His body started showing manifestations of his anxiety, giving him another reason to stay. The rioters acted on their threat and torched Chhobi’s house hours after her mother had walked out with her siblings and her. Walking after sunset was exceptionally risky, she said, especially for a woman with no man accompanying her and her children. Her mother went on to join a group of women who were leaving that same night. “I was the baby in her arms. She had to carry me, the puffy rice and jaggery that she had packed for us to eat on the way, and a few clothes. She carried that bunch on her head. My brothers trailed after her, everyone carrying the last bits of their life until then.” She had carried only one saree for herself. “We had spent at least 10 days like that, eating only that.”

After their house was set on fire, her father had somehow managed to escape with his life. He could not bring anything with himself. “We met him on the second day, I think. That’s what my mother said. We found him in the huge crowd of people.”

They came to Calcutta by train. Chhobi’s family reached Calcutta in 1948 under dire circumstances. As an individual, she has no personal memory of their eviction and resettlement, but the struggles of her life have largely been shaped by her identity as a refugee from East Pakistan. “My family has had a host of strong, opinionated women. I already told you about my grandmother, right? She was the head of the village.” Her family’s financial crunch post relocation prompted them to travel further, wherever the only earning member of the family at the time – her elder brother – was posted for his work. “We stayed in Katwa, Burdwan for some years, then moved to Salbani, Midanpore. We had also spent some time in Krishnanagar and Kanchrapara, respectively, in the district of Nadia. In Krishnanagar, we stayed in a refugee camp. It was very neat. Then we finally built a house of our own under the Government scheme of ‘refugee rehabilitation’. I came back to Kolkata in my late

⁸ The Bengali word ‘Morol’ is used to define the chief or the head of a village. Interestingly, it is a gender neutral term.

⁹ Alternative term used to denote the subscribers of Islam – the Muslims.

teenage years.”Her family thrived on the refugee aid provided by the Government of India till their eldest son had started earning. Shouldering the responsibilities with her siblings, Chhobi joined Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) at the age of 19 where she would eventually go on to work till her age of retirement. Her college education was interrupted for two years for the same. “We were poor. But my mother never let us feel poverty in its true form.”

“My life is very cinematic. The struggles are endless, but here I am today; and I have never bowed to pressure. I always wished to find someone who would write my story.” She laughed. “And here you are.”

Ananya:

There is an echo of the non-linear nature of the journey from East Pakistan into Kolkata in her story as well. Her memories of the Partition are clear, despite her confession about old age chipping away at her short-term memory. The interaction with her gave me crucial insights on the continuity and breakdown of familial structures owing to the disruption created by the Partition. Her father was posted in Susunia Pahar in undivided Bengal – that came under West-Bengal after the Partition. It was a Christian area, dominated by the European Missionaries for Christ, which prevented her family from sending their children to school in the region. Her family left Susunia Pahar to come into the town of Mymensingh when she was very young. Almost five years later, Ananya experienced relocation again, this time triggered by the Partition of India and Pakistan. Her family too, like Namrata’s, was that of affluent businessmen, and there was no culture of women being engaged in paid employment. They were 7 siblings, and lived in a nuclear family structure owing to the mobile nature of her father’s work. She was 10 years old in the December of 1947 when her family decided to migrate to the Indian side of the erstwhile Bengal Province, because of the brewing communal tension. However, her story of the transit echoed a lot of Chandra’s, in so far as the ability of her family to make an unhurried journey across the border. Her uncle used to stay in Jalpaiguri, neighbouring to the town of Siliguri; her parents decided to relocate there for security. Their immediate journey was thus from the town of Mymensingh in East Pakistan to Jalpaiguri in the northern part of West-Bengal by train. They were able to migrate without any direct confrontation with violence. “I came to Kolkata only after getting married, that too for visiting my brother-in-law. I began frequenting the city only after both my daughters got married and settled in this city, and they would never agree to let us go before a month, at least!” Ananya has spent most of her life in Jalpaiguri, moving first to Kolkata and then to the town of Kalyani in Nadia district, West-Bengal, for easier access to their daughters. When I asked her about her life in Jalpaiguri after the Partition, she told me: “I vividly remember everything before and after the Partition. When they turned our home into Pakistan, that is when my father decided that we would not stay there any longer. My uncle used to stay in Jalpaiguri, and my father visited the place to buy a piece of land. We came here from Mymensingh when our house was still under construction, and thus had to stay with my uncle for a while. Honestly, I have never known any financial woes.” They could not sell their house in Mymensingh, and had to abandon it. She was enrolled in school after they had shifted to Jalpaiguri, but for some reason, she did not appear her matriculation examinations. Her marriage was arranged shortly after.

Gayatri:

The daughter of a photographer who lost his sanity to the violence ushered in by the Partition, her story kept reminding me of the extraordinary capacity of human beings to cope with adverse situations and reconstruct their lives even in face of trauma of such tremendous

magnitude. Gayatri's father was a photographer, associated closely with the British who came to hire him to travel along with them and click their photos in leisure. "He used to go mainly to Rongpur with the foreigners. He clicked their photos. Back then, Bengalis did not have a knack for getting their own photos clicked. So the foreigners took my father along. And got their photos clicked. I could have shown you my father's work, but those are in Bolpur now. His handiwork. Anyway, there's no one left now. My father, mother, brothers, sisters-in-law, no one is alive now." She was brought up in her maternal home in Kalakopa, Bandura. They were 8 siblings; "We lost three in East Pakistan. My eldest and my third eldest brothers succumbed to Meningitis. My fourth brother, his name was Rabi, he drowned. He was one and a half years old then." Gayatri spoke of a self-sufficient agrarian unit. ". We did not stay much at our father's home. There was only paddy and farm land there. We only had to buy salt and oil from the market. Everything else was our own. We still have the lands. My nephew had recently visited. He told me that there is no development yet. How will there be any? It's all in the interiors. My grandfather had built all that. They cultivated a lot of crops. Whatever modern facilities are there now, came much later. I did not see my grandfather, neither did my mother! She saw none of her in-laws, in fact. My father was the youngest of his siblings."

They left for Kolkata in 1947. Gayatri was an infant when her family had to abandon their home and life in East Pakistan and relocate to the city of Kolkata. Her memories, too, are largely constituted by what she had heard from her family. When I asked her what she had heard regarding the journey, she said "We came from my maternal home – Kalakopa, Bandura. My grandfather, I haven't seen him; only heard about him from my mother. He had two sons and three daughters. The eldest son was a Postmaster in Kolkata. He used to back and forth frequently. And my other uncle was an inspector, used to stay with the British." Therefore, she already had relatives staying in Calcutta. "We carried whatever we could in boxes and trunks, and came."

Gayatri's family entered Kolkata by train, via the Sealdah station. Gayatri's family reached Kolkata and took shelter in Munshibazar, Shibatala in her brother-in-law's house. "It's in Kolkata itself, near Sealdah. But our father did not want to stay at his daughter's place for too long, you understand right? So we rented a place for ourselves. From there, my eldest brother got a job, in Bongaon. He worked at the Agriculture Office. It was then that we shifted to Bongaon from Kolkata then." She said that his job involved a lot of transfers, which meant that they kept shifting, from Bongaon to Ranaghat, to Chakdah, to Krishnanagar. "That's how we had spent our days. I got admitted to the Corporation School after coming here." She paused for a moment before saying: "My education is till class 5. I studied till class 4 in the Corporation School, and then shifted to Pamorbazar, and studied in the high school there. I was married off after that! Can you imagine? I was 14 years old. The groom was from our neighbourhood itself. He was working in Bengal Potteries back then. They lived in a three storied house on lease. I did not get to see much of Kolkata, you know? I got married too soon."

Gayatri talked to me with her grand-daughter in the room, who listened to her as curiously as I did.

"Nobody asked me to talk about these before. Who would I say it to?"

Ajaya:

I got the most conclusive description of Partition violence and its implications on women's lives from my interaction with her. My conversation with 85 year old Ajaya aided me

immensely in drawing comparisons between sheltered and ‘unsheltered’ cross-border migrations. She also lent me insights into the impact of the displacement on her mental health, education and the subsequent course her life took. Ajaya spent 17 years of her life in pre-Partition Bengal in Dhakeswari Cotton Mill, Narayanganj, where her father was working at the time. Describing the political climate in the Partition era, she said that “the Cotton mill was a Hindu area, but the workers were mostly Muslim. There was a lot of resentment in people back then. Everyone harboured anti sentiments against the other. They were also very excited because of the partition. And they were blinded by religion. They could not look beyond Islam. Fundamentalism was rampant.” Ajaya was on the brink of appearing her matriculation examination when the tension broke out, and her father could not risk keeping her in the area. She came to Kolkata to stay with her uncle until the situation settled down.

All the respondents had one trait in common. The nostalgia about their homeland started surfacing only when they went on to describe their life post the displacement. Strangely, the yearning was not as apparent when they talked to me about their initial life in pre-Partition Bengal. However, it is only when they looked back on that life from where they stand today that they expressed emotional agony regarding their loss. From this section, it is discernible that all the participants hail from at least a middle class background, if not of the rich. This factor must be kept in mind while reading their accounts, for it shapes a significant part of their experiences and opinions. Ajaya gave me the most elaborate account of her experience with the transit. She was 17 years old when her family sent off their two daughters to Calcutta for reasons of safety. I have chosen to quote her extensively to communicate her experience verbatim, to you.

“Let me tell you how we came here. We got off the steamer in Goaland, and had to travel the rest of the way on a train. The train would come till Sealdah. But they stopped the train at the Indian border that fell near that port. There is a station called Tonga. I think it is still there. It was midnight when our train was stopped at Tonga. There were four of us; my sister, me our neighbour and her daughter. We could hear the sobbing from the next train. The thugs were entering through the windows and extorting from the passengers. My sister and I had nothing on us. But our neighbours had some. There were two guys who were escorting us. They came to us hurriedly, worried about the three young girls. They asked us to hide inside a blanket that we got from the porters. I still remember the foul smell. Fortunately the thugs did not enter our compartment. The police was alerted by then. We were saved by luck. When we got down from the train, we could not get another one that early in the day. We had to wait for hours at Tonga.” I had stopped her at this point to ask if they had to spend the night on the platform. To that, she offhandedly pointed out – “what platform? We waited on an open ground! They stopped the train. The train had left. It was the border between India and East Pakistan. A train would come from Sealdah, and only then could we enter India. We had to spend the rest of the night on that open ground. The porters gave us blankets. Finally the train came in the morning. I remember when it came, the doors were all locked. Our neighbours were carrying some trunks. We were young girls, and I was very strong. The two boys who are escorting us entered through the windows and opened the rest. My neighbour and I lifted those heavy trunks and pushed them inside the compartment. Later I don't know how they open the door, but we finally entered. The train finally moved around 8am. It felt like I was alive, once again.” Ajaya came to Kolkata in March of 1950, the same year she was supposed to take her matriculation exam in Dhaka. “Even our schedule was out. We just had to pack up and leave. Safety first, you know.” However, she did not have to miss out on a year of her academic career because “the University of Calcutta had created a special exam centre. They made a special consideration for refugees from East Pakistan and allowed us to take the examination in the month of September. When I asked

her if she could continue with her education after that, she said: “I could not. We lost our father in the same year, 1950. Actually, he passed away when I was writing my exam. I had to wait in the city till my results came out. After doing the last rites of our father my eldest brother came to Kolkata along with my mother and our two younger siblings and I headed back to Narayanganj; to the same Dhakeswari Cotton Mill. My mother spoke to the manager of the Cotton mill. I passed my matriculation by then, and she decided I should teach in the school that we had in the Mill. We needed money. My mother had 9 children to look after. And there was no earning member.” Ajaya is currently located in Sydney, Australia and came to Kolkata for a month when I had the opportunity to listen to her.

Upon analysing the aforementioned data, the following conclusions emerged. Firstly, the interconnectedness of the now divided land meant that there were several routes connecting the two. People took land, sea, river and aerial routes to escape from the conflict-zone. The risks associated with these routes varied – journey by land contained the highest risk of exposure to violence, whereas the ones who could afford the airfare had a more secure path of exit. Those who could, avoided the land route altogether. Ajaya’s experience with the journey is an apt example of the risk factors associated with crossing the border by train. None of my respondents had to undertake the journey unaccompanied under severe conditions, and that might be factored in while noting their experience being devoid of sexual and physical assault. A dominant trend common across the narratives is that of fear of the ‘other’ community, and that is not exclusive to the ones who fled from East Pakistan. The people who were driven out of Indian territories also witnessed similar brutality from their ‘other’.

PRIVILEGE, AGENCY & INDIVIDUALITY

The seven women who participated in my research pointed me towards realities that we often overlook while streamlining an event of terror and trauma to fit in within the perimeters of collective memory. 1947 saw an unprecedented explosion of brutality and violence in the Indian subcontinent. Urvashi Butalia says in her book on the silence surrounding the Partition that “There had been, at Partition, no ‘good’ people and no ‘bad’ ones; virtually every family had a history of being both victims and aggressors in the violence” (Butalia 2000). I was hesitant to subscribe to this assertion in the beginning since it dangerously implies complicity of survivors in their own plight. However, in the process of gathering data, I stumbled upon narrations of daily life that carried seeds of communalism, much before the idea of Partition was germinating in the subcontinent’s political consciousness. One of my respondents reflected on her childhood and told me, “There were some rules that they¹⁰ observed, as did we. I did it unconsciously back then, I was too young. When the milkman came, my mother would greet him, ask him “Miyan, all is well?” but she was careful to not touch his hand while taking the vessel from him. It was a habit. I don’t think even my mother was conscious of the underlying rationale behind this untouchability.”

There have been several instances where I was confronted with the dilemma of unfiltered representation of the views of these women about the ‘enemy’/ the ‘other’, especially when I contextualised the same in the current political atmosphere of India. Hatred is the most obvious fuel and result of targeted persecution. It is rather naive to expect a survivor of communal violence to be totally free of suspicion and hostility towards the other. The spatial and temporal limitations of my research has confined my study to only one group, for which I

¹⁰ Her Muslim friends and neighbours.

implore you, reader, to not use my findings to arrive at any conclusion about the ‘other’ community – for it will be obviously skewed.

I began my work based on my interest to know about how women perceive the loss of their homeland specifically in the context of the Partition of 1947. When it involves women, the concept of loss juxtaposed with conflict is almost always understood as the loss of “honour” or “integrity” that stretches beyond the individual to span across the collective. My respondents carry no notions of loss involving these.

I did not predetermine my research sample based on this criterion, but it has helped me to achieve my objective of understanding non-physical, non-sexual trauma on women who survive conflict-induced displacement. I have brought up the question of privilege time and again in my thesis. I had access to seven women hailing from seven very different economic and social backgrounds, and I wanted to see how their/ their family’s economic and social status negotiated with the way they had experienced the Partition. Namrata and Ananya narrated their encounter with the displacement as a relatively better planned phenomenon, cushioning them from the full impact of being uprooted. Economic affluence enabled their families to acquire properties of their own on the Indian side of the border. The same factor provided them with a safer route of exit – especially in Namrata’s case. Not many could afford to rent a steamer or fly by chartered planes in those troubled times, and those who could, significantly reduced their exposure to the threat of violence.

Privilege can also be understood in terms of social capital. Most of my respondents discussed about finding shelter with family, who already lived in Kolkata, Siliguri and Jalpaiguri; but all of them mentioned the plight of people who were uprooted from East Pakistan and had no friends or family on ‘this side of the border’.

How does privilege negotiate with trauma?

After analysing the narratives of the respondents, it can be concluded that trauma is too pervasive a phenomenon to be completely neutered by privilege in a situation of conflict. Privilege might act as a defence in certain circumstances; might even dilute the risk factor in others, but in none of the testimonies I have recorded has it been able to be a foolproof antidote to trauma.

In my quest to untangle the threads of nostalgia surrounding a lost home, I learnt that there is no direct correlation between the time spent in that home¹¹ and the extent of nostalgia shrouding its loss. Chandra had gotten to spend the most number of years in East Pakistan among my respondents, but was much less emotionally inclined to discuss her attachment with it. However, I am aware that it can also be for a myriad of reasons – the most probable one being it reminding her of her losses. On the other hand, Gayatri and Namrata, who did not have the chance to memorise their homeland as well as they would have wanted to, looked back with much stronger nostalgia.

My work had an ultimate aim from its very inception. I wanted to unearth the individual experiences of survival and adaptation in an alien place, especially as women. The stories that surfaced from my interviews allowed me to highlight the agency of the individual woman in the process of her adaptation. Survival in a new society has different implications for different genders, and is further determined by the intersections of class, caste and other factors.

¹¹ Here, I mean the home and familiarity that they were forced to abandon in East Pakistan.

My research universe is a collective in terms of what they had experienced, but very individualistic in the ways that they had experienced it.

Through this journey of listening to the stories that moulded the lives of seven women – expelled from their homeland, Beryl Markham's words haunted me.

“I have learned that if you must leave a place that you have lived in and loved and where all your yesteryears are buried deep, leave it any way except a slow way, leave it the fastest way you can. Never turn back and never believe that an hour you remember is a better hour because it is dead. Passed years seem safe ones, vanquished ones, while the future lives in a cloud, formidable from a distance.” (Markham 1942)

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