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## Issue of Dalit Identity and the Partition of Bengal

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to present the history of partition of Bengal and the issues of Dalit communities that they faced during and aftermath of partition of India in 1947. It presents the experiences of the 'Chhotolok' or Dalits and the sufferings they encountered because of the bifurcation of the Bengal province. The paper deals with the migration process in Bengal side and the treatment of government and higher-class societies towards lower class/caste people in their 'new homeland'. The paper presents an account of representation of Dalits in Bengali partition narratives and the literature written by Dalit writers. The paper also presents their struggles in Dandakaranya forest and the incident of Marichjhapi Massacre in post-partition Bengal as depicted in several Bengali partition novels written in Bengali and English language.

**Keyword:** Partition, Bengali Partition Narratives, Dalit, Dalit Literature, Partition of Bengal 1947, Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi Massacre

### **Introduction**

Indian Partition Novel, as a major genre of fiction, gained prominence in post-independence India. Since then, Indian writers have contributed to the growth of the genre in English and regional languages. Compared to the mainstream Partition narratives of India, Bengali Partition tales have remained on the fringes. This paper examines representative Bengali partition novels in English to address some crucial issues related to the issue of Dalit identity in post-partition Bengali society. The Dalit identity in Bengali partition narratives is one of the sub-marginalised areas of studies in the broader aspects of partition narratives of India.

The paper intends to apply the historical analysis of the partition of India and more specifically the partition of Bengal. It would also use to textual analysis method to find out the representation of Dalit communities in various partition narratives written in the context of 1947 Bengal partition.

Bengal has witnessed three partitions to date. These are- the bifurcation of Bengal in 1905, India and Pakistan's independence and partition in 1947, and separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan, resulting in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The present research would focus on the literature written in the context of the second partition of 1947. The novels studied for research are connected with West Bengal and written in English and English translations from Bengali novels and memoirs.

Sarbani Banerjee in her work "More or Less Refugee? Bengal Partition in Literature and Cinema" (2015) challenges the Bhadrakalok (Upper caste) perspective of Bengali Partition narratives. She cites partition works by upper-caste writers like Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 1967 and Ritwik Ghatak's film in Bengali language *The Cloud-Capped Star (Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960). According to her, presents the migration and settlements belongs to Bengali *Bhadrakalok* migrants. She highlights the writings by Non-Bhadrakalok (lower caste) Bengali writers. According to Banerjee, these writers "represent a point of departure from the Bhadra refugees' romanticised description of refugee memory." (Harrington 2015, 3)

Joya Chatterjee in her critical work on partition *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-1947* (1994), mentions that the communalisation of Indian politics and societies reached a higher level in the Bengal province in the 1930s. Chatterjee shows that the possibility of permanent subordination to a Muslim majority province let many Hindus conclude that the Bengal province must be divided into religious lines. That is why the provincial congress committee firmly supported the plan of partition approved by Nehru and Patel on the national level. She argues:

"Bengalis were not passive bystanders in the politics of their province; nor were they victims of circumstances entirely out of their control, forced reluctantly to accept the division of their 'motherland'. On the contrary, a large number of Hindus of Bengal, backed up by the provincial branches of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, campaigned intensively in 1947 for the partition of Bengal and for the creation of a separate Hindu province that would remain inside an Indian union." (Chatterjee 1994, 227)

Dalit or *Namashudra* people's migration is also an important theme, neglected in the study of the partition literature, whether in national partition literature or Bengali partition literature. The research attempted to present the discussion of migration and the struggle of Dalit or '*chhotolok*' people who also migrated from their motherland to India and their problems because of being from Dalit communities. The study also highlights the step-motherly attitude of the government towards the *Namashudra* or Dalit or *chhotolok* people. It has been observed that the Dalits were sent to the refugee camps situated in various districts. In contrast, the refugees from the upper class and castes were allowed to settle themselves around Kolkata. Novels selected for the research shows that they were sent to Dandakaranya forest area, located in the border of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (currently Chhattisgarh).

Jhuma Sen in her article "Reconstructing Marichjhapi" (2015) writes - "It must also mention that in Calcutta and its vicinity, 149 unauthorised colonies, colloquially termed as *jabor dakhal*, sprang up to house the *bhadralok* refugees. Conversely, the *chhotolok* were placed in transit camps and forced out of the state". (Sen 2015, 3)

The study observes the issue of caste identity and during partition of India. The migrated people from East Bengal were settled in various refugee camps across the state. The novel *East-West* points out that the upper caste people refused to stay in the same camp along with the refugees. They migrated from 'Muslim Pakistan' with the expectation that they would get respect and settled life in a 'Hindu country'. However, they were not welcomed by the native Bengalis despite belonging to the same linguistic and religious root. Sarbani Banerjee in her PhD thesis "More or Less Refugees? Bengal Partition in Literature and Cinema" mentioned that - "In the immediate post-partition Indian setting, Hindu Dalits were the most disadvantaged in every sense. They did not get the espousal that they expected from the native West Bengalis, who generally maintained a distance from the refugees despite belonging to the same linguistic group. (Banerjee 2015, 37)

Due to the uncertainty sparked by the partition, the East Bengali Hindu refugee women suffered enormously. The emergence of refugee women from private space to public space brought about a profound shift in the thought and mindset of Bengali women as a whole and introduced a new dimension to their personality. Many refugee women returned to the domestic world as soon as their families were comfortably situated, financially and physically.

Local people felt that the East Bengali women were forcibly taken by the Muslims as if they had all been raped by the Muslims. The local people did not even allow the women in the shelter to collect drinking water from the common water point. Gradually, refugee women have progressed far beyond the sense of survivor bound to a triumph hood. They have built a sense of trust and willingness to survive and have achieved success.

The partition of India also created the refugee or *Sharanarathi* identity among the Bengali Communities. The selected works such as novel *East-West*, memoirs *A Life Long Ago* and *Train to India: Memories of Another Bengal*, discusses refugees who migrated to India from East Pakistan. Harit Mondal in *East-West* is a refugee leader who is struggling to settle the refugees in West Bengal. He organises protest march against the injustice on migrated

people by the government. There is a description of a clash between native people and refugees in the novel.

Caste identity is also visible in the partition narratives of Bengal where refugees/people from lower caste have been treated differently than the upper caste people.

The term Dalit is popularly known as '*chhotolok*' in Bengal. It means "lower caste" and *bhadralok* refers to "upper caste". Jyotiba Phule had introduced the term Dalit, to represent the marginalised people in a Hindu social system. The term Dalit became familiar to identify all the socially discriminated people in India. In the context of Bengal, *chhotolok* refers to the person who was directly associated with the working class and lower caste people. At the social status level based on Brahminic caste-system, the chhotolok struggled for their livelihood, without necessary facilities and education to enlighten them.

The lower caste refugees were mostly from Namashudra background; they were also known as Chandals of Bengal. They have mainly migrated from Dhaka, Khulna, Bakerganj, Faridpur, Mymensingh, and Jessore of East Bengal. The partition gave a decisive blow to the very establishment of the Namashudras. They lost their negotiating strength and lost their political power in both countries. However, this is the part of an issue only, the refugees from upper caste and class were settled in and around Calcutta, but the lower caste migrants, Namashudras were sent to the refugee camps of districts Dandyakaranya forest areas.

When there is a discussion on Bengali Partition Narratives, it generally discusses or indicates the literature produced by the upper-class Hindu migrants. Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967 Trans. *The River Charming*), Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purbo-Pashchim (East-West)*, Ritwik Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960). These works present upper-class perspective of the partition. They have come up with Bhadra refugee issues where the problems faced by non-Bhadra or lower caste people got side-lined. The study would discuss some of the partition works written by non-Bhadra Bengali refugees that challenge the upper caste narration of Bengal Partition and representation their plight of partition. Such works are – Adhir Biswas's memoir *Deshbhager Smriti* (2010), Allar Jomite Paa (2012), Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (2012) and Sunanda Sikdar's memoir *Doyamoyeer Kotha* (2008). These writers present the Dalit perspective by describing their own experience in their works.

### **Migration**

It is obvious that equally in history and in literature, the representation of partition is emphasised on the Punjab side. Both historians and literary writers appear to be concerned with the events that took place in Punjab. However, the partition experience turned out to be quite different on the Punjab and Bengal borders. The crisis in Punjab was seen as a national emergency, the communal violence took shape of genocide which forced the government to act promptly on the western side. This sense of immediacy was totally lacking when it came to the eastern border. Hindu minorities in East Bengal were not considered to be in great danger and the westward migration of the refugees was regarded mostly as the product of imaginary fears and baseless rumours.

Partition caused one of the largest displacement of people on world history. Some 20 million people were migrated making it the largest displacement in the twentieth century, 12 million people displaced in Punjab province alone. This unprecedented, forced transfer of people took place despite assurance of party leader and the British administrators. The Indian subcontinent was divided to avoid violence, but it became the reason for great genocide that could have ever imagined. Partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in one of the classic examples of “refugee generating process”. It left millions of Hindus, Muslim and Sikhs on the wrong side, which is the responsible for the greatest exodus of world history.

### **Migration in Bengal Side-**

A major difference between Punjab and Bengal partition in terms of migration was that while in the former case there was a mutual agreement of virtual exchange of population, but in case of Bengal, the migration happened in various phases and the government tried to limit the transfer of population. Anasua Basu Roy Choudhury has listed three basic factors that affected and speed up the migration of Bengalis from East Pakistan to West Bengal. These three factors are- *dhan* (wealth/property), *maan* (honour/prestige) and *praan* (life).

Migration in Bengal happened in three phases. First phase of migration happened between October 1946 to March 1958. Those entering into West Bengal during this time frame are considered as ‘old migrants. They were comprised of the upper caste and upper-class elite Hindu migrants, who were not became burden on the provincial government. Many of this type of migrated people had socially or economically influential relatives or assets in the newly formed West Bengal.

The Second group of migration happened during April 1958 to December 1963. The government called these refugees as “in between migrants”. The second group of migrants comprised of middle class and upper middle class. This group was not recognised as displaced persons and was not given any financial assistance, as the government treated the group as a group of economic migrants motivated by the doles offered by the government. In fact, the central government advised the West Bengal government to shut down its rehabilitation ministry. Ranajit Roy claims that a great segment among these middle and upper middle-class people, who had earlier connection with Calcutta, did not register themselves officially as displaced persons, even though they greatly added to the population of post-partition West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. (Roy, 53).

Third phase of migration happened during January 1964 to March 1971, this wave of migration started with the incidents of Hazratbal in 1964 when few miscreants desecrated Hazratbal Dargah and in reaction to that incident there were communal riots in various parts of Bangladesh (East Pakistan). Mainly from peasantry and the artisan section of East Pakistan left their home for India in this phase. This migration continued to infiltrate into India until the late 1970s. The poor and Dalit migrants were entitled to rehabilitation only if they want to resettle outside of West Bengal because they were seen as an economic burden.

The reasons behind first and second wave of migration were mainly the fear of losing *dhan* (wealth/property) and *maan* (honour/prestige) and for the third phase of migration which



is also known as 'new migrants', comprising from the lower castes of Bengal, the reason behind their migration was *praan* (Life).

### **Upper-Class Hindu Narratives on Partition**

Writers and filmmakers like Jyotirmoyee Debi and Ritwik Ghatak have presented the partition of Bengal in their writings by bringing a specific representation of migrants' experience. They have highlighted in their work, the upper or upper-middle-class Bengali's status changed as refugees. Sarbani Bandopadhyay in her Doctoral thesis "More or Less Refugees? Bengal Partition in Literature and Cinema" argues –By speaking mainly for a select upper-caste Hindu refugee group through an emotional content and emphasising exclusively "Bhadra" issues, these works failed to address the Dalit position. (Bandopadhyay 2015, 4)

The Dalit people belonging to the Namashudra, Sadgop, and Poundras did not migrate until the post-partition socio-political situation of East Bengal changed in the 1950s and 1960s. The introduction of passport in 1952, two country's borders was tightened which changes the national government's perspective towards the religious minorities, and the Muslim landowning classes occupied the places and lands that the Hindu people left in East Pakistan because of migration. The Muslim landowners decided to give their lands for cultivation to only Muslim farmers, which destroyed the working-class people's Hindu and Muslim unity. All these reasons forced the Dalit communities of East Pakistan to migrate for West Bengal although Pakistan's Law and Labour Minister, Jogendranath Mondal "had reassured their people to stay on in East Pakistan as their interest would be served there." (Banerjee 2015, 16)

### **Caste Discrimination in Refugee Camps**

Rehabilitation measures adopted for the two classes also visible because of this caste reason. With resources in their possession, the upper caste refugees could easily be integrated into the mainland of West Bengal. On the other hand, the lower caste people were forced to live on the fringes, and they went to new nations like Andaman Island or Dandakaranya forest. Jhuma Sen writes- "It must also be mentioned that in Calcutta and its vicinity, 149 unauthorised colonies, colloquially termed as *jabor dakhla*, sprang up to house the bhadralok refugees. Conversely, the chhotolok were placed in transit camps and forced out of the state". (Sen 2015, 3)

Adhir Biswas and Byapari's memoirs claim that refugee camps and colonies have been organised in West Bengal concerning the caste and class hierarchies. The upper class's poor refugees were also acutely dominated and distanced from the refugees of a lower caste. Following the migration, many socially upright' but financially weak people had resisted settling themselves in the camps with other refugees. They considered it a shame to live with the Dalit people in the same camp.

### **Politics of Partition and Dalits**

Jogendranath Mondal reiterated that the Dalits and oppressed people opposed the decision of partition. He decided to stay in Pakistan after partition and became a minister in Pakistan government. Although, backward Bengali people including most of the Dalits sided

with the narratives of Congress and Hindu Mahasabha. They preferred to stay in Indian union and wanted to see themselves as a chiefly citizen of a Hindu majority nation-state.

In the aftermath of partition, the Dalits were the most backward community in each field. They were not welcomed with an open heart by West Bengal's people, despite belonging to the same linguistic group. The native people of West Bengal kept a distance from them. The lower caste refugees were denied help by the upper and upper-caste migrants, with whom they left their homeland.

### **Discrimination by the Government**

The caste and class-based discrimination appeared in the rehabilitation project of refugees under Dr Bidhan Chandra Ray's ministry. The government planned to resettle the Dalit Bengali refugees outside of West Bengal, to the places like Andaman Island and Dandakaranya forest area. Sarbani Banerjee says-

"The lower-class people had earlier led an insular life in East Pakistan and would not be incorporated in mainstream nationalistic political movements. Because they did not have monetary hold, they could not propose any choice about their desired style of living in the post-partition period. Instead, they became pawns in the mission for fashioning a progressive, independent India. The Dalit Refugees were urged to live up to the criteria of 'socially useful' people. For example, Prafulla Chandra Sen, Chief Minister of West Bengal for 1961-67, suggested that these people make Andaman agriculturally one of the highest rice producing regions." (Banerjee 2015, 38)

On the representation of Dalits and other lower caste's Bengali refugees, Jhuma Sen brings in an account of discrimination and repression on Chhotolok or Dalits, in her article "Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives" (2015). She says-

Bengal's romance with the upper caste bhadralok's 'traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal' has dominated the imagination of partition historiography so much that very little or no attention has ever been paid to the bulk of refugees who settled outside Bengal and who had to directly face a lopsided discriminatory rehabilitation and policy practised by the government. (Sen 2015, 1)

### **Dandakaranya Project**

The Dandakaranya Project Area (DPA) covered about 77,700 km of Orisha and Madhya Pradesh. The process of sending refugees started as soon as the DPA began in 1958. Dandakaranya was an area culturally, socially removed from the known world of the refugees. Many refugee camps witnessed a mass protest dissenting against the attempt of the government to send them away. Even the government served the refugees notice to either go to Dandakaranya or leave the camps within 30 days. However, from the first day itself, refugees started leaving Dandakaranya forest. Since most of the refugees were poor, and from the farmer background, they would not be familiar with other activities other than farming. The Dandakaranya forest area was not fertile. Those, who were sent to Dandakaranya were neglected

from their basic needs because of the misconception between the state administration of Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and the DDA.

Refugee leader Harit Mondal actively participated in the protest march against West Bengal's government demanding necessary facilities and rehabilitation for them. The government planned to send the refugees in Dandakaranya forest and Andaman Island. They resisted sending them from Bengal and protested the state strongly supported by various communists' organisations. Police have beaten Harit Mondal several times because of his involvement in the refugee struggles. He left his home, properties, and ponds in East Pakistan and after migration he is struggling to settle himself.

I had my house over there with three rooms, one kitchen, one cow-shed. Besides these, he had a small pond, and one shared big pond, thirteen bighas of paddy field. They never worried about food and other things. (Gangapadhyay 1989, 115)

The Bangladesh government opened national border for the sharanarthi (refugee-seekers) who fled during the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. As a result, many refugees return to the newly formed country Bangladesh. However, the ruling state government planned to settle the remaining poor and Dalit migrants to the Dandakarnya forestry in Madhyapradesh. Like Andaman, the government also expected to 'use' the refugees in cleaning lands or alike rigorous labour.

### **Political Movement and the Refugee Problem**

Lower caste refugees were not satisfied with state and central government's rehabilitation process. The beginning of the 1960s witnessed a political development in various refugee camps. The Communist party raised their voices, supporting the demands of refugees. The leftist leaders protested against the Congress government regarding implementation and the failure of Dandakaranya project. Communist leaders like Jyoti Basu had promised refugees to resettle them in the Sundarban areas of West Bengal.

Jyoti Basu himself wrote a letter to the B.C Roy government on July 13, 1961, informing the protest and hunger strikes against forceful eviction that was going on in various camps by the refugees and lodged their disagreement against the plan of sending refugees in Dandakarnya forest. The left front had insisted that no refugees should be forced out of West Bengal against their wishes. Jyoti Basu demanded publicly in Bhilai while addressing an industrial workers' meeting on January 25, 1975, that the refugees from Dandakarnya would be allowed to settle in Sundarban area once they come in power. But he failed to fulfill the promise when he came to power, and the refugees thought that they have been deceived by the communist government.

The writer also mentions the death of Jawaharlal Nehru and the reaction of Bengali refugees. The refugees were settled in the Dandakaranya forest. However, due to cyclone, their camps were blown up. The government did not do anything for them, and camp officers fled expecting backlash from the refugees. Suddenly, they heard the sound of a drum with an announcement of Jawaharlal Nehru's death. After listening to this news, refugees were started dancing because they thought Nehru was the reason for their misfortune. They thought, Nehru's



step-motherly attitude towards Bengali refugees has been deprived of many facilities that the Punjabi refugees have been availed.

A news of death brings the tide of happiness despite their sufferings and pain. They surrounded the announcer and wanted to know further information. Has someone shot him? Did he suffer pain while dying? Was there someone beside him to give him water while he was dying? (Gangapadhyay 1989, 347)

### **Marichjhapi Massacre**

The Communist Party came to power in 1977. However, they failed to keep their promises that they did to the Dalit refugees residing outside Bengal. The refugees were outraged, thinking that the government has deceived them. The first wave of refugees started returning from Dandakarnya via Orisha's Malkangiri to West Bengal at the beginning of 1978. More 10,000 refugees crossed Kumrinari and reached Marichjhapi on April 18, 1978. They requested the government to allow them to live on the island of Marichjhapi.

The communist party promised them to resettle but betrayed the Dalits and instead uprooted them from Marichjhapi by force. In her thesis, Banerjee says "Testimonials by Nirmalkanti Dhali and Radhikaranjan Biswas attest to the brutality subsequently instigated by the Communist government, who encouraged the police force to carry out random massacres of Dalits and sabotage their lives and property." (Banerjee 2015, 41)

The government falsely accused of smuggling national treasures and damaging reserved forest property to expel the refugees from Marichjhapi. Goons sponsored by the government entirely annexed the island. Marichjhapi presents the forceful eviction of East Bengali refugees from Sundarban areas by the Left government in 1979. This forceful eviction caused greater human calamities in which hundreds of refugees died. Jhuma Sen, in her article "Afterlives of Partition: citizenship and legal belongings" says that "Marichjhapi Massacre, was the product of some factors including partition, migration, questions of caste, ecology and discriminatory refugee policy and finally of a reversal in a policy adopted by the West Bengal government". (Sen 2005, 2)

To conclude the paper, it can be said that most of the Bengali partition writers are from upper caste/class communities and have come up with their own issues, difficulties, and sufferings. Although novelists like Sunil Gangopadhyay, Jyotirmoyee Devi have tried to deal with the lower caste people and their issues in the novel *East-West* and *The River Churning* but still Dalit narratives and perspectives are missing from mainstream Bengali partition narratives. There are certain writers from Dalit community like Manoranjan Byapari, Sunanda Sikdar have tried to highlight their partition stories- reactions while leaving their homeland for another country that is supposed to be 'there', pain of separation from their relatives and closed ones, process of migration and the issue of rehabilitation in the newly formed country in their memoirs. The decision of sending lower caste refugees to Dandyakaranya forest and incident like Marichjhapi massacre demand for further research in future.

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