

Literature in Bengali during Partition of India – A Case study

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Abstract - On 1947, Our country has divided on the basis of Jinnah's 'Two-nation theory'- Hindu majority India and Muslim majority Pakistan. The line that Sir Cyril Radcliffe drew to separate East Pakistan from India was a deeply dispute one. This is perhaps the pinnacle of disaster in the Indian Sub-continent against the triumph of Independence. Certain incidents carry their aftermath in their own right. A collection of Bengali short stories which reflect the sentiments of the time have been discussed with an attempt to underline the personal and social struggle inflicted on a generation.

Keywords - Partition, sub-continent, border, uprooted, refugee, migration.

I. INTRODUCTION

Whatever may be the reasons or motivations and justifications for accepting the partition of the country by the national leaders, for millions of people the Independence of the country brought terrible suffering and humiliation, fear of loss of human dignity and a morbid sense of isolation of being uprooted. 'Although the proposal for Pakistan was placed before the country in the 1930s and pressure for the bifurcation of India mounted up in the 1940s, the very reality of the division of the country in 1947 came as a rude shock.'¹ What we must notice is that there have been partitions on either side of the Indian border – East and the West and the two land masses not only have a geographical divide but also have very distinctly different human experiences which are intrinsically related to the character of partition on both sides of the border. 'What is unique about the Bengal partition is that unlike the massive exchange of populations in 1947-48 and till 1950 on the western border, the influx of refugees across the Bengal border has never stopped, to date. It has sometimes swollen to a deluge and sometimes been reduced to a trickle, but it has never dried up.'² Though the migration across the Bengal border into West Bengal, Assam and Tripura was of staggering proportions, it was spread over years in a steady and continuing stream, across what remains, a 'porous' border. 'Compared to the nature of border and boundary in the West where political, strategic and military considerations have converted the entire region into two rigid divisions, the dividing line in the East is porous and flexible.'³

The partition of Bengal in 1947 remains the gravest event in the history of Bengali-speaking people touching all spheres of their life: economic, social, religious, cultural, political and linguistic. The trauma of the separation in villages and cities, the physical suffering and tormentation, the silent tears and piercing cries permeated deep, fermenting into the

creative process; thus giving rise to a new kind of literature: the writings and expressions of separation and homelessness. Annada Shankar Ray, in an immensely quotable Bengali rhyme voiced his protest against the absurdity of country's bifurcation:

You scold the little lass
When she drops the glass
But what about you,
adult brats
When you shatter India
into little parts.

(trans. Sisir Kumar Das)⁴

The Partition of Bengal brought about a huge migration of the Hindu middle-class population of East Bengal to West Bengal, prompted by fear and anxiety and the consciousness of being aliens in a 'foreign' land. The border land turned into a vast territory of the destitute, the metropolitan Calcutta suddenly became a vast slum, for decades the railway platforms, spaces under flyovers, parks and pavements became the home of human beings. The Indian Government did not have a well formulated and thought out policy of rehabilitation for the Indic Bengalis from East Pakistan and West Bengal did not have the resources to cope up with the numbers arriving everyday at its doorstep. On the Eastern border the 'othered' community faced a menacing trauma: the Hindus in East Pakistan experienced the term *udbastu* (uprooted from home) after they were rendered homeless. They were also entrapped in sporadic incidents of communal violence and as minorities were left to the plight and fury of mob violence. Since 1930s sporadic incidents of communal violence have been registered. After Kolkata, Noakhali and Tripura this illness became an epidemic. The country was partitioned to stop communal violence and save people. Partition could not stop violence and killings – history says so. Instead it has

made lakhs of Bengalis homeless and penniless. Hindus have been constantly evicted from Bangladesh. Historian Amalendu De has pointed out to the 1941 East Bengal Census report which shows the Hindu population as 28%. In 1991 that has ebbed to 10.5%. We do not know of any other country in the world where the population of minorities has dropped 1/3 in 50 years. From 1947 to 1971 during the period of East Pakistan the majority community of Muslims had forced the minority Hindus to flee the country. It was envisaged that after the birth of Bangladesh it would come to an end. However this did not happen. The refugee influx in 1970-71 is estimated at about 9 million, i.e., 13 % of the population of East Pakistan, ⁵ the majority being Hindu.

After the Partition, humiliation and torture in the lives of women, a drastic change is seen in the social life. Although women did not have any role in the dirty politics and riots that started after the partition, it was found that in the refugee life, women were attacked both physically and mentally. Girls became the target of attacks during the riots. At that time, women were turned into routine casualties like loot, rape, forced marriage etc. After coming to Bengal from refuge for refugees, girls were facing many new problems in West Bengal. The need for women to come out of the house to earn money at this time. Educated girls currently accept jobs in various government and non-government organizations. They also faced many new problems at work.

The problems of partition were large and penetrating. Many writers addressed the political and emotional issues associated with them. A not so well known writer Manoranjan Hazra wrote a short novel *Mahanagare Dabanal* (Wildfire in the City) in 1946 describing the incidents of the riot that followed in response to Muslim League's call for Direct Action on 16 August 1946. In 1947 Nabendu Ghosh wrote a novel *Phiars len* (Fierce Lane) which had graphic and minute records of the madness that gripped the city of Calcutta. However, the first well known novel was published only in 1955 on the subject. It was Narayan Sanyal's *Balmik* (it was part of a trilogy) and thereafter a spate of novels followed in 1960s and 70s. Few mentionable ones are Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967), Prafulla Ray's *Keya Patar Nouko* (1970), Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* (1971), Atin Bandopadhyay's *Nilkontho Pakhir Khoje* (1971) and Gour Kishore Ghosh's trilogy - *Jal Pare Pata Nare* (1978), *Prem Nei* (1981), and *Protibeshi* (1995).⁶

Literature articulated the sentiments of the times and emerged as an alternative archive. The little narratives stood against the grand stories, the official was pitted against the unofficial which recorded the daily chronicles and showed the actual effect of official decisions in everyday life of the people. People were central to the literary representations, moulding the perception of the age, its contradictions, travails and anxieties. Against the novels on partition the

short story too held a position of pre-eminence till recent times. The short story encapsulated individual fates and carried as much punch as the epic sweep of novelistic time within its short duration.

In the story *Pather Kanta* Ramesh Chandra Sen writes of one such group trudging from east to west, carrying meagre belongings, confronts another group like itself, consisting of mainly women children, the elderly and a few men, just as hapless as itself. There is a moment of silent empathy between them as they size each other up and recognize their similar plight, before going their opposite ways.

The human stream has continued flowing, only from east to west from Bangladesh, and has never stopped till today, as Ranabir Samaddar's essay's title says, *'Still They Come – Migrants in the Post-Partition Bengal'*.⁷ It has been a story of long drawn out migration and a seemingly unending struggle for the survival of the east Bengali refugee crossing to West Bengal, Assam, and Bihar over the 'porous' border.

In the life of the protagonist in *Epar Opar* (This Side and That Side), a story by Manoj Basu, a similar plight of displacement is experienced a year before Partition during the Noakhali violence. Noakhali led to Bihar violence, which then had repercussion in other districts of east Bengal. The minority community of the well-to-do Hindus like Himangshu's family in *Epar Opar* were at the receiving end of the violence. A way of life is disrupted as households break up and are swept away. Then Himangshu's family members are left with no other option but to face unemployment and homelessness in the continuing struggle as east Bengali refugees in India.

Acharya Kripalani Colony by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay encapsulates the fear of displacement, the worry about relocation and the exploitation of such anxieties of would-be refugees by profiteers, around the time of Partition. It shows how east Bengali refugees in India were sold marshy land and given rosy promises of development. The cautious narrator in the story comes all the way from Jessore to inspect the 'colony' which turns out to be miles away from the station and the Ganga river, and like much of the lands given to east Bengal refugees, is water logged, mosquito infested and a veritable jungle of swampy undergrowth. In the end by the twist of fate, according to the Radcliffe Report, the narrator's village is allocated to West Bengal, showing how the border defeated many expectations of where it would 'place' them.

Epar Ganga Opar Ganga, a story by Jyotirmoyee Devi is about the crossing of the border after Partition, of people in whole families, who leave fields of flourishing paddy and homesteads behind, carrying very little in their search for a safe haven. The self-styled guardians of the border on either side are out to make a profit. This story is about Sudam and his pretty, young wife, Durga. Men with money and beautiful women are easily spotted and noted by those

guarding the border. Sudam crosses to Kolkata leaving Durga to find 25 rupees as the price to take his pretty wife across the border. He returns after many days, by which time Durga has taken the only option left to a defenceless, apparently abandoned women, of drowning herself. Sudam then becomes the crazed husband looking for his lost wife.

Written like a diary, *Janmabhumi* by Samaresh Dasgupta has all the nostalgia of a refugee remembering his motherland. The narrator is an artist who paints the landscape of what he has left behind with its romantic connotations and the reality of Sealdah Station⁸ which became proverbial as the crowded arrival point and indefinite refuge for the destitute from east Bengal and later, East Pakistan. The refugee narrator continues to miss the land of his birth and encounters the sarcasm of those who have not been uprooted from a fairly prosperous agricultural base and cannot comprehend the whole truth of what the dispossessed have lost. The new border has separated families as the narrator's parents, uncles and aunts stayed back and died there, while his generation was sent to India.

In his story *Shamikshan*⁹ writer Sujanbilash Biswas narrates the harrowing tale of squatters inside Sealdah Station, where, without work, food or shelter, people are left to either die like the protagonist Sudhanya or commit suicide like his wife Sulata, to escape a life of shame or are orphaned as their son is, without the sustenance and security that east Bengali refugees required at the time of Partition.

In the story *Ek Janmer Hirn* by Dipankar Das both the narrator's and his uncle's families have been forced to flee their homeland at the time of the Partition, and though the narrator's father somehow manages to make a living for his family, the brother is never able to recover the 'social dignity' he knew, in what was east Bengal. Deep in debt and desperation, he disappears across the border, perhaps looking for his homeland after losing his mental balance.

The themes of families being separated, of tentative returns to one's roots, the call of the ancestral land and one's home, are recurrent themes in post-Partition literature as in Akhtaruzzaman Elias's story *Anya Ghare Anya Swar*. Prodip has returned to his father's old home where his widowed paternal aunt, Pishima and cousins still live. It is not exactly a sense of home-coming that Prodip feels, but perhaps, an unexpressed attempt to feel and hear of his late father once again, to discover familial traits in Pishima, to be assured by a sense of continuity as Prodip feels restless in his own fractured existence.

Debesh Roy's story *Udbastu* questions the very identity of a family of a husband, his wife and daughter. Protagonists Satyabrata Lahiri and Anima, uprooted from east Bengal following Partition, are doubted by the proposition that they have faked their true identities. The story shows the bizarre legal investigations carried out in the Indian Union when it is faced with the question of approving property bought by

refugees, demanding certificates from people who have fled without their belongings, doubting the 'purity' of women who finally made it across the border, jeopardizing the very identity of their off spring.

Bana Hangshir Deshe by Amar Mitra is set on the Hili border of West Dinajpur in 1996. India has decided to demarcate the border with Bangladesh with barbed wire fence. The barbed wire would proclaim all trespassers as 'infiltrators', i.e., illegal immigrants who had no right to cross over, rather than refugees or migrants, negating the assurance once given to people facing displacement when Partition was accepted by India and Pakistan, who were told that they would find refuge in the country of their choice or the one they were forced to inhabit. The border has segmented homesteads, lands, lives and identity. The barbed wire will trap them as never before. Protagonist Aloka wants to see the border and comes accompanied by her husband, Subir. Confrontation with the border demystifies Aloka as she finds that 'everything is just the same, yet, everything is different'.

II. CONCLUSION

As discussed from the account of short stories we see social debacles to personal encounters of the darkest moment of Indian history. The stories mentioned above and many more cover a wide time span, from pre-Partition days to the present and the narratives poignantly portray the dilemmas of people who see only fuzzy frontiers and emotional homelands where coldly and irrevocably drawn borders come into existence. While the border on land can be barbed how can minds be fenced? The stories depict the dilemma of the times somewhat impinging on the far-reaching permanent scars of the issue for generations to come.

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- [3]Bagchi, Jasodhara and Dasgupta, Subhoranjan (ed.), 'The Problem', Porous Borders: Divided Selves – a symposium of Partitions in the East, Seminar Magazine, February, 2002.
- [4]Das, 1995, p. 378.
- [5]Samaddar, Ranabir (ed.), Reflections on Partition in the East, New Delhi, 1997, p. 106.
- [6]The Collections from which the stories (except Shamikshan) are selected are:
 - a. Azad, Salam, Deshbhager Galpo, Kolkata, 1998.
 - b. Bandyopadhyaya, Manabendra (ed.), Bhed Bibhed, Kolkata, 1992.
- [7]Samaddar, 1997, p. 87.
- [8]Prafulla Chakrabarti describes the scenes at Sealdah Station as 'The Gateway to Hell.' See
- [9]Chakrabarti, Prafulla Kumar, The Marginal Men, Kolkata, 1999, pp. 11-12.