

BOOK REVIEW

The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967

Joya Chatterji

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All those who work in the area of Partition Studies have waited in anticipation for Joya Chatterji's book on the Partition of Bengal (1947) titled *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (CUP, 2007). The book is a welcome intervention in the area, dealing with the behind the scenes political machinations, migration and other fall-outs of the vivisection of the country with a special focus on Bengal. Chatterji's study is important in many counts, not least because there is a serious dearth of engagement on the topic even after 60 odd years of India's independence. In the sub-continent, and particularly in India, Partition Studies have been to a large extent Punjab-centric. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 has been a neglected area in Indian historiography and we still await a comprehensive look at the effects of the Partition combining West Bengal, the North-East and Bangladesh. The 1947 division meant massive population migration across the borders of the newly independent nation states of India and Pakistan. Fifteen million people crossed the newly defined boundaries; in West Bengal alone an estimated 30 lakhs of refugees entered by 1960. For over a million people, it was death in various violent encounters involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For an estimated 80 thousand women, in India and Pakistan, it meant abduction and sexual assault.

Although ordinary people suffered these traumas of displacement, murder and mayhem, the dominant hegemonic structures of public memory of the Partition, issued by the state and the majoritarian nationalistic discourses, have paid very little attention to these voices. However, in the last two decades, some shifts in Partition Studies can be discerned. In the late nineties, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin commented on the abundance of political histories of the events equaled by a 'paucity of social histories of it'.¹ They also noted an absence of feminist historiography of the Partition. Around the same time, Urvashi Butalia began to retrieve through interviews and oral narratives the stories of the smaller, invisible players of the events: the women and the children and the scheduled castes. Butalia's contention was that we couldn't begin to understand what Partition is about 'unless we look at how people

remember it'.² These works, as well as others like Kathinka Kerkoff-Sinha's study of the Momins in Jharkhand, Sarah Ansari's study of the Muslim refugees in Sind and Papiya Ghosh's work on the *Biharis* in Bangladesh, question the homogeneity of nationalist discourses and have marked a significant break from an exclusive concentration on high politics.³

These explorations have also seen marginal communities in a constant dialogue with hegemonic state structures even as they internalize hegemonic perspectives. Other studies that look at the 'unfinished agenda' of nation building especially the participation of the Dalits and minorities in the formation of the nation state as well as issues of social mobilization have also opened up the complexities of the Partition.⁴ On one hand, these studies have recognized and documented violence to see the importance of personal memory as well as to demonstrate the plurality of how we remember the Partition even within the same community just as they demonstrated that gender, caste and class variegated the memories of a community, as the communities in turn are constantly reinvented and reconstituted at particular moments in history. Chatterji's book takes these issues a step further; her study is important in assessing the human and political costs of the Partition, particularly in Bengal.

The book has three sections: the first, *Hopes and Fears*, traces the early political confabulations about boundaries and the rationales behind the Partition; the second talks of the arrival of the Hindu refugees in West Bengal and the Muslim minority that stayed on; and the third is an analysis of the politics of the partitioned state between 1947 and 1967. In her Introduction, Chatterji states why she stops at 1967: 'The study ends in 1967, in part a consequence of the difficulties of gaining access to primary materials, whether public or private, for the period after that date. But there are other reasons why the book ends in 1967. Events in West Bengal and India took a dramatically different turn in the late 1960s and 1970s, so there is a logic.....to concluding the account with the elections of 1967.' (xiii) Although the closure in 1967 can be found fault with, very few things in this book can be. Written with a great eye for detail and an impeccable historical sense, Chatterji's account creates a new benchmark in Partition Studies.

Chatterji's earlier book *Bengal Divided* looked at the enthusiastic role played by the elite Hindu *bhadralok* and to a lesser extent the 'communal mobilization' of the lower castes in Bengal in bringing about the Partition in Bengal. In this account she looks at the high politics of the Partition, the drawing up of the boundaries and the part each of the political parties played in these deliberations. The economic and social reasons for the acts of boundary-making are particularly telling in her account: 'Congress wanted one thana each of Rangpur and Dinajpur for West Bengal since

they were deemed to be essential for bringing tea from Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri down to the docks in Calcutta.' (p.44) The Congress plan to bid for a few well-chosen Muslim majority thanas ran into troubled waters when even within the Congress a powerful dissident caucus claimed a compact and even smaller state. Chatterji looks at the various plans for partitioning Bengal and draws an important conclusion: although these plans were ranged on a broad spectrum, they had some interesting commonalities and she concludes that 'this common ground and the geographical base of the movement that demanded the partition of Bengal were substantially one and the same.' (p.52) The 'political core' of the new state was to be the areas of south-central West Bengal while the areas in the north would be the 'periphery.' This analysis of the formation of the new state goes a long way to help us understand the way these areas have figured in the present day politics of West Bengal. This continuance of unequal relationship between these areas contributed to many of the political turbulences of West Bengal in the decades after Partition. In drawing a new broken line between the past and its present day shadows, Chatterji's analysis once again reminds us that the long shadows of the Partition still hover over our lives and politics.

Part II titled the Bengal Diaspora is the section that draws our attention with the immediate fallout of the Partition: the migration of refugees who suddenly find themselves on the 'wrong' side of the borders or in the 'wrong' state. Chatterji's look at the historical causes of Partition related migration shatters many a-historical and commonly held myths. It is a mistaken belief that communal violence was the only reason why people moved after the Partition in 1947. That reason may have been largely true in Punjab but in Bengal the causes were various and complex ranging from the first wave of upper class and upper caste migrations and then the later migrations by the agriculturists and artisans who went as late as 1950. Chatterji's study also points to the fact that refugee migrations had begun as early as 1946 in the wake of the Calcutta and Noakhali carnages and till date no study has assessed clearly the total number of migrations that had resulted through that year due to the larger and smaller communal conflagrations. Calcutta for instance remained on a boil with incidents of confrontations between Hindus and Muslims and newspapers were reporting cases of arson and stabbing through the months leading up to the Independence. An important aspect of Chatterji's study is the way in which she looks at the migration patterns of the Hindu peasants, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers and the population distribution of refugees district wise in West Bengal. She builds on Nakatani's study of the refugee migration in Nadia district to weave an elaborate and concentrated argument about patterns of migrations, employments and

settlements to draw two important conclusions. The patterns in which the refugees moved 'upset the conventional, resolutely patrilocal and patrilineal familial relationships of rural Bengal, with consequences which are still little understood.' (p.126)

The second was the movement from rural to urban areas in West Bengal that have turned the 'refugee settlements into curious hybrid zones where rural and urban lifestyles coexisted in uneasy equilibrium.' (p.127) After the partition, West Bengal became one-third its original size and the effects of the partition on its society, economy and demography have been far reaching. The pauperization of vast majorities of people through dislocation and lack of sustainable livelihoods have certainly contributed to the dereliction and disarray that so often meets the eye even now when one travels through the towns and cities of the state. In her analysis, Chatterji takes a long hard look at the squatter colonies that mushroomed all over the state but fails to assess the cultural and social impacts of these spatial sites in any sustained manner. The reason for this may be obvious but it does leave a gap in an otherwise flawless analysis. In any account of refugee migration in West Bengal, the squatter colonies become an important topographical site for the configurations of refugee identity and memory.⁵ The colony bazaar, the colony school and cultural clubs were places where a distinct public culture of colony related activities and social interactions evolved. Extant autobiographical narratives of the squatter colony residents or oral narratives bring out the displacements within displacements that add new complexities to the refugee's experience.⁶

Chatterji's study does not go into these affective dimensions of refugee-hood for obvious reasons but this lack certainly points a way in which future partition studies can integrate two important aspects of migration: to see how they take place in all its historical and political nitty-gritty and to assess the processes of identity formations of the displaced and the uprooted. 'One important aspect of the refugees in West Bengal that has rarely been addressed either by the government or by scholars is the cultural dimension of the refugee-hood. The experience of the refugee is profoundly cultural...' Pradip K. Bose had once stated in a seminal study of refugees in West Bengal and his concern still remains true to a large extent.⁷

The unprecedented number of refugees, stretching West Bengal's economy, creating dents in the social fabric of its towns and cities, was responsible for a number of changes in policy and in attitude. Early official and public benevolence for the hapless refugees soon transformed into resentment and anger against the new entrants to the cities and towns who filled it to capacity, overcrowded its' streets, occupied empty lands and orchards and introduced a new component of recklessness in Calcutta's

urban life. The refugees extended Calcutta's limits, filled its slums and took up livelihoods far removed from their own. Sociologist Benoy Ghosh wrote in 1967: 'The New Suburbia has expanded in the last twenty-five or thirty years. The old boundaries of the city suburbs has expanded to accommodate wave after wave of population – abandoned land, fertile land, rice field, marshy lands, ponds, lakes, jungle and gardens all took in the rising tidal waves of population.'⁸ Contemporary literature, films and theatre seemed to grasp these new changes in the city much more sensitively than city planners did, so that 'the theme of an overall moral crisis generated by a violent uprooting and the compulsions of survival appeared often in contemporary literature'.⁹ In the poems of Samar Sen, Bishnu Dey, Sankho Ghosh and Buddhadev Bose, in the stories by Ritwik Ghatak, Subodh Ghosh, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay, Ashapura Devi, in the novels by Sabitri Ray, Shaktipada Rajguru, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Kamal kumar Majumdar we see the relentless portrayal of a city in decline, of people struggling to survive, of colonies and their inhabitants and, then, the union and rise of refugees as a political force in the city in the 50s and 60s.

Another aspect of the refugee experience that Chatterji takes up but cursorily is the settlements outside the state where the migrants were dispersed to diverse geographical areas such as to the Andamans, the Sunderbans and to Dandakaranya in the years after the partition and the large scale desertions of the refugees from these camps who flooded back into West Bengal. This aspect of the Bengali diaspora, and the early confrontations between the refugees and the authorities often resulting in the loss of life (the Dhubulia camp incident comes to mind) had an impact, often elliptical, often direct, on West Bengal's post partition politics. Although Chatterji discusses the Dandakaranya rehabilitation project in some detail, other settlements in Bihar, Orissa, Assam and the Andamans are barely touched upon. While discussing the Dandakaranya rehabilitation project, Chatterji overlooks an important eyewitness account that blew the lid off from one of the biggest and most prominent rehabilitation projects undertaken in Independent India. Saibal Kumar Gupta, Chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority between 1963–64 wrote a series of articles in *The Economic Weekly* (January 1965). These as well as his memoir are important historical sources that have not been used in the discussion.¹⁰ The hugely diverse rehabilitation projects outside the state and their corresponding histories of failure may have been outside the ambit and scope of this analysis, but it remains one of the absences in the book that leaves a reader disappointed.

Chatterji's analysis makes an important contribution to Partition Studies with the section titled 'Staying on: partition and West Bengal's

Muslim minorities.' Needless to say, the section takes a close look at the plight of the Muslims who stayed on and asserts once again what we have always known as true but never articulated: every community and every individual within the community had experienced Partition in their own ways: so instead of just one Partition, there have been many partitions across the broad spectrums of caste, class and gender. Bengals' Muslim community's experiences, varied and complex, have however never featured in any detail in our historiography except in scattered ways. Chatterji draws our attention to this hidden history and enriches our understanding of how cartographic politics had made a certain sections of people 'aliens' or 'citizens.' Territoriality has meant that the clustering and ghettoisation of Muslims in areas where they were pushed onto, resulting in a sharp fall in the number of Muslims in the towns and cities of West Bengal. Yet these clusters of Muslim population, through an irony of history, became an important player in the electoral politics of the newly independent state resulting in the emergence of a 'distinctively Muslim politics.' (p. 197) In the new state, the 'processes by which Muslims ended up in clusters and ghettos had heightened perceptions that Muslims were a community apart, which needed to maintain a political identity of its own.' So in spite of the pressure to 'assimilate' the exigencies of partition actually did exactly the opposite. 'Paradoxically, the process of ghettoisation had given Muslims not only a greater sense of grievance and a greater sense of solidarity, but also a measure of political influence they might not otherwise have had.' (p. 201)

Part III of the book is devoted to the political reconstruction and change visible in post partition West Bengal headed by successive Congress governments till 1967. The two decades after the partition were marked by rising unemployment, labour and student unrests and high food prices that often made daily life extremely volatile in the state. The constant negotiations between the new migrants to the state and the rehabilitation ministry also created a situation that only made matters worse. The result was that refugee participation made the Communist Party of India and its offshoot the Communist Party (Marxist) major political players in the state and helped them create large inroads in West Bengal politics at the expense of the Congress. This may partially explain why the smouldering communal discord in the aftermath of the partition did not tilt the balance in the Hindu Mahasabha's favour. The parties in the left forged significant alliances with new constituencies like the displaced Hindu migrants of the state who were vastly alienated from the Congress. The burgeoning urban middle classes were also disillusioned with the Congress at the Centre and in Bengal. This section takes a close look at the rise of the Communists in the state who came to power not due to a militancy of the

working classes and the labouring poor but more 'to their pragmatic and flexible support for interest groups not known for their appetite for Marxism and for causes which did not conform to any text book version of the creed.' (p. 261) This section also charts out the different currents and eddies that resulted in Bengal's waning influence in national politics, the machinations and policies of the major political players that resulted in electoral advances or annihilation. In all this the growing refugee population and their strident demands for relief and rehabilitation became a key factor. The Mahasabha's handling of the refugee crisis when compared with those of the left-wing parties brings out the 'tectonic' shifts in 'Bengal's political geology.' The fissures that resulted from these alliances and considerations also created fertile ground for the periphery to become mainstream.

The Spoils of Partition overturns many commonly held beliefs about the Partition of Bengal. The goals for which partition was sought by the Hindu bhadralok were conservative with a belief in maintaining Hindu domination in economy and politics. All these aspirations came to naught, as were the false assumptions by the architects of the partition that West Bengal's fiscal and financial health would remain unaffected. Partition proved to be a profoundly destabilizing event not only for the key players but also for those millions on the march. The impact and the afterlife of the Partition would take many such efforts, as Chatterji's, to assess. In history writing, the relationship of memory and archive is richly problematic and the methods through which we access our pasts can never be simple and linear. All we hope is to discover newer sources that will enable us to arrive at a nuanced account of the past. This study by Joya Chatterji is a laudable effort in that direction.

NOTES

1. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 6-9
2. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 18. See also Kuldeep Nayar and Asif Noorani, *Tales of Two Cities*, Delhi, 2008 for personal accounts of the trauma that transformed the subcontinent.
3. Kathinka Kerkoff Sinha, *Tyranny of Partition: Hindus in Bangladesh and Muslims in India*, New Delhi, 2006. See also Sarah Ansari, 'The movement of Indian Muslims to West Pakistan after 1947: partition-related migration and its consequences for the Pakistani province of Sind' and Papiya Ghosh, 'Partition's Biharis' both in Tai Yong Tang and Gyanesh Kudaisya, eds, *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Reader*, Vol. 1, London, 2008, pp. 241-258 and 144-169.
4. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta

- University Monograph 5, 1990 and 'Mobilizing For A Hindu Homeland' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, eds, *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building In South Asia*, Delhi, 2001, pp. 151-195, give us an understanding of the lower caste identity formation in Bengal.
5. Manas Ray's memoir 'Growing Up Refugee' *History Workshop Journal*, Spring, 2002 (53: 1) is a case in point. There are other important autobiographical narratives coming from within the refugee colony that are interesting like Indubaran Ganguly's *Colony Smriti*, Calcutta, 1997.
 6. I recall Sudeshna Bannerjee's essay 'Displacement within displacement: The Crisis of Old Age in the Refugee Colonies of Calcutta', *Studies in History*, 19:2, New Delhi, 2003.
 7. Pradip K. Bose, 'Refugees in West Bengal: The State and Contested Identities', in *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta, 2000, p.2.
 8. Benoy Ghosh, 'Metropolitan Mon' in *Metropolitan Mon O Modhyobidtyo Bidroho*, Calcutta, 1973, p. 67.
 9. Moinak Biswas, 'The City and the Real: Chinnamul and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s' in Preben Kaarsholm, ed. *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*, Calcutta, 2006, p.53.
 10. Saibal Kumar Gupta, *Kichu Smriti Kichu Katha*, Calcutta, 1994. His writings have been discussed in some detail in Debjani Sengupta, 'From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi: rehabilitation, representation and the partition of Bengal (1947)', *Social Semiotics*, 21:1, London, 2011.