Borderland Narratives of the Bengal Partition

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Koeli Mitra Goel

Borders and partitions have troubled histories of divisive politics in which neighboring communities walled off from each other continue to be shaken up by tremors of such divisions long after the actual event. This panel examines community experiences related to India's Partition in 1947. In the aftermath of the British Raj's decision to leave behind a divided territory in South Asia, the subcontinent was wracked by violent communal aggressions.

The history of western India becoming West Pakistan and Indian Punjab has been privileged in official Partition stories, academic research and popular culture. The eastern borderland of a broken, fragmented Bengal has largely been overlooked in mainstream discourses. Our panel hopes to contribute towards highlighting experiences of the communities along the Eastern borders of the newly crafted Republic of India from 1947.

As the original capital of the British Empire and later Bengali capital, Calcutta developed as a cosmopolitan center where art, cinema, and literature, as well as business and trade flourished. Bengal saw great prosperity during colonial rule, but it also underwent violent communal strife when the Partition forced Muslims out of a largely Hindu West Bengal and Hindus from a mainly Muslim East Pakistan. However, over the course of the next half century, a common language (Bengali) became a central platform of identity, superseding individual or class interests, and spurred the self-determination of Bangladesh and its independence from Pakistan.

Partition is a process which continues to shape social relations, political agendas, government policies, cultural histories, and most importantly ordinary lives in India and Bangladesh. Postcolonial interventions are called for: How can we best understand the violence when the Radcliffe Line was drawn? What legacies were lost as millions were forced to leave home and hearth and move to unfamiliar land on different sides of this arbitrary border simply based on their religious affiliations?

From personal perspectives to broader public memory, these stories form the inspiration for this panel. This panel will explore a fairly uncharted terrain of entangled identities, stratified citizenships, homes lost, and lives uprooted.

Professor Hans Hok

Banglatā, Islam, and language.

In this presentation I take a somewhat broader historical view, trying to contextualize the relationship between East Pakistan/East Bengal/Bangladesh with West Bengal, with special focus on language as a marker of identity.

In addition, I invite you to join me in entertaining the idea that there is and has been a dual identity for many Bengali Muslims, especially in East Bengal, a tension between what may be called Banglatā and Islam.

1905: Curzon partitions Bengal (reunification in 1911)

Initial reaction by Muslim intellectuals is highly negative

The Central Mohammedan Association of Calcutta condemned the proposed partition of Bengal at a meeting held in February, 1904. Most of the speakers at the said meeting were very important Muslim leaders of the time. They were Mir Motahar Hussain, Zamindar of Barisal; Seraj-uI-IsIam Chaudhary of Chittagong, member Bengal Legislative Council; and Abdul Hamid, Editor of the 'Muslim Chronicle'.

Soon after, the local population of East Bengal realizes that there are economic benefits, and they support the division.

Subsequent Hindu reactions lead to the view among Muslims that the National Congress serves Hindu interests; this makes the Muslim League more attractive.

Bangla vs. Urdu (first take)

Late 19th century: Social activists such as the Muslim feminist Roquia Sakhawat Hussain were choosing to write in Bangla to reach out to the people and develop it as a modern literary language.

1937 Lucknow Session of the Muslim League: Bengali delegates petition that Bangla to be recognized as a language of Indian Muslims. Muhammad Ali Jinnah and most non-Bengali delegates reject this petition and argue that only Urdu can be the national language of India's Muslims. This marginalizes not only Bengali Muslims but also Muslims from other areas, such as Malayalam-speaking Muslims of Kerala. Similarities to the attempts to impose Hindi as national language of India (and to Bengali and South Indian resistance)

1947 vs. 1971 — Partition of India vs. Partition of Pakistan.

20 June 1947, Bengal Legislative Assembly, in three separate votes, agrees on the partition of Bengal, with even a 58:21 majority among the non-Muslim-area members.

Partition and "population exchanges" were accompanied by a large amount of violence and atrocities, but the violence was not as extensive and ferocious as that in the west.

The Bangladesh war of liberation, which ended in 1971, engendered a much higher level of violence. The (West) Pakistan army killed some 3 million Bengalis, of whom about 2.5 million were Hindus. Moreover, there was widespread destruction of Hindu businesses and religious sites.

Atrocities recurred numerous times after 1971, driven by Islamist groups. At the same time, many Bangladeshi intellectuals protested against these events, including the well-known writer Taslima Nasrin (Lajja 'shame'), who had to go into exile in 1994 and, sadly, met with opposition in India as well.

Banglatā vs. Urdu Nationalism and the partition of Pakistan.

Right after the 1947 Partition, the government of Pakistan proceeds to remove Bangla from from its currency and postal stamps.

The minister of Education, Fazlur Rahman, starts the procedure of making Urdu the single official state language.

Student protests in December 1947 and March 1948. They are joined by numerous East Bengal intellectuals, both Muslim and Hindu, including Professor Nurul Huq Bhuiyan, Dhirendranath Datta (member of the Constituent Assembly), and the legislators Shamsul Huq, Prem Hari Burman, Bhupendra Kumar Datta, and Sris Chandra Chattopadhyaya.

Dhaka, 21 and 24 March 1948.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah condemns the Bengali language movement as a "Fifth-column" effort to divide Pakistan.

19th-century kind of arguments in favor of "one nation – one language (– one religion)'

'But let me make it very clear to you that the State Language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without one State Language, no Nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. Look at the history of other countries. Therefore, so far as the State Language is concerned, Pakistan's language shall be Urdu.'

Subsequent developments

The Pakistani government wavers between rejection and accommodation of request for Bangla recognition

21 February 1952 – violent suppression of protests in East Pakistan

"Ekushey Februyāri" Bhāṣā Andolan; later adopted in West Bengal; UN "International Mother Language Day" (1999, 2008)

Official settlement of the "language issue" in 1956

But tensions continue, both economic and cultural (with Bangla language being an essential identifier of culture)

1971: “Operation Searchlight” by the Pakistani army against Bengali intelligentsia and cultural institutions, as well as the Hindu minority – some 10 million flee to India, some 3 million are killed

Urdu-speaking Mohajirs (originally from Bihar) play a major supporting role

Declaration of Bangladeshi independence (with Indian military support in December 1971)

Recognition by the UN in 1972

Bangla becomes the official language of Bangladesh (with English playing a highly reduced role, but …)

Banglatā’s linguistic consequences

Urdu of Mohajirs marginalized

Non-Indo-Aryan “tribal” languages marginalized: Khasi, Santali (Austro-Asiatic), Kurukh (Dravidian), Koch, Garo, Mizo … (Tibeto-Burman)

Regional, often very different varieties marginalized: Bishnupriya Manipuri, Chakma, Chittagonian, Sylheti

These are especially vulnerable, since they are considered “Bangla”

“One country – One language” redux ?

Sudipto Das

We have already heard about the background of the Partition of Bengal [from Professor Hans Hock's lecture]. I would like to give a little more perspective because, I believe, the Partition of Bengal was not [done] in isolation – it was [a] part of the Indian partition.

My family is a victim of the partition of the eastern side. My father was only seven years old and my uncle was 14 years old. And… one fine morning, not in 47 but in 1948 – my father's family didn't move immediately, like most Hindu families. So, one fine morning, my grandmother – she just woke up, and she told my uncle, who was 14 years old, to take my father and my younger aunt, who was just five years old. What happened was something like this: A14-year-old boy – he becomes the guardian of a seven-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl. And they took almost 35 days to come from Barishal [to Calcutta]. Barishal is one of the divisions in Bangladesh which adjoins the Sundarbans and which is one of the southern [most] districts of Bangladesh.

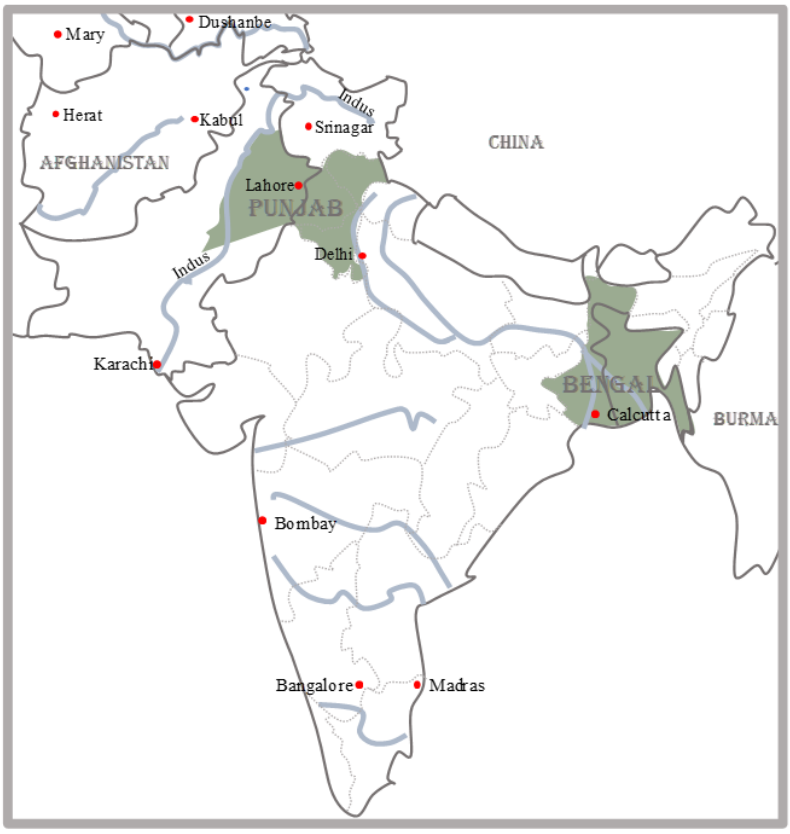
I never went to Bangladesh like most of the second-generation Bengalis whose parents have moved [to India]. I never went to Bangladesh and I never saw all the horrors and all the violence myself. But what happened is this.

When I was growing up, I had one of my very old aunts who used to stay with us – she was a widow – and she used to babysit me when I was very young. My father and mother both were working. And a 70 plus year old lady, who had moved out of Bangladesh almost 35 years back – it was in the seventies – and [yet] her entire world was around Bangladesh. She had been staying in India for the last more-than-thirty years. She never got a chance to go back to her homeland but all she could talk about was all Bangladesh, which was East Bengal. And I grew up hearing only stories of not only partition but also various other things, like the village fairs, about some very insignificant things which nobody might even remember. But that old aunt – she used to again and again tell all the stories. And [as] for a five-six-year-old child, who should be treated with more of fairy tales… and all these things, and… I grew up with the fairy tales of Bangladesh.

And then she died in 82-83… and life moved on. And [then], somewhere in the 2007 or 2008, when I thought that I would take up writing, I figured out that the stories that I have heard about the partition, and also about Bangladesh – those are actually a treasure trove to me. And another very interesting thing which I figured out [was] that there was absolutely nothing available about the Bengal side of the partition. When we talk about the Indian partition it's always the Punjab side. Whether it's in the movies, whether it's in the literature or whether it's in the… the common psyche of Indians. None of my friends and colleagues even knew that Bengal was also partitioned. Because, with movies, Hindi movies, and also the Punjabi writings, which were already getting translated – like, Amrita Pritam Singh is one the fantastic Punjabi writers, and

we have Bhisham Sahni, and then we have Krishna Baldev Vaid – there was [a] huge amount of literature available in Punjabi and also in English – Khushwant Singh had written a fantastic book called Train to Pakistan. So, what made me curious is, why is it so that two states were partitioned at the same time but somehow the narrative of Bengal has been totally forgotten? Nobody knows about it. I searched in goggle. Absolutely… absolutely no material.

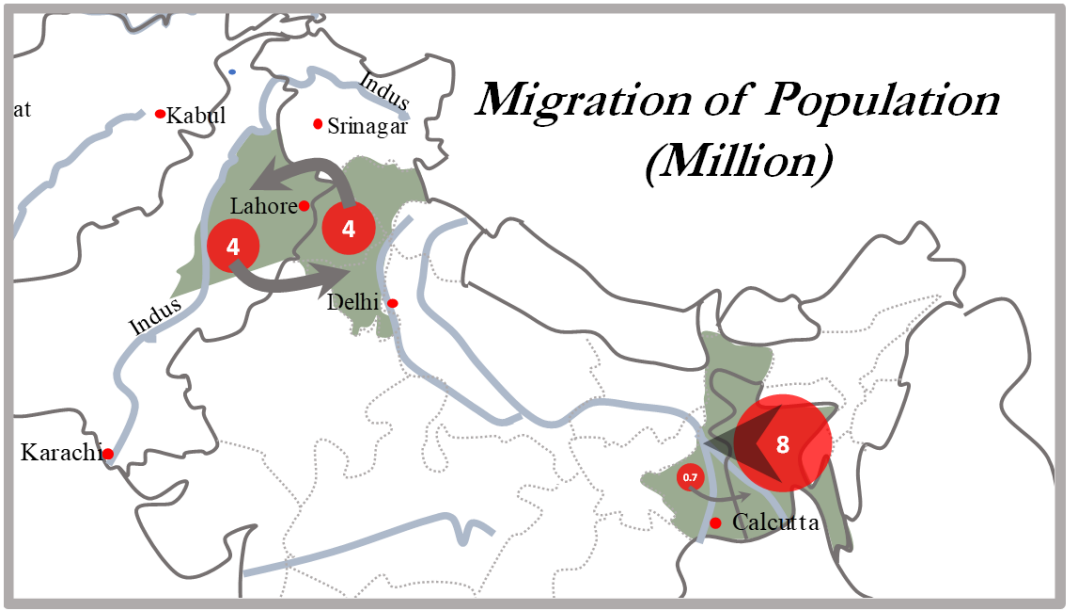
And at this juncture I would like to refer to one of the very distinguished guests, who's here in the audience – Mr. Rajmohan Gandhi. I read one of his books, Mohandas. And… while I was thinking [of] writing about Bengal partition, [I found] his book has one chapter about the Noakhali riots and I believe that was one of the very few materials which I got about what exactly happened in Bangladesh. So that's where I wanted to figure out what was different in Bengal that it never got the attention.



And… [this is] just to put some perspective to the magnanimity and to the enormity of the issue. This, you see, is the undivided Bengal, which comprises both West Bengal and the present Bangladesh. The current Punjab in Pakistan is little different, but so is in India. The Indian Punjab has been broken into three states, Punjab Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. This is how India was partitioned.

And if you see the numbers – the idea of partition was to create a safe home for the Muslims, which [is what] the Muslim League used to say – the partition of Punjab was, I would say, sort of realistically done, where each side has almost four million of minorities. The Indian Punjab had around four million Muslims and the Pakistan side [of] Punjab had around four million non-Muslims, which included Sikhs and Hindus. So, the population exchange was very similar. Four million from here to there and four million from there to here.

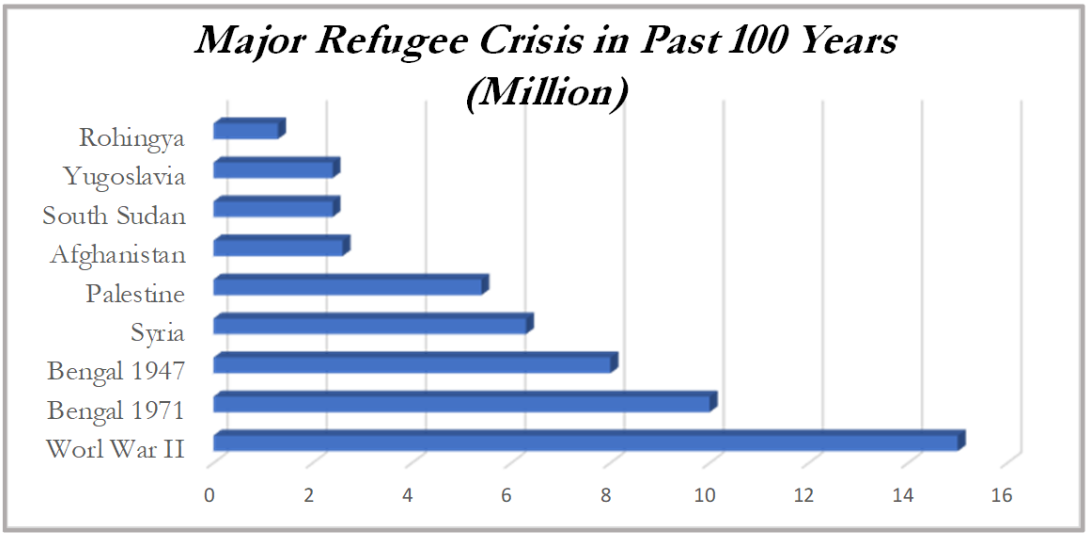
But in the Bengal side, almost eight million, sort of, non-Muslims were there in Bangladesh, and of course West Bengal had a huge population of non-Hindus, Muslims.



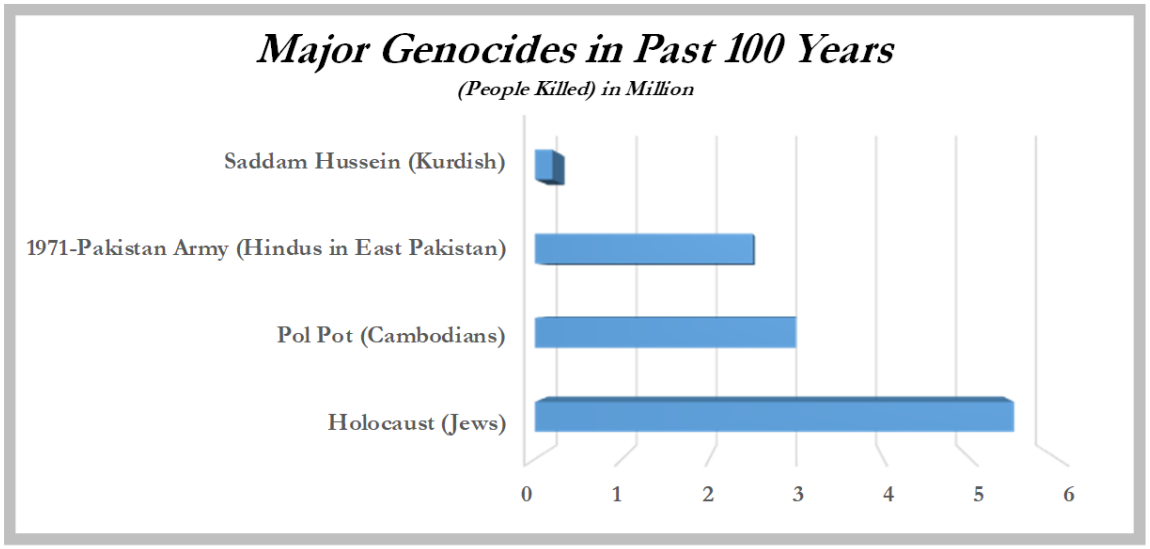
But, very interestingly, only seven hundred thousand Muslims from West Bengal moved to East Bengal. Very recently, I read an article written by a Bangladeshi journalist in [the] New York Times – it was published during the seventy years of Indian independence – and there also, he mentions the same figures, that only 700K Muslims travelled from West Bengal to East Bengal, and that also, not due to violence. They moved because of better opportunities, because they felt that a Muslim majority country might have more opportunities for them.

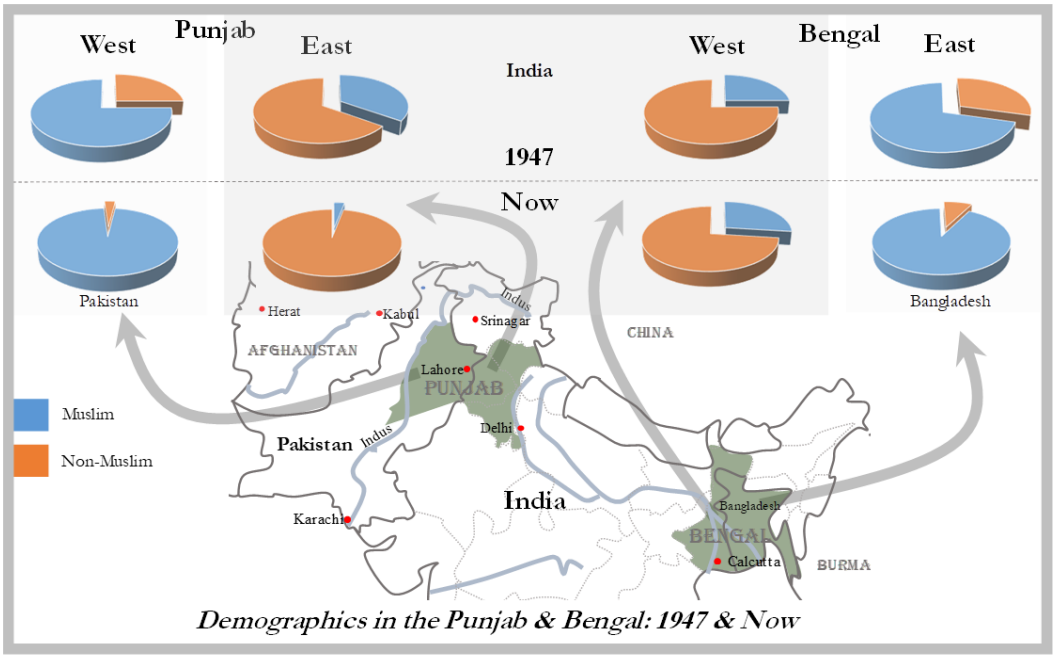
And, if you see, this eight million, who moved from East Bengal to West Bengal – they didn't move in one shot. Because eight million people can't move in one shot. It's like twice the [size of] population transfer that happened in the Punjab. They trickled into West Bengal over a very long time, starting from 1947 till 1971, when Bangladesh was liberated. And my own family moved towards the end of 1948.

So even if you see, by sheer number, it's double the size of Punjab partition. And also, it's a very one-sided affair. It's not population exchange. And here, then again, what sort of makes me even more curious [is], if you compare the refugee crisis, that happened over the last 100 years: World War Two created around 11 to 20 million [refugees] so I took 15 million as the median number; Bangladesh [Liberation] 1971 created around 10 million, and the 47 [Bengal] partition created around 8 million refugees. So that's among the highest in the world, and that makes the Bengalis of East Bengal, who moved to West Bengal, the second most… second largest displaced community in the world, if you go by these numbers.



I was curious… somehow, why such a big thing totally escaped the sympathy, empathy or the attention of the rest of the world. So again, another interesting thing, which Professor Hans [Hock] has also pointed out, that another level of violence happened during the 1971 [Bangladesh Liberation] thing. But that was not between the two sides of Bengal. It was mainly between [East] Bengal and [the] Pakistan [Army], which again created another huge round of refugees [and a major Hindu genocide of massive proportions].





But interestingly, in West Bengal – and I'm very proud of it, that I'm a native of West Bengal – the population percentage of Muslims didn't reduce in [independent] India. Somehow, India managed to maintain its secular fabric. West Bengal had around 25% Muslims in [19]47 and now its 27%. So… I would like to request the Western

Academicia to do some research, [as to] why is it so that such a big event, and such a big refugee problem, such a big displacement in the world, which the Bengal partition created – why was that totally forgotten?

I don't have any clear answer for that. But I believe I would request some academic research to figure [that] out. At least for [the next generations of the] refugees, like us – okay, I'm not a refugee [par say], but I think the only solace for a refugee is to see other people sympathizing them, to see [a] lot of literature written about them. The Jews – one of the best consolations for them is the huge amount of literature, films, movies created on them. So, they realized, "Fine, I'm not alone." There are millions of sympathizers for them. But the Bengalis of the Bengal partition – we don't even have that solace. Nobody writes about us. Nobody talks about us.

Thank you.

Anustup Basu

I will begin with two illustrations. Anecdotes if you will. I remembered them just before coming here. So forgive me if the details are a bit vague.

The first is an actual incident described in the historian Gyanendra Pandey's book *Remembering Partition*. This was taking place about two years after 1947. Some people had put up a public notice in the dorms of the Aligarh Muslim University inviting applicants to join the Pakistan Army. It was candid and, as we would perhaps call it, naïve. The people who did it were incredulous when they were told that they could not do such a thing.

Unimaginable in our times. What this tells us is that, even after that apocalyptic violence of the Partition and the greatest mass migration in the history of humanity, many were unsure about exactly what the Partition had done in terms of dividing a land and a people. What were the legal and political consequences of that division?

My second illustration is from Sunil Gangyopadhyay's magnum opus *Purbo-Paschim.* It is a wide canvas story of a refugee family in Kolkata. There we see a theme of popular imagination and hope. In the novel people among the destitute community believe that they will eventually be able to return to lost ancestral villages. The Partition will be undone and the country – the two Bengals at least -- will be united in 1957.

1. What exactly does the Partition mean socially? Culturally, politically?
2. How permanent is this arrangement?
3. How is the pain to be absorbed in the long run?

With this Preface I come to certain themes in Hindi and Bengali cinema of the 1950s. That is, the period of settlement. That of coming to terms with the permanence and legacy of the Partition.

Bhaskar Sarkar has written an excellent book on the Partition and Indian cinema. It is called *Mourning the Nation*. One of the major things that Sarkar says is that in the first few decades after INDEPENDENCE, there was very little cinema made, either in Bombay or Bengal, that directly addressed the Partition. Was about the Partition.

That is true and there are two reasons for that.

1. Censorship: Chances are, your film could get banned. *Nastik* (1954). A traumatized refugee in Bombay who turns to atheism and crime on seeing social hypocrisy and cruelty. *Nastik* was banned by censors on the grounds that it may hurt the sentiments of the Hindu community.
2. Sarkar forwards a Freudian explanation. A culture needs some time to absorb, work through trauma before it can start talking about it.

So there were very few films made on the Partition. There were examples like Manmohan Desai's Chalia starring Nutan and Raj Kapoor, or Kidar Sharma's *Hamari Yaad Ayegi*. In Bengal there were mainstream films like the Uttam Suchitra romances *Bipasha* or *Shobar Opore*. Apart from the famous Partition trilogy directed by Ritwik Ghatak.

These very different kinds of films, including non-serious ones, like the 1959 feature Milan, where Partition causes the lovers to separate, till they are reunited by an ingenious German Shepherd.

But, given that thousands of films were made across the 50s and early 60s, the number was strikingly small. The rest was a voluble silence.

But for me, the real question is not whether or to what extent Partition appeared in films. The question is, whether films could remain the same after Partition.

Let me invoke a memorable line from Rahi Masoom Reza's memorable 1966 novel *Adha Gaon*. In rough English translation, it goes like this: "In short with independence several kinds of loneliness had been born."

So this is the only point I would like to make today. After 1947, cinema, both in Bombay, as well as Bengal, was filled with different kinds of loneliness. Both these traditions, in different ways, became melodramas of loneliness. That of negotiating loneliness in a strange and alienating city.

Both Bengali and Hindi cinema in the 40s were dominated by the family melodrama – the social' as it was called. Ergo, the usual run of the mill film usually featured drama and intrigue within the parameters of the feudal extended family. This template remained, but the screen of the fifties also became filled with lonely protagonists. Vagabonds, (*Awaras*), pickpockets, petty criminals, destitute people who arrived in the big city with nothing. No family or community or even caste identity. They lived in the pavements, slept on park benches or under street lights. Most of the time, these historical orphans came without biographical backgrounds. Yet often they would show markers of respectable upbringing and education. It was as if they carried the baggage of an unspecified historical devastation and uprooting. They had come from lost villages. Connoisseurs of Hindi cinema would recall the protagonist in Raj Kapoor's classic *Shri 420*. A vagabond arrives in the big bad city with no money, but a BA degree (big deal in those times) and also without an identifiable past or clan identity.

We see culturally different, but equally noticeable forms of loneliness in Bengali film melodrama of the 50s, especially in the template massively popularized by the matinee idols Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. They gave expression to a new conjugal desire and yearning. It was that of a woman and a man, both often working, both often without distinguished family backgrounds, legacies etc., and both often coming from absent or dysfunctional families trying to struggle and find a place in the city teeming with refugees, the hungry, and the unemployed. This, unlike the couples of the old, was

a distinctively nuclear couple. This nuclear desire is expressed best in the signature song sequences in these films, often set in utopian spaces – gardens in the moonlight, empty houses, picnic spots, nooks of nature -- that the otherwise bursting metropolis actually does not have anymore.

I am afraid I will not be able to say a lot about Ritwik Ghatak's cinema. This evening would be too small a time frame for that. It is in his cinema that we see the essence of the different kinds of loneliness. He depicts the present in the light of the past in each of its trilogies, but in a cinema of the imperfect tense. Loneliness is caused because selves and their memories themselves are partitioned. In his cinema, the Partition assumes the form of a primal division. Not just of the land and the population, but an entire civilization, linguistic universe and culture are ripped apart.

There might thus be very little Partition in both Hindi and Bengali cinema of the fifties and sixties. But Partition perpetually haunts cinema. It populates the screen with phantom figures weighed down by a primal loss. Different figures. Different stories. Different destinies. And different kinds of loneliness.