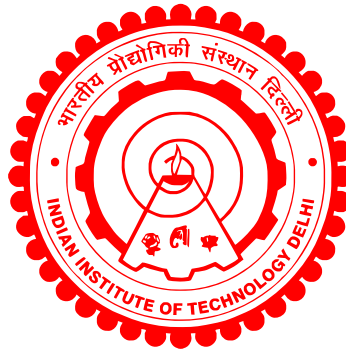


From Rupture to Resilience: Memory and Identity in Oral Narratives of Refugees Arriving from East Pakistan to West Bengal (1947-1970)

by

Sumallya Mukhopadhyay



Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

October 2022

© Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD), New Delhi, 2022

**From Rupture to Resilience: Memory and Identity in Oral Narratives
of Refugees Arriving from East Pakistan to West Bengal (1947-1970)**

by

Sumallya Mukhopadhyay

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Submitted

In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy



Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

October 2022

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis – **“From Rupture to Resilience: Memory and Identity in Oral Narratives of Refugees Arriving from East Pakistan to West Bengal”** – submitted by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay to the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT Delhi) for the award of the degree of **“Doctor of Philosophy”** is a record of bona fide research work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance, and it is in conformity with the rules and regulations of IIT Delhi.

He has fulfilled all the requirements for the submission of this thesis which has, in my opinion, reached the standard of fulfilling the requirements for the degree.

To the best of my knowledge, the material contained in this thesis has not been submitted, in part or in full, to any other University or Institute for the award of any other degree or diploma.



Professor

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

New Delhi

India

Date: 18 Jul 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis is the harvest of several years of hard work, a mission accomplished through the continuous support, encouragement and motivation of many people. I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to every one of them.

Dedicating his magnum opus, *The Waste Land* to his mentor, T.S. Eliot has stated that Ezra Pound is *il miglior fabbro*/the better craftsman. I will write the same for my supervisor, Prof. Arjun Ghosh. He has been the most discerning reader of my work for the last five years. His comments, insights and observations have greatly enriched the dissertation. He has inculcated in me the value of time, believed in what I wanted to do and gave me the academic liberty to take my research forward. His persistence and patience, erudition and encouragement have inspired me to venture out on paths that otherwise might have been left untraversed. Most importantly, his anecdotes on life, loss and love unconsciously made me realise how I wanted to design the five years of the doctoral journey. It has indeed been a rewarding experience to work with him.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the members of my doctoral research committee – Prof. Brinda Bose, Prof. Simona Sawhney and Prof. Sarbeswar Sahoo. Despite their myriad professional engagements, they had always managed time for me. I benefitted a lot from my interactions with them.

I am grateful to the faculty members of the HSS department for promoting an ambience of interdisciplinary research. I fondly recall our conversations in the classrooms and corridors. The staff members of our department – Neelam ji, Pankaj and Mukesh – merit special mention. They always greeted me with a smile and completed all documentation and procedure on time.

When funding in higher education was limited, IIT Delhi offered me a generous fellowship. Without the institution's support, the project would not have seen the light of the day.

I have attended workshops at two places – the Centre for Public History, Srishti School of Design and Technology, Bengaluru and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna. Over the course of time, I have realised the importance of these two workshops in framing the arguments of the thesis. I am grateful to both the institutions for the opportunity that they had given me.

I am indebted to institutions where I was selected to present papers on my research. As a young scholar, it was equally encouraging to deliver invited lectures in places like TISS Patna, Amity University Delhi-NCR, Miranda House College and Ramanujan College in Delhi. The feedbacks and responses were instrumental in persuading me to ponder over various ideas of my thesis.

I must thank the Partition Museum, Amritsar, for supporting my archival work in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) and the National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi.

When my fieldwork was cut short by the pandemic, Tata Trusts and the 1947 Partition Archive awarded me a research grant. The Oral History Association Scholarship introduced me to the world of digitalising oral narratives. My involvement with the Kolkata Partition Museum gave me a timely exposure to understand the distinct cultures and communities in West Bengal. These organisations assisted me in securing archival materials from different sources. I am thankful for their support.

My research took me to archives in New Delhi and West Bengal. I am grateful to the staff members in NMML, NAI and West Bengal State Archives, who made a special allowance for me to avail the documents despite the looming presence of the pandemic.

In the last five years, I have received academic guidance from Prof. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Prof. Martha Norkunas, Prof. Alessandro Portelli, Prof. Anindita Ghoshal, Prof. Anupama Mohan, Prof. Kalyan Das, Prof. Indira Chowdhury and Prof. Rituparna Roy. I also acquainted myself with researchers like Anam Zakaria, Aanchal Malhotra and Kavita Puri. Their inputs, suggestions and recommendations have contributed towards structuring of my thesis.

I want to acknowledge the contribution of my seniors, Dr. Devjani Ray, Dr. Mriganka Sarma, Dr. Sandip Debnath, Dr. Rituparna Sengupta and Dr. Apurva, along with my friends Jyotirmay, Neha, Minakshee, Debottam, Sania, Fariya, Riyaz, Nazia, Wing-Kong, Angarika, Nandini, Chandni, Nikhil, Sayantani, Urooj, Nimish, Lalita, Jatin, Arpan, Soham, Sourav, Pritam, Jashan, Punit and Amrish. Life in IIT was memorable owing to their convivial presence.

I could not have finished the project without my partner, Preeti Kumari's unflinching support and unconditional love. She was the first person with whom I discussed aspects of my work. At times, she would question my arguments, urging me to re-think and re-evaluate. The completion of the thesis is an important milestone for both of us. Echoing Shakespeare I would say, more is thy due than more than I can pay.

The acknowledgement remains incomplete without paying tribute to my family. I am eternally grateful to my father, Dr. Samir Kumar Mukhopadhyay, for cultivating in me the art of reading and writing, my mother, Krishna Mukhopadhyay, for revealing to me the beauty and power of storytelling, and my sister, Dr. Kankan Mukhopadhyay, for teaching me to be self-reliant and empathetic towards others.

Lastly, I will take this opportunity to thank all those who willingly agreed to share their life stories with me. This thesis belongs as much to them as to me.

**October 2022
New Delhi**

Sumallya Mukhopadhyay

ABSTRACT

The research is focused on refugee migration from East Pakistan to West Bengal between 1947 and 1970. The primary sources are the oral history narratives that I have secured from the various districts of West Bengal. By historicising the period when individuals and families took to migration, I underscore the ethnocultural distinctiveness of the refugees. The central argument is that the definition of ‘refugee’ – a densely nuanced word with hardly any co-relative in Bengali parlance, and is, therefore, simply transliterated – changed considerably in the two decades after the Partition. I examine how, during the time of recollection, the operative framework of the word ‘refugee’ inspires the narrators to negotiate with their past. I contend that the identity of ‘refugee’ in West Bengal is rather a cultural than a legal-official marker for those who migrated from East Pakistan.

Since the refugees crossed the borders without any particular timeframe, their stories are not of any uniform pattern. A common thread, however, connects the different narratives. The refugees collectively emphasize that the social frameworks in West Bengal are not conducive to record their perceptions. I insist that the opportunity to tell their life stories, after almost seven decades, acts as an impetus to narrate diligently. Against this backdrop, I theorise the oral narratives as performative presentation of life stories. I discuss the refugees’ desire to speak, depict their involvement in the refugee movement and deliberate on how the act of narration directs them to dramatise their life stories through words, actions and bodily gestures. While most scholars have read the personal reminiscences through the silences and the stutters and stammers embedded in them, I conceptualise the tangibility of the narratives as they are recollected during the interview.

Hence, I have reformulated the oft-asked question – why remember? – to ask instead – how does one remember? It allows me to move beyond the rhetoric of violence and trauma to look at the dialectics of remembering and forgetting. It brings to the fore different narrative techniques employed by the refugees when they narrate their past and discuss its enduring impact on the present. The East Pakistani refugees in West Bengal are not a homogenous group. They have migrated from varied regions, carried their societal dynamics and linguistic affinities, and subsequently, enriched the socio-

political and cultural milieu of West Bengal. Through an affirmative subversion of the refugee identity, they lay emphasis on their cross-border lineage to put forward a renewed definition of how refugees can be agentive, enterprising and participatory in nature. In fine, I intend to establish that they have exhibited to the world how refugees, in general, can develop their own models of self-reliance to emerge as resilient individuals against institutional negligence and apathy.

सार

शोध 1947 और 1970 के बीच पूर्वी पाकिस्तान से पश्चिम बंगाल में शरणार्थी प्रवास पर केंद्रित है। प्राथमिक स्रोत मौखिक इतिहास कथाएँ हैं जो मैंने पश्चिम बंगाल के विभिन्न जिलों से प्राप्त की हैं। उस अवधि को ऐतिहासिक बनाकर जब व्यक्तियों और परिवारों ने प्रवासन लिया, मैं शरणार्थियों की जातीय-सांस्कृतिक विशिष्टता को रेखांकित करता हूँ। केंद्रीय तर्क यह है कि 'शरणार्थी' की परिभाषा - बंगाली भाषा में शायद ही किसी सह-रिश्तेदार के साथ एक घनी बारीक शब्द है, और इसलिए, केवल लिप्यंतरित है - विभाजन के बाद के दो दशकों में काफी बदल गया है। मैं जांच करता हूँ कि, स्मरण के समय, 'शरणार्थी' शब्द का ऑपरेटिव ढांचा कथाकारों को उनके अतीत के साथ बातचीत करने के लिए कैसे प्रेरित करता है। मेरा तर्क है कि पश्चिम बंगाल में 'शरणार्थी' की पहचान पूर्वी पाकिस्तान से प्रवास करने वालों के लिए कानूनी-आधिकारिक मार्कर के बजाय एक सांस्कृतिक है।

चूंकि शरणार्थियों ने बिना किसी विशेष समय सीमा के सीमाओं को पार किया, इसलिए उनकी कहानियाँ एक समान पैटर्न की नहीं हैं। हालाँकि, एक सामान्य सूत्र विभिन्न आख्यानों को जोड़ता है। शरणार्थी सामूहिक रूप से इस बात पर जोर देते हैं कि पश्चिम बंगाल में सामाजिक ढांचा उनकी धारणाओं को दर्ज करने के लिए अनुकूल नहीं है। मैं इस बात पर जोर देता हूँ कि लगभग सात दशकों के बाद उनके जीवन की कहानियों को बताने का अवसर लगन से बयान करने के लिए एक प्रोत्साहन के रूप में कार्य करता है। इस पृष्ठभूमि में, मैं मौखिक आख्यानों को जीवन की कहानियों की प्रदर्शनकारी प्रस्तुति के रूप में मानता हूँ। मैं शरणार्थियों की बोलने की इच्छा पर चर्चा करता हूँ, शरणार्थी आंदोलन में उनकी भागीदारी का चित्रण करता हूँ और इस बात पर विचार करता हूँ कि कैसे कथन का कार्य उन्हें शब्दों, कार्यों और शारीरिक इशारों के माध्यम से अपने जीवन की कहानियों को नाटकीय बनाने के लिए निर्देशित करता है। जबकि अधिकांश विद्वानों ने चुप्पी और उनमें निहित हकलाने और हकलाने के माध्यम से व्यक्तिगत यादों को पढ़ा है, मैं कथाओं की मूर्तता की अवधारणा करता हूँ क्योंकि वे साक्षात्कार के दौरान याद की जाती हैं।

इसलिए, मैंने अक्सर पूछे जाने वाले प्रश्न को सुधार लिया है - क्यों याद रखें? - इसके बजाय पूछने के लिए - कोई कैसे याद करता है? यह मुझे याद रखने और भूलने की द्वंद्वत्मकता को देखने के लिए हिंसा और आघात की बयानबाजी से आगे बढ़ने की अनुमति देता है। यह शरणार्थियों द्वारा नियोजित विभिन्न कथा तकनीकों को सामने लाता है जब वे अपने अतीत का वर्णन करते हैं और वर्तमान पर इसके स्थायी प्रभाव पर चर्चा करते हैं। पश्चिम बंगाल में पूर्वी पाकिस्तानी शरणार्थी एक समरूप समूह नहीं हैं। वे विभिन्न क्षेत्रों से पलायन कर गए हैं, अपनी सामाजिक गतिशीलता और भाषाई समानता को आगे बढ़ाया है, और बाद में, पश्चिम बंगाल के सामाजिक-राजनीतिक और सांस्कृतिक परिवेश को समृद्ध किया है। शरणार्थी पहचान के एक सकारात्मक तोड़फोड़ के माध्यम से, वे अपने सीमा पार वंश पर जोर देते हैं ताकि एक नई परिभाषा को आगे बढ़ाया जा सके कि कैसे शरणार्थी प्रकृति में एजेंट, उद्यमी और सहभागी हो सकते हैं। ठीक है, मैं यह स्थापित करने का इरादा रखता हूँ कि उन्होंने दुनिया को प्रदर्शित किया है कि कैसे शरणार्थी, सामान्य रूप से, आत्मनिर्भरता के अपने स्वयं के मॉडल विकसित कर सकते हैं ताकि वे संस्थागत लापरवाही और उदासीनता के खिलाफ लचीला व्यक्तियों के रूप में उभर सकें।

CONTENTS

Certificate	i
Acknowledgement	ii-iii
Abstract	iv-vii
Contents	viii-x
Abbreviations	xi
List of Figures	xii
Chapter One: Introduction	1-38
1.1. Why Oral History Narratives?	2
1.2. Theoretical Framework	8
1.3. Methodology	9
1.4. The Prelude to the Partition	12
1.5. Literature Review	15
1.6. Chapter Synopsis	32
Chapter Two: Who is a Refugee? Understanding the Refugee Figure in West Bengal (1947-1970)	39-83
2.1. The 1943 Bengal Famine and the Great Calcutta Killings 1946	41
2.1.1. Mapmaking in Bengal and the Transfer of Power	48
2.1.2. The Desire for a Homogenous Political Collective	50
2.2. The Refugees as a Distinct Social Category	55
2.2.1. The International Refugee Regime vis-à-vis the South Asian Refugee Regime	56
2.2.2. The Refugees as Figurative and Socio-Material Subjects	59
2.3. The Moment of Rupture and the Refugee Crisis	61
2.3.1. Government's Differential Treatment of Refugees in Punjab and West Bengal	64
2.4. The Nationalising State and the Socio-Material Refugee Subjects	67
2.5. The Ethnocultural Identity of the Refugees	74

2.6. The Situation in Assam: A Comparative Study	78
2.7. Conclusion	81
Chapter Three: The Politics of Condition: Refugee Narratives from Camps, Colonies and Settlements	84-128
3.1. The Migration of Refugees from East Pakistan: 1947-1949	87
3.1.1. The First Phase of Refugee Movement: Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad	95
3.1.2. The Establishment of Bijoygarh and Other Squatter Colonies	97
3.1.3. The Eviction Bill, 1951 and the United Central Refugee Council	104
3.2. The Communal Riots in 1950 and the Failure of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact	111
3.2.1. Refugee Settlement in Jirat	112
3.2.2. Refugee Settlements in Dandakaranya	113
3.2.3. The Narratives of Refugees from Jirat and Dandakaranya	116
3.3. Refugee Narratives from Camps	120
3.4. Conclusion	127
Chapter Four: Reading Oral History Narratives: Formation of Self, Performative Narration, Voice and Text	129-182
4.1. The Methodology of Oral History	132
4.2. Multiplicity of Time in Oral History Narratives	140
4.3. The Formation of Self	150
4.4. Intersubjectivity in Oral History Narratives	155
4.5. The Oral History Narratives as Performances	160
4.6. The Voice, the Text and the Narrative	168
4.7. Conclusion	181
Chapter Five: Understanding Memory Politics: Collected Acts of Remembering and Forgetting the 1947 Bengal Partition	183-238
5.1. Collective Memory vis-à-vis Collected Memory: Pre-Partition Lives of Refugees	186
5.2. Remembering Forgetting and Mnemohistorical Reading of the Past	203

5.3. Understanding <i>Post-Amnesia</i> : Inter-generational Re-telling of Narratives	220
5.4. The Material Memory of the Partition	226
5.5. Conclusion	238
Chapter Six: Conclusion	239-265
6.1. Narrating the 1947 Bengal Partition	240
6.2. For the Times They are Changing	247
6.3. Scope for Future Research	250
6.4. Epilogue	252
References	266-292
Figures	293-304
Academic Resume	305-306

ABBREVIATIONS

ABP	Amrita Bazar Patrika
AICC	All India Congress Committee
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRC	Bengal Relief Committee
CPI	Communist Party of India
DDA	Dandakaranya Development Authority
D.P.	Displaced Person(s)
GRSC	Greek Refugee Settlement Commission
I.B.	Intelligence Bureau
ICARA	International Conference on Assistance of Refugees in Africa
ICRC	International Committee of Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KDWS	Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
NVBKP	Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parisad
P.L.	Permanent Liability
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
UCRC	United Central Refugee Council
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. Identity Card of Soham Das' Grandfather	293
Figure 2.2. The Migration Certificate of Reena Biswas' Father-in-law	294
Figure 5.1. The Certificate of Registration of Santosh Kumar Biswas	295
Figure 5.2. The Matriculation Certificate of Anil Kumar Kundu	296
Figure 5.3. The Cover of Anil Kumar Kundu's Passport	297
Figure 5.4. The Passport of Anil Kumar Kundu	297
Figure 5.5. The Letter Debabrata Dutta's Father Received in 1958	298
Figure 5.6. Sunil Chandra Paul's M.A. Certificate	299
Figure 5.7. The Appointment Letter of Sunil Chandra Paul	300
Figure 5.8. Opening Page of Pratima Saha's Album	301
Figure 5.9. Pratima Saha's Ancestral Home	301
Figure 5.10. The Gold Medal of Pratima Saha's Grandfather	302
Figure 5.11. Bijan Kanti Sarkar's House <i>Madhumati</i>	303
Figure 5.12. The Migration Certificate of Pabitra Bhusan Bhattacharya	304