

Reflecting Displaced Identities: Testimonials of the Partition Survivors from West Bengal

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the nature of complex negotiation with displaced identities revealed through the memoirs of four partition survivors who migrated from various places of West Bengal, India, and relocated in Khulna division in erstwhile East Pakistan, today's Bangladesh, over a period of two decades since 1946. These testimonials were collected through on-site interviews in the districts of Jhenidah, Kushtia, Meherpur, and Chuadanga during 2017-2018 as part of a one-year project titled "Mapping Partition Memory, Amnesia and Literature in Middle and Southern Bengal: An Indo-Bangladesh Perspective" jointly carried out by English Discipline, Khulna University, and Netaji Shubhas Open University, Kolkata. The oral testimonies of Partition survivors from Bangladesh make visible how displacement is not contained within the historical moment of migration but reverberates through everyday life, kinship, and speech. Memory here does not function as a passive archive; it actively reconstitutes identity, mediates loss, and negotiates belonging. The paper asks how Muslim refugee testimonies from southern Bangladesh make visible the lived processes through which displaced individuals reconstruct their sense of belonging, negotiate their identity, and make sense of home within shifting political and emotional contexts. Three central findings emerge from the analysis of the narratives. First, displacement appears as an embodied condition in which sensory memory of food, weather, landscape, and sound structures the articulation of loss and longing. Second, memory takes shape within the context of political and historical pressures that influence how individuals interpret their past. Third, belonging emerges as gradual and negotiated rather than immediate, and depends on incorporation into community narratives and social worlds. The paper argues that the Partition of

Bengal is not a closed historical event but an ongoing presence that continues to shape memory, speech, and the slow formation of home for Muslim refugees in post-Partition Bangladesh.

Keywords

Partition of Bengal, Memoirs, Trauma, Rupture, Belonging

“You love your country, I know
I love it too, believe me.
There’s a small difference, though, if only you understand
You *are* there, and I *belong* there.”
— Gulzar, “Compatriot”, *Footprints on Zero Line* (48-49)

Introduction

The Partition of Bengal on the basis of the hurriedly drawn Radcliffe Line during the 1947 Partition of British India remains one of the most disquieting ruptures of the twentieth century, not only for the magnitude of its demographic upheaval but also for the psychic dislocations it generated across generations. Displacement extends beyond the physical act of crossing borders; it is a sustained reconfiguration of selfhood, belonging, and cultural identity. The condition of being uprooted destabilizes one’s sense of home and community, producing what Homi Bhabha terms the “unhomely,” a state in which the intimate and the estranged collapse into each other (1992, 141). Even those without a direct genealogical connection to Partition cannot remain untouched by its resonances, for narratives of exile and unbelonging register as universally legible forms of human vulnerability. Subhashri Ghosh notes that “the refugee experience, conditioned to a large interaction between the refugees and the members of the host society, may either amplify the state of shock and depression and the dependency syndrome that the refugees tend to acquire, or may convert into a healthy atmosphere, with both sides interacting and exchanging ideas” (2021, 82). Ghosh’s formulation thus invites an inquiry into the experiential textures through which refugees encountered, resisted, and reimagined the conditions of their displacement. Such

theoretical considerations, therefore, deserve an examination of the lived and narrated modalities through which displaced individuals navigated these historical and affective ruptures.

Situated within the broader landscape of Partition's afterlives, this study draws on four oral testimonies recorded during fieldwork in 2017–18, documenting the lived experiences of Muslim migrants who resettled across the Khulna division in the decades surrounding the Partition of India. These include the account of Hassan Ali¹, who fled Calcutta in 1946 as a child; Alauddin, who migrated from Chandannagar in 1950 amid localized violence; Nisar Miah, who left Barasat following the 1964 communal riots; and Kamaluddin, whose protracted family migration from Bajitpur unfolded between 1958 and 1978. Though their trajectories differ in timing, geography, and circumstance, their narratives reveal how displacement was negotiated as a long, uneven process shaped by memory, loss, and the gradual work of rebuilding. This paper, therefore, asks: how do these Muslim refugee testimonies from southern Bengal illuminate the lived processes through which displaced individuals reconstruct belonging, negotiate identity, and make sense of home across shifting political and emotional landscapes?

Methodology

The selection of these four testimonies is intentional rather than arbitrary. Together, they offer a cross-section of Muslim migration experiences across southern Bengal, spanning different decades of displacement and representing diverse socioeconomic, educational, and geographic backgrounds. Their trajectories include both immediate flight during moments of acute violence and protracted, negotiated migrations shaped by anticipation, fear, and shifting political

¹ Names of the participants used in this paper are fictitious.

circumstances. This temporal and regional variation enables the study to trace how Partition's afterlives unfolded unevenly across time and space, revealing the multiple rhythms of displacement rather than a single, uniform narrative. Moreover, these cases were among those most accessible during fieldwork in various districts of Khulna division, offering rare testimonies that might otherwise remain unrecorded. Taken together, they provide a representative yet distinctive set of voices through which to examine how memory, belonging, and identity are reconstructed across different modes of migration.

From this empirical foundation emerges a deeper conceptual insight: the dialectic these testimonies repeatedly foreground, between alienation and negotiation, despair and resilience, captures the paradox at the heart of refugee existence. Resettlement places refugees in a persistent double bind: they are, on the one hand, dependent on the hospitality, tolerance, or hostility of the host society; on the other, they must reconfigure their identities within an unfamiliar cultural landscape, often by suppressing, rearticulating, or hybridizing elements of their past. In this sense, the refugee condition is not only a humanitarian crisis but, as Giorgio Agamben argues, a political category that exposes the fragility of citizenship itself (2000, 15-28). Partition refugees across Bengal, Hindu and Muslim alike, exemplify this predicament, navigating the contradictions of being insiders to a shared civilizational culture yet outsiders to the newly constituted nation-states after 1947. What Ghosh identifies, then, is not a mere sociological outcome but the deeper instability of belonging itself, where the boundaries between dependency and reciprocity, hostility and hospitality remain continuously renegotiated.

These testimonies were recorded on video during fieldwork in 2017-18. Coordinated by English Discipline of Khulna University as part of its one-year joint project titled "Mapping

Partition Memory, Amnesia and Literature in Middle and Southern Bengal: An Indo-Bangladesh Perspective” with Netaji Shubhas Open University, Kolkata, several research groups, each consisting of a faculty member and a student, worked collaboratively to gather detailed accounts of survivors who relocated in different districts under Khulna and Barisal divisions. For my part, I travelled to the more remote areas of the Khulna division, including its bordering districts, accompanied by an undergraduate volunteer, who provided technical and logistical support, such as managing the video recordings and equipment, while I conducted the interviews. His role ensured the smooth documentation of the narratives, though he was not involved in the interviewing itself.

Gender-matched interviewing was a conscious methodological choice: female researchers spoke with female migrants, acknowledging the delicate and often unspoken dimensions of gendered experience that might not be shared with male interviewers. This ethical sensitivity reflected a broader principle guiding the project, emphasizing participants’ comfort, agency, and narrative control. Fieldwork in distant and border districts brought to light experiences of uprooting, adaptation, and negotiation that might otherwise remain invisible, allowing the study to situate individual stories within larger historical and social trajectories.

All participants provided informed consent, fully aware of the purpose of the research and the ways in which their stories might be reproduced in scholarship. They gave permission for their narratives to be used for academic purposes, on the single condition that their identities remain protected. Accordingly, the participants’ names are fictitious, and any references to people that could reveal identity have been altered. The decision to present testimonies in the first person is similarly deliberate: it preserves the immediacy of recollection and allows readers to encounter the

texture of memory as spoken by the survivor, rather than filtered entirely through the researcher's voice.

The rigidity of structured questionnaire was deliberately avoided. Instead, we invited participants to *recollect* freely: to return, as much as possible, to the incidents that forced migration on them, to recall the reasons behind that retreat, the conditions of the journey, and the process of settling across the border. I also asked them to reflect on two assumptions that strike at the core of displacement: given the chance, would they return to their abandoned homes in India, and how settled do they feel in their adopted homes in Bangladesh? By posing these questions not as survey items but as prompts for memory, I sought to elicit testimony in its most personal and unfiltered form. The resulting narratives, therefore, are not data points but memoirs of dislocation and survival.

A practical obstacle shaped the use of resources. All interviews were recorded on video, but the drive containing them became permanently unusable during the Covid-19 pandemic. This loss itself stresses one of the central tenets of memory studies: that memories are fragile, vulnerable to erasure not only through trauma and amnesia but also through the contingencies of preservation. What survives here are our transcriptions, notes, and recollections, which themselves become part of the layered archive of Partition memory.

Finally, the testimonies reveal a striking geographical inflection. Narratives of migration from Kolkata are saturated with loss, suffering, and struggle; the uprooting appears as a rupture that stripped families of home and livelihood. In contrast, testimonies of settlement in Bangladesh often carry, alongside the pain, a sense of gain: new land, stability, and dignity painstakingly

rebuilt. This contrast does not suggest a uniform pattern for all Partition survivors, but it is at least consistent across the voices we encountered. It reveals how memory is never a flat chronicle of loss or triumph, but a palimpsest in which pain, nostalgia, and joy coexist uneasily. It is against this textured background of oral histories that I now turn to the testimonials, to see how individual recollections written for posterity both echo and diverge from spoken testimony.

The Testimonies

Account of Hassan Ali

Hassan Ali was born in Kolkata in 1937. At age nine, he fled to Kushtia, East Pakistan, after the 1946 Calcutta killings. His father, an imam, helped the family settle. Hassan completed a BSc and became a math teacher in 1966. He married in 1968, bought land and a shop, and built a home. Bangladesh is now his home. He was interviewed in Kushtia in April 2017.

I was born in Kolkata and lived in a joint family with my parents, elder uncle, cousins, and grandfather. We weren't wealthy, but we were reasonably comfortable. My father was the imam at a local mosque, and our family had a business in Chitpur. I was nine years old in 1946, studying in class three at a primary school on Purna Das Road.

The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 is still fresh in my memory. It was soon after the maghrib prayer. My father had just returned from the mosque, and my elder uncle was at our family business. Suddenly, our house was attacked by a group of Hindu zealots, armed with daggers and swords. I remember one of them shouting as they rushed in, "They are jabans! They

are followers of Jinnah and want Pakistan!” They captured my grandfather, who was about fifty, and brutally killed him. I heard the chaos, the shouting, the fear! It felt like the world itself had erupted.

We somehow managed to escape, though I don’t even remember exactly how. My father, my mother, a couple of cousins, and I ran away to Dum Dum Road, not awaiting any more horrific incidents. We knew we had to leave the place fast. The two cousins with me were older but still in their teens, and we tried to take shelter wherever we could. The days and nights were terrifying; anything could happen at any moment. After two or three days, we began the long journey on foot toward Petrapole. Sometimes we hired bullock carts, but we often walked, carrying little money, always terrified for my mother, the only woman among us. My father had to remove his beard, since he was an imam, and my mother was asked to wear sindoor so we could pass as Hindus.

The journey was long, about seventy kilometers along Jessore Road, with daylight travel being safer than night. One evening, we waited outside a house, unsure of what to do. The house belonged to a Hindu family, and even though we were disguised, the owner could see we were Muslims. I still remember his first words: “You are Muslims, aren’t you?” And what I remember even more is the care he showed. He took us in, saying, “Don’t worry, you are safe here. Stay until the situation improves.” We stayed with them for two nights. That family, risking their own safety, fed us, sheltered us. I remember *mashima*, a woman my mother’s age, whose kindness I will never forget. Their kindness still lingers on my mind, how a complete stranger, risking his own safety, opened his home to us, fed us, and treated us as family when the world outside had turned cruel. I can still see *mashima*, her gentle hands arranging food for us, her eyes full of quiet determination to protect us. That moment taught me something about humanity that I carry with me to this day

— even in times of fear, hatred, and uncertainty, compassion can light the darkest paths. As we rode toward Petrapole, I remember feeling a mixture of exhaustion, relief, and a strange, fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, safety could exist in this fractured world. Their act of care stayed with me throughout the long, uncertain journey to East Pakistan, and even now, decades later, I think of them often, as if that kindness has left a dense mark on my heart.

Back in Kolkata, we lost contact with my uncle and another cousin who stayed to help him with the business. We got to know much later that our house had been forcibly occupied, and the family business taken. They were left to survive as best they could, moving from place to place, doing odd jobs. Meanwhile, we finally reached Kushtia. It was a grueling odyssey. Transport was scarce; sometimes we traveled on foot, sometimes by boat. Nights were spent wherever we could rest, often outdoors, but the relief of safety, the absence of fear for our lives, was overwhelming.

My father's position as an imam helped us in Kushtia. He arranged a place to live in the heart of the city near Boro Bazar and set up a *maktab*, teaching young boys Arabic and basic religious studies, and girls in their homes. He wasn't making much, but it was enough to survive. Two of my cousins, less educated, worked as coolies, hawkers, or selling goods on trains. They did whatever they could to support the family. Prominent Muslims in the area even built us a house. I continued my education, unlike my cousins. I went to Kushtia Zilla School, then Kushtia College, and completed my BSc in 1964. In 1966, I became a math teacher in a local high school and soon became quite popular. I take enormous pride in my students, many of whom now hold positions in government offices, academia, research, and business. Their visits bring me immense joy.

I got married in 1968, and my wife took care of the home while I continued teaching and studying. Slowly, I was able to buy land in Abdalpur and a shop in Boro Bazar. My father passed away in 1970. I gave the semi-*pucca* house, built by prominent locals, to my cousins and bought a house of my own.

Life in Kushtia became stable, though it had taken years of struggle to reach this point. When I think about my life now, Bangladesh is my home. Though I wasn't born here, it is my country. I have no other land, no other place to call my own. My memories of Kolkata are bitter, especially the terror, the cries of "*Shob koitake jobai kor*" (Slaughter every one of them), but also bright moments remain, glimmers of a childhood that once felt ordinary and full of wonder. I remember the trams of Kolkata, gliding along the streets like magic, their bells ringing through the air, and the Muharram processions that filled the city with mourning and a sense of community. I can still feel the dust of the streets beneath my small feet as I chased after the spectacle, heart racing, forgetting, for a moment, the unrest that lurked in the shadows.

Even the bitter memories, the fear, the loss, the nights spent running from danger, they have shaped me. They taught me what it means to survive, to endure, and to find strength in family and kindness from strangers. And yet, Bangladesh is where I have grown roots, where I built a home, raised a family, and found a life that is truly mine. These memories, both bitter and sweet, remain with me, intertwined like threads in the fabric of my life. They remind me of where I came from, the journeys I endured, and the simple yet heartfelt joys of being alive, of being safe, and of belonging somewhere at last.

Account of Alauddin

Alauddin was born in 1935 in Farasdanga (Chandannagar) under Hooghly district in West Bengal, and migrated to Chuadanga, East Pakistan, in 1950 at age eleven. His family were farmers, and he worked from an early age. By the 1960s, he started a clothing business in Boro Bazar. He married in 1961, had three daughters, and now lives with his grandson's family, content, though he remembers Chandannagar fondly. He was interviewed in Chuadanga in November 2017.

Chandannagar, as I remember it, was a peaceful township. It had once been a French colony; people even called it Farasdanga, the land of the French. To me, as a boy, it was simply home. I still see the river Hooghly in my mind, its waters so clear that my Christian friend Joseph and I would sit for hours on its banks, staring at the endless flow. Sometimes we would wander near the old French fort, its towering presence both strange and beautiful. And I will never forget the Sacred Heart Church; its serenity and elegance left me spellbound. I did not understand much of religion then, but inside that church, beside Joseph, I felt something unexplainable.

We were untouched by Partition at first. In Chandannagar itself, there was little trouble. But in 1950, violence broke out in Hooghly. People were killed, homes set aflame. My grandfather, fearing what might come, decided that we must leave. It was not an easy decision. Our land, the only inheritance we had, was sold to neighbors. We could not exchange it for property in East Pakistan, so we carried only what we could. The journey took us four long months. From Chandannagar, we moved toward Bashirhat, then crossed into East Pakistan through Bhomra in Satkhira. We traveled by whatever means we found – boats, trains, bullock carts, buses. Sometimes the men would walk for miles with heavy bundles tied to their backs, while the women and children huddled together in overcrowded carriages. Nights were the hardest. We had no permanent roof,

only the shelter of mosques when the muezzins were kind, or the courtyard of a shrine, or the bare ground outside a temple. There were times when we slept under the open sky, mosquitoes swarming, bellies empty. I remember watching my uncles barter small belongings for food, sometimes a pot, sometimes a piece of cloth, anything to keep us going.

At Jessore railway station, we were stranded for three nights. The platform itself became our home, our kitchen, our bed. The men worked as coolies, carrying the luggage of strangers for a few coins. I can still see my father's hands, once used to holding the plough, now raw from hauling other people's trunks. For a boy of eleven, those days felt endless, as if time itself had paused in misery. Finally, we reached Chuadanga, in Taltola near Boro Bazar and the railway station. What we found was hardly a home, a tiny place, barely enough to fit us all. None of us had an education worth speaking of. My grandfather had none; my father and uncles knew only a little reading and writing. I had studied for three or four years in Chandanagar, but that ended when we migrated. There was no chance to continue. We had to survive, and that meant working, and working hard.

Those early years in Chuadanga were full of hardships. The four men in the family, father, uncles, and even I, did whatever work we could. Slowly, with time, I found my footing. By the early 1960s, I had begun a small business in clothing at Boro Bazar. Piece by piece, I built it up, and it still stands today, now run by my grandson. In 1961, at the age of twenty-six, I married. My wife and I had three daughters, all of whom are now married and settled in various parts of Bangladesh. My wife passed away in 2010. Since then, I have lived with my grandson and his family. They take care of me, and I am content. Even now, at eighty-two, I sometimes walk down

to the shop. Other days I watch television or sit in the courtyard when the weather is kind. When my daughters come with their children, the house fills with laughter, and I feel life's fullness again.

Do I miss Chandannagar? Yes, the river, the church, the fort, and most of all, my friend Joseph. With our departure in 1946, I lost all contact with him. Those memories are tender, but I do not regret the path my life has taken. I did go back there twice, but the place felt alien, unfamiliar. Too much time had passed. My roots have sunk deep into Chuadanga now. Here is where I built my home, raised my daughters, and found dignity in work.

I carry Chandannagar in my memory, but Chuadanga is where I belong.

Account of Nisar Miah

Nisar Miah was born in 1946 in Duttapukur, North 24 Parganas. He migrated to East Pakistan in June 1964 at age 18, settling in Gangni, Meherpur. His family were small landowners. He later worked as a muhuri and bought a house in Meherpur town. He has three children and lives there with his wife. He was interviewed in Meherpur in December 2017.

I was born in 1946, in Duttapukur, under Barasat subdivision in North 24 Parganas. We lived in a joint family, with parents, father's elder brother, and cousins. My aunts had already been married off, and my grandparents were gone by then. I was my parents' only child, but my uncle had two sons and two daughters, so the house was never quiet. We weren't wealthy in the grand sense, but we were certainly comfortable, even somewhat affluent. My father and uncle owned a

fair amount of land. Farmers tilled it, and the sharecropping arrangement provided more than enough for our sustenance. Life, in those early years, felt steady and secure.

But the world outside our village was stirring. I still remember the chill that entered our lives in December 1963. News came that the *Moi-e-Muqaddas*, believed by many as the sacred strand of the Prophet Muhammad's beard kept in Srinagar, had been stolen. The relic was revered, especially in Kashmir, and its disappearance ignited protests that quickly spread far beyond. In East Pakistan, the fury turned into violence against Hindus. In Kolkata and its surrounding areas, Hindus retaliated with equal force. By January 1964, the violence reached us.

From the 9th to the 12th of that month, Muslims in West Bengal were brutally targeted. People were hacked to death in broad daylight. Women were raped; homes were looted and burned. Though Barasat wasn't the worst affected, the tension seeped into every conversation, every decision. Our own house wasn't attacked, but in our neighborhood, Muslim households were singled out. I still remember the shock of hearing that an elderly neighbor had been murdered, and that there were cases of abduction. I was eighteen then, old enough to grasp the seriousness of what was happening, old enough to feel the fear sitting heavy on my chest. At first, we thought we would stay. Barasat had always been our home. But the tide of violence, and the constant fear of what might happen next, became too much. Hindus began leaving East Pakistan in large numbers, and Muslims in West Bengal, like us, began planning their own migration. My father and uncle started meeting with Hindu families across the border, who were themselves preparing to leave. After months of negotiation, we struck an arrangement: we would exchange our home and land in Barasat for property in Gangni, Meherpur, in East Pakistan.

In June 1964, we finally made the move. I still remember that journey vividly. We left Barasat with what little we could carry and traveled first to Benapole. The border crossing itself was uneventful, but the road beyond was long and broken. Sometimes we rode in a rented jeep, sometimes in crowded buses, and other times we crossed waterbodies by country boat. The journey took us two days in all, and when we finally reached Gangni, we were exhausted but relieved. What we found waiting for us eased that transition. The house we received in exchange was large and well-built, made of brick, with its own pond and a stretch of farmland. It reminded us so much of what we had left behind in Barasat that, for a moment, it felt as if life had resumed where it had paused. The farmers who had worked on the land before simply continued under us, and we didn't face the grinding hardship that so many migrants did.

I had just finished school in Barasat, and in Meherpur I enrolled in a college. My cousins also continued their studies. One of my female cousins even completed her entrance before she was married to a government employee and moved to Barisal. Slowly, life began to feel settled again. The years passed. In 1980, through family support and my own efforts, I bought a house in Meherpur town, on Court Road, the very heart of the town. It was a two-storied building, something I took immense pride in. By then, I had established myself as a *muhuri*, an advocate's assistant. The work suited me, and I grew successful in my profession. I practiced until 2012, when I finally retired at the age of sixty-six. Retirement brought me back to the land. I bought more plots in Gangni, including a mango grove, which not only provides a good income but also ties me to the soil in a way that feels deeply satisfying. My wife is still by my side. We have two sons, one lives with us and lectures in sociology at a private college, while the other works in a pharmaceutical company in Chittagong. We also have a daughter, married and settled in Barisal.

Life now is peaceful. My days pass in reading, in conversations with friends, in occasional trips to see my children and grandchildren.

And yet, Barasat lives within me. I miss it terribly at times, especially the pond we had, and the mango grove where my cousins and I spent so many afternoons. I can still taste the ripe mangoes we plucked, the sourness of the green ones we nibbled on before they ripened. I remember the net fishing we used to do, catching *ruhi* and catfish, the thrill of pulling up a net heavy with life. One memory has stayed with me more than most. It was during the monsoon, after two or three days of relentless rain. The ponds and fields were brimming, and one evening my cousins and I went out to fish. That day, we caught the largest *katla* I had ever seen. I can still picture it, gleaming in the rain, the excitement of carrying it home. The fish was cut, cooked, and shared among our family and neighbors. That moment, that sense of abundance and togetherness, is etched in me forever.

I did return to Barasat once, in 2009. Some of my old friends are still there and meeting them brought back a flood of memories. Do I long to go back? Well, my first impulse is to say yes, yes, I miss it, yes, yes, it will always be home. But then I remember the fear, the violence, the losses that forced us to leave. So, my answer is no. It is enough to visit, to remember, to hold onto the pleasant memories without disturbing the life I've built here. Barasat remains with me, the mangoes, the pond, the rain-soaked fields, the laughter of cousins long grown. But Meherpur is where my roots now are, where I built a home, raised a family, and carved out a life of dignity. I have lived through loss, displacement, and rebuilding, and I have learned that home is not only where you begin, but also where you choose to stay, where you are able to find peace at last.

Account of Kamaluddin

Kamaluddin was 17 in 1947 and lived in Bajitpur, 24 Parganas, West Bengal. He migrated to East Pakistan in 1958 at age 28, and the migration of his entire family would not be complete before 1978. His family were landholders; later his father ran a grocery in Kaliganj, Jhenaidah, where Kamal eventually settled. He first worked in a clothing shop in Bangaon and later in the East Pakistan postal department. He died in 2019 at about 90 years old. He was interviewed in Jhenidah in March 2018.

I belonged to a family from Bajitpur, a predominantly Muslim village in 24 Parganas under Bangaon subdivision of West Bengal. We owned land and lived among a handful of Hindu families, who mostly worked as barbers or cobblers: occupations that placed them on the edges of village life. Yet, despite these differences in religion and social status, my childhood was peaceful. It was marked by school, friends, and long afternoons spent by the village canal, rather than the distant rumblings of politics. The upheavals of the 1940s and 1950s, however, gradually began to intrude upon this ordinary rhythm. I later understood that the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, and the Partition of 1947 were watershed moments. But at the time, there were fewer moments of immediate danger than shadowy presences, whispered in villages more than experienced in blood. I only realized we now belonged to India when I went to college, a thought that still makes me marvel at how disconnected rural life could be from the sweeping stories of history. We didn't have a radio, so we missed the historic announcements of 15 August 1947. Only slowly, in the weeks and months that followed, did we grasp that the border had cut through our lives.

For the first year, life seemed to continue as before. But by the early 1950s, after a series of communal riots, creeping anxiety settled over us. Neighbors brought stories of bloodshed in nearby towns; travelers told of Muslim minorities attacked in Hindu-majority areas, and Hindu minorities persecuted in Muslim-majority regions. Bajitpur itself, being mostly Muslim, remained largely untouched, but the fear was real. It did not arrive in direct violence, but it arrived, nonetheless. It lodged itself in our hearts, quiet and persistent. By 1958, at twenty-eight, my parents and I became the first in our family to migrate to East Pakistan. The move had been in motion for years; my father had been exchanging land with Hindu families moving in the opposite direction from Jessore to India. Our migration was not a single, dramatic rupture but a slow, drawn-out process, completed only in 1978 when my sister and her husband finally crossed the border.

Still, my memories of Bajitpur remain vivid, almost luminous. I can still picture Kudla Khal, the canal running by the village, where we boys would dive into the cool, clear water after school. I remember fishing there, sometimes with a rod, sometimes with a *gamcha* stretched wide like a net. Schooling at Bajitpur Primary and later at a high school in Bangaon seemed ordinary then but now glows with the innocence of youth. I remember Shefali, a Hindu girl from my class, to whom I sent letters that never received a reply. She never wrote back, but I knew her love was there. And Chetan, the son of a Hindu cobbler, who was my inseparable companion in wanderings across the village, unbothered by the differences that divided the adults. These memories: diving into the Kudla canal, boyhood friendships, first love! These remind me that the village was not just a place on a map, but a landscape of the heart.

The decision to leave came abruptly. One night in 1958, my father announced that we would migrate. Even though we had always known it might happen someday, the shock was

immense, as if the ground beneath us had shifted. We journeyed by boat toward Petrapole, crossed to Benapole, moved through Jessore, and finally reached Kaliganj in Jhenaidah, where my father had already secured a house through property exchanges. The crossing was unpoliced; no visas were required. Yet the emotional weight of leaving home, perhaps forever, pressed down on me.

In Kaliganj, we began rebuilding. My father opened a grocery store at Boro Bazar, and I found work in the postal department, first temporary, then permanent, by the early 1960s. Compared to my earlier job as a cashier in my Muslim neighbor-owned clothing shop in Bangaon, it felt respectable and stable. Migration was a paradox: I had lost my roots and home yet gained security and recognition in a new land. I married in 1961, and together we raised three sons and a daughter, slowly building a life from the fragments of what we had left behind.

In the early years, I often wondered if leaving India had been the right choice. Anxiety and uncertainty gnawed at us. Yet the people around us welcomed us, and over time, life found its balance again. That is the paradox of displacement: pain and rupture coexisting with the slow, persistent work of adaptation, of learning to weave pieces of the old into the fabric of the new. Through it all, I carried Bajitpur with me, not just as a memory, but as a living presence which shaped me as much as the new home we built. My story is one of both rupture and tenderness, of fear and durability, of how memory allows us to reconcile what we lost with what we gain.

Discussion

The experiences of Partition extend far beyond the political and demographic upheavals of 1947 and subsequent migration; they resonate deeply within memory, identity, and lived experience. As Ananya Kabir observes, “the division of families and cultures through the drawing

of national borders over ethnic, linguistic, and filial identities seems the least horrific of Partition's long litany of horrors" (2014, 6), a reminder that the most enduring ruptures are often those inscribed in the intimate fabric of everyday life. Displacement was not merely a singular historical rupture but an ongoing negotiation of home, self, and social belonging, shaped by trauma, resilience, and the structures of daily existence. The narratives highlight the meticulousness of this negotiation, revealing how memory, sensory experience, and social frameworks of religion, community, and kinship mediated the disruptions of uprooting. They also mirror Kabir's question of "how we can voice our longing for places, times, and lives other than ours without fearing that we have betrayed the nation-state" (2014, 27), starkly putting to words how refugees must navigate the tension between affective memory and national belonging, yet not consider themselves as betraying the nations they are from, or the one they truly belong to.

Partition in Bengal, then, is not only a matter of political cartography but a wound carried in memory, refracted through stories, and recollection acts. These oral testimonies of Partition survivors from West Bengal, when read through the lens of memory and trauma studies, reveal how displacement is not confined to the historical moment of migration but reverberates through memory. Yet memory here does not function as a passive archive; it actively reconstitutes identity, mediates loss, and negotiates belonging. Hence, Partition is not merely an archival marker of 1947 or the 1964 communal riots, but a haunting afterlife that persists in memory, speech, and silence. However, the existing body of Partition memory studies has tended to focus more extensively on Hindu refugee trajectories (e.g., Basu 1975), resulting in an asymmetry in the archival and scholarly visibility of different communities' experiences. By examining memoirs of four Muslim refugees who resettled in different districts of the Khulna division across several decades, this

paper demonstrates that Muslim survivors, too, negotiated fractured identities in their new homeland. These narratives, when placed in dialogue with existing memory studies, not only broaden our understanding of Partition's afterlife but also destabilize the inherited binaries of victim and perpetrator, homeland and hostland, memory and amnesia.

The Bengal Partition, unlike the rapid and intensely violent rupture in Punjab, was a drawn-out, sometimes insidious process, marked by communal tensions, arson, abduction, and gendered violence. Yet it was also intensely emotional, shaping memory, attachment, and affective geographies. The Bengali experience of displacement, as Dipesh Chakrabarty theorizes in "Remembered Villages," foregrounds the simultaneous presence of loss and adaptation: villages, landscapes, and social fabrics abandoned or reconfigured by Partition evoke both nostalgia and trauma, creating an enduring psychic imprint that persists across generations. Similarly, in Dakshinaranjan Basu's *Chere Asa Gram* (1975), a collection of memoirs of the migrants who relocated in various parts of West Bengal by, illustrates the poignant experiences of survivors from East Bengal, whose memories of uprooted childhoods and violent dislocations stand in marked contrast to the narratives collected from Bangladesh, where refugees often recount strategies of adoption, negotiation, and resilience in their new environments.

Chakrabarty argues that the Bengal Partition was not only a spatial rupture but also an affective and socio-cultural dislocation. The depopulation of villages, abandonment of homes, and restructuring of ecological and communal spaces produced enduring anxieties over belonging, identity, and the persistence of the memory of home. Displacement, in this sense, extends far beyond the physical act of crossing borders; it involves a sustained negotiation between absence and presence, memory and erasure, continuity and rupture. Chakrabarty emphasizes that these

abandoned spaces carry duality: they are sites of material desolation and simultaneously repositories of nostalgic attachment, where memory actively reconstructs what the body and social fabric have lost (2009. 318-337).

This framework resonates with Urvashi Butalia's reflections on Partition in *The Other Side of Silence*, where memory is not a passive record but an active reconstitution of identity, mediating loss and negotiating belonging. Survivors' recollections, she maintains, show that Partition "could not be so easily put away, that its deep personal meanings, its profound sense of rupture... still lived on in so many people's lives" (1998, 8). The affective imprint of displacement, loss, grief, and nostalgia is not only psychological but also embodied, manifesting in the sensory textures of everyday life: smells of soil, taste of familiar foods, and rhythms of streets and canals that persist in memory even after resettlement.

What Butalia identifies as the enduring residue of rupture finds an instructive counterpoint in Anam Zakaria's brief invocation of "hazy divisions" (2015, 24). Zakaria's account of a Muslim boy raised within a Sikh family reveals the permeability of everyday boundaries, moments in which religious and social identities were lived relationally rather than as fixed categories. The "hazy divisions" thus points to a world where distinctions existed but had not yet hardened into the rigid communal lines that Partition would later enforce. The example recalls a time when such boundaries were more fluid, which sharpens our understanding of how profoundly Partition reconfigured the terms of belonging. It unsettled these porous networks, producing sudden ruptures and compelling survivors to negotiate newly imposed forms of identity.

Yet memory continues to hold traces of these earlier, interwoven worlds, allowing the past to remain an active presence in the lives of those displaced. Extending this insight, Aanchal Malhotra's reflections on embodied nostalgia illustrate how memory "oozes out of every word" (2017, 190) and embeds continuity, grief, and resilience into recalled experience. This slow "oozing out" reinforces how remnants of pre-Partition intimacy and shared life persist within the affective textures of testimony.

Building on this affective terrain, the social and gendered dimensions of Partition, as Adnan Bashir notes, further complicate this psychic landscape. Violence carried with it a secondary, social, and emotional trauma, particularly for women, while broader social exclusions and structural dislocations, such as property loss, forced migration, and bureaucratic interventions, produced enduring precarity (367–369). Yet within these ruptures, narratives also testify to adaptive strategies, acts of solidarity, and the resilience required to navigate a newly imposed social order. These ongoing efforts to inhabit a life shaped by loss and discontinuity echo Edward Said's observations in "Reflections on Exile," which offer a lens for understanding the subjective and conscious dimensions of such displacement.

For Said, exile is not only the geographical dislocation of being "out of place" (2000, 180) or the material "deprivation" (2000, 177), but it also entails a state of consciousness structured by estrangement and the need to narrativize belonging in the absence of a secure ground. His concept of "contrapuntalism," borrowed from music, where independent yet harmonically related melodies sound together, identifies this condition of holding in tension multiple, often conflicting perspectives within the self. The exile lives in overlapping registers of attachment and alienation, memory, and amnesia. To be an exile, Said argues, is to endure "frustrations and miseries" (2000,

174) that extend beyond the loss of homeland into the erosion of one's cultural and personal identity, a solitude so profound that it blurs the boundary between diaspora and exile itself. For him, exile is a "jealous state" (2000, 178): it isolates, it stigmatizes, and yet it compels the subject to develop coping mechanisms, whether through performance, intellectual sublimation, or the assertion of wounds in the presence of those more secure. In this contrapuntal condition, displacement is never resolved but endlessly negotiated, exemplifying the broader psychic topography of exile that Said describes. The displaced inhabit overlapping registers of attachment and alienation, memory, and amnesia, where nostalgia, grief, and survival coexist. In the context of Bengal, these overlapping registers are particularly striking: the slow, prolonged, and often less visibly violent nature of the migration contrasts with the immediate brutality experienced in Punjab, yet the psychic dislocations are equally profound.

Thus, the dynamics of displacement emerge as multi-layered, persistent, and affectively charged. Partition is neither a singular rupture nor a completed historical event; it endures in memory, sensation, and the continual negotiation of identity, revealing the complex, ongoing processes through which displaced subjects inhabit, remember, and reconstruct both home and self. This condition is not merely a personal quirk but a symptom of the broader post-Partition dislocation, where home becomes less a stable locus than a narrative constantly rehearsed to conceal its fracture. As Ghosh observes, migrants "live and relive this loss day after day" (2021, 90), a reminder that displacement is not a singular rupture located in the past but a repetitive temporality, a continuous re-enactment of absence and estrangement. In this sense, the Partition of Bengal was not an event confined to the summer of 1947 but a process that extended into the following years, culminating in the waves of migration and violence that continued until at least

1950. The memoirs of both Hindu refugees in West Bengal and Muslim migrants in East Bengal reveal parallel trajectories of betrayal, dislocation, and attempts at re-rooting. Yet the historiography of Partition has often privileged the former, casting Muslim experiences into silence or marginality.

To understand these narratives not merely as historical anecdotes but as living memories, this study approaches them through the lens of memory studies, emphasizing the processes of recollection, testimony, and the ongoing presence of trauma. Chakrabarty's reflections further the material and affective dimensions of this process: abandoned spaces, depopulated villages, and dislocated ecologies carry both the traces of loss and the enduring attachments of memory (2009, 319–321). Memory, in such cases, does not only reconstruct personal or communal histories but actively inhabits the spaces of absence, transforming desolation into sites of imaginative engagement and nostalgic resonance. In this framework, both the participants and the researchers are engaged in acts of recollection: the survivors as they narrate their migrations, and as we listen, record, and now reproduce these memories in writing, negotiating the delicate interplay between absence, presence, and enduring attachment.

While this methodological act of shared recollection frames how we encounter these narratives, Bashir reminds us that the legacies of Partition extend far beyond geopolitics or demographics, seeping into the intimate layers of memory, survival, and belonging. As he notes, “Religion has a great usage to deal with the traumatic events” (367), which is evident in Hassan Ali's account, where his father's position as an Imam anchors the family in a displaced world, offering both psychological resilience and social recognition within the faith-centered community of their new city. By contrast, Kamaluddin's father, lacking such religious ties, struggled to

integrate after relocating. Religion, then, functioned as both a coping mechanism and a source of continuity in an uprooted life.

Bashir also highlights the gendered dimension of Partition violence, particularly the vulnerability borne by women (368). In Ali's narrative, his mother's need to disguise herself with sindoor to "pass" as Hindu reveals the intertwining of familial survival and the bodily risks imposed on women. Such acts stress the social and psychic burdens borne unevenly across generations. Bashir also emphasizes the broader sociocultural implications of displacement, from loss of property to social exclusion (369). Ali recounts losing his family home and business in Kolkata and witnessing his uncle's descent into precarious work. Yet even amidst such trauma, gestures of unexpected solidarity, like a Hindu family sheltering them, reveal the fragile but enduring space of human compassion. Ali's assertion, "Though I wasn't born here, it is my country. I have no other land," captures Partition's paradox: a simultaneous experience of violent dispossession and the hard-won possibility of belonging.

First-generation testimonies, including those of Alauddin and Nisar Miah, reveal the layered complexities of displacement and memory, where individual recollection is inseparable from the political and historical forces acting upon it. As Sayeed Ferdous notes, "this issue of memory and forgetting often receives an added layer of complexity when it is entangled with the relationship between the nation and history" (2022, 10). Alauddin's memories of Chandannagar, his friendship with Joseph, the Sacred Heart Church, and the Hooghly River — all display precisely this entanglement; his affective past does not map neatly onto the nation-state's narrative of communal division. His life in Chuadanga represents survival, dignity, and economic stability, yet it never erases the emotional truth of what he left behind. This suspension between two

emotional geographies resonates with Butalia's idea of *watan*, a homeland that persists through memory even after physical departure (1998, 54). Alauddin's narrative also reveals the moral ambiguities of Partition; Ferdous's observation that "at times of strife, one can be both the victim and the perpetrator" (2022, 106) helps frame his recollections of coexistence and later violence not as contradictions but as part of a shared political tragedy.

Nisar Miah's journey from Barasat to Meherpur in 1964 further demonstrates how memory functions through sensory and affective registers. Although his family experienced relative economic stability through property exchange, displacement lingered in the body: monsoon rains, mango groves, and ponds became emotional markers of a lost world. Malhotra's insight that memory "oozes out of every word" (2017, 190) captures this embodied quality, showing how seemingly ordinary sensory details carry both continuity and grief. Nisar's narrative also reflects Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais's formulation that migrants must first be "'assimilated' into a community with a single story or construct about itself before [they] can begin to negotiate [their] acceptance as a part of a host nation" (229). His successful integration into Meherpur with education, career, and property ownership was only possible after aligning himself with the prevailing social narratives of the host region, revealing how belonging is produced through both emotional adjustment and ideological accommodation.

Hassan Ali's testimony foregrounds the fragmentary nature of recollection itself. His memory of the 1946 slogan "*Shob koita ke jobai kor*" (Slaughter every one of them) shows how violence imprints itself on the sensory consciousness of a child, blurring the distinction between trauma and landscape. His recollections move between vivid detail and gaps, demonstrating how memory crystallizes around terror, safety, smell, and sound. Hassan's narrative reveals that for

many migrants, childhood does not soften the blow of displacement; instead, it embeds trauma within the sensory fabric of early life.

Kamaluddin's experience offers yet another temporal model of displacement: rather than abrupt rupture, his migration unfolded gradually over decades. His story exemplifies what Butalia calls "*a rift for eternity*" (1998, 51), a prolonged fracture produced by Partition's borders. Tender memories of fishing, friendships, and first love coexist with slow-moving political unease and eventual uprooting. His narrative shows how displacement can be cumulative: the wound deepens, not through a single event, but through the steady erosion of security over time. Nostalgia, silence, and selective forgetting become survival strategies that allow him to reconcile the tenderness of childhood with the pain of forced migration.

Taken together, these oral histories resist the linearity of official narratives and the closure demanded by state histories. Instead, they demonstrate how memory is shaped by affect, landscape, and embodied experience. As Butalia reminds us, "history does not give you leave to forget so easily" (1998, 31), a truth evident in the testimonies' sensory textures — orchards, canals, monsoons, the clanging of trams — each functioning as mnemonic anchors. And yet, these memories are not free-floating; they are shaped by the political realities migrants encountered in their new homes, reinforcing Ferdous's point that memory and nationhood are always intertwined.

Conclusion

The four testimonies examined in this study reveal three central findings that deepen our understanding of Partition's enduring afterlives. First, displacement emerges as an embodied condition in which sensory memory becomes a primary mode of articulation. The survivors'

recollections of food, weather, landscape, and sound do not function as incidental details but as constitutive elements of how loss, longing, and belonging are remembered and expressed. Second, the narratives demonstrate that memory is inseparable from the political and historical structures within which it is produced. The interplay between personal affect and national history affirms Ferdous's argument that remembering is always shaped by the pressures of identity, nationhood, and historiography (2022, 10). Third, the testimonies indicate that belonging in the post-Partition world is a gradual and negotiated process rather than an immediate outcome. As Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais suggest, individuals must first be incorporated into a community's dominant story before they can begin to negotiate their position within it (229).

Across abrupt, negotiated, and prolonged migrations, these testimonies show how survivors continue to inhabit a space where rupture coexists with continuity and where trauma is held alongside adaptation, resilience, and reinvention. Together, they reveal Partition not simply as a historical rupture confined to 1947 or 1964 but as a continuing condition that endures in the affective, sensory, and narrative practices through which individuals reconstruct home, identity, and belonging. In tracing these lived and remembered trajectories, the study contributes to a deeper scholarly understanding of Partition as an ongoing phenomenological and existential reality that continues to shape both personal narratives and the broader field of memory studies.

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