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# Space and Psyche: The Bengal Partition in *Chitra Nodir Pare* and *Swapnabhumi*

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**Abstract**

The Partition of 1947 brought changes to the subcontinent's demography by dividing India, Pakistan, and later Bangladesh (which gained independence in 1971). Millions of inhabitants were compelled to leave their ancestral homes, switch jobs, and endure separation from loved ones. Those who remained behind witnessed the departure and felt the absence of neighbours and friends. The mass displacement and communal violence gave lasting psychological trauma to the partition victims and witnesses. Born in 1955, Bangladeshi filmmaker Tanvir Mokammel, one of the few in his country to produce films about Partition, was profoundly affected by the migration of his schoolmates and neighbours during post-Partition unrest. In his full-length feature film *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999) and mega documentary *Swapnabhumi* (2007), he portrays the ongoing suffering of the masses, their anxiety over separation and the emotional scars left on them by the historical division. In *Chitra Nodir Pare*, Mokammel has depicted the lasting effects of the Bengal Partition through the story of Shashikanta Bhushan, a Hindu lawyer from Narail, reluctant to migrate from his homeland and in the documentary film *Swapnabhumi*, he brings the long-term consequences of stranding Pakistanis living in East Bengal and their repartition crisis to attention. This paper, with an emphasis on addressing the existing amnesia surrounding the Partition in Bangladesh, analyses these two films by Tanvir Mokammel to explore the consequences of the Bengal Partition, as depicted on screen, in the memory of different generations. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, Freud's 'uncanny' (1955), and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'unhomeliness,' this article argues that *Chitra Nodir Pare* hammers the traumatic remembrance so forcefully that it resists the balance between memory and forgetting required by Viet Thanh Nguyen's theory of 'ethical memory.' In contrast, *Swapnabhumi* partially fulfills this

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ethical imperative by foregrounding displacement and statelessness as ongoing struggles of survival and belonging.

**Keywords**

Displacement, Trauma, Belonging, Remembrance, Films, Tanvir Mokammel

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**Introduction**

Partition Studies has shifted its emphasis in recent decades towards examining the human side of migration, argues Ian Talbot, a renowned scholar of Partition, while recognizing the importance of oral histories in his lecture titled "Rediscovering Partition from New Perspectives". The scholar advocates for analyzing the human impact of Partition, its enduring consequences, and its gendered dimensions, especially in the postcolonial era. Building on this, this article explores the portrayal of the aftermath of the 1947 Bengal Partition and its effects, particularly in East Pakistan (which gained independence from West Pakistan as Bangladesh in 1971), through the films of Tanvir Mokammel, a contemporary filmmaker from Bangladesh who has been profoundly affected by the displacement of numerous East Pakistanis following post-Partition upheavals. Fahmida Akhter describes Tanvir Mokammel as a leading figure in Bangladesh's New Wave cinema (Interview, Akhter 2020). Despite being a ten-time winner of the Bangladesh National Film Award and receiving the prestigious *Ekushey Padak* in 2017, Mokammel remains underrepresented globally, as Fakrul Alam contends that "as a filmmaker and writer, Mokammel deserves to be much better known everywhere" (Alam 2014, 121).

As a second-generation artist from the partitioned subcontinent, Mokammel draws on what W. G. Sebald calls "secondhand memories" (Nguyen 2017, 123) and what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory" (Nguyen 2017, 303) of Partition. Born in 1955, Mokammel was psychologically affected by the migration of his schoolmates and neighbours due to the communal unrest that followed Partition. His Bangla films, *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999), *Swapnabhumi* (2007), *Seemantorekha* (2017), and *Rupsa Nodir Banke* (2020) portray a deep-seated angst about division and reflect a desire to empathize with the lasting scars left by historical separation. Through

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interviews, archival footage, personal narratives, and a cinematic style, Mokammel's films evoke an emotional and intellectual engagement with Bengal's fractured past that upholds his firm belief that he considers it a filmmaker's duty to depict the suffering of people due to the Partition, which he sees "as a historical mistake" (qtd. in Ghoshal 2022, 431), as he mentions in the interview: "Artists and authors from Punjab, like Khishan Chandra or Manto, narrated the horrifying experiences resulted due to the Partition of Punjab. As a Bengalee, I consider it my duty to uphold the pangs and pathos caused by the Partition of Bengal" (Mokammel, Email Interview).

This article attempts a close analysis of *Chitra Nodir Pare* (Quiet Flows the River Chitra), a full-length feature film, and *Swapnabhumi* (The Promised Land), a documentary, with an effort to discuss Partition amnesia and memory in Bangladesh. The Partition of 1947, celebrated in Pakistan as the "birth of a new nation" (Zakaria 2019, xi) and mourned in India as "the breakup of the motherland" (Zakaria 2019, xi), suffers from a kind of amnesia within Bangladesh's collective memory. According to Mokammel, the cause of this amnesia is that "Bangladeshis in general are not very keen to discuss the events of 1947. One reason might be that they are generally the beneficiaries of the Partition of Bengal" (Ghoshal 2022, 441). We can compare this amnesia to "unjust forgetting" as Paul Ricoeur argues, "unjust forgetting" involves "leaving behind a past that we have not dealt with in adequate ways" (Nguyen 2017, 315). The silence surrounding certain aspects of Partition history, especially the fate of the 'stranded Pakistanis,' exemplifies this case. Partition is still a reality, just the way Kavita Daiya describes it as "an unfinished past" (2020, 3) and Urvashi Butalia frames it as "the business of living with the consequences of that history" (Daiya 2020, ix). Regarding remembrance and forgetfulness, Mokammel expresses his view that he believes "what Czech novelist Milan Kundera had said, 'Struggle of people against power is

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struggle of memory against forgetting.' As an artist committed to our people, I consider and believe that it is my duty to rekindle the memories of our people." (Mokammel, Email Interview). Thus, this article investigates the role of Mokammel's film and documentary in shaping public memory as an effort to address the collective amnesia and 'unjust forgetfulness' about Partition in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, caught between conflicting feelings of gain and loss, often does not prioritize the 1947 Partition. The Language Movement of 1952, the communal riots of the 1960s, and the Liberation War of 1971 have left little room for the nation to reflect on Partition as a pivotal historical event. As Niaz Zaman argues, in East Pakistan, the events of 1947 "were overtaken almost immediately by the language question […] With the language movement of 1952, all questions of Partition of '47 were forgotten" (Zaman 2011, 3). Thus, Partition has become a floating signifier, continually shifting in meaning, much like Jacques Derrida's différance, which indicates the ongoing delay of meaning. The legacy of Partition also appears in concrete, ongoing problems such as refugee crises, migration flows, border violence, river disputes, environmental disasters, and, in the case of the so-called 'stranded Pakistanis' (Bihari communities). The marginalisation of the Bihari community has been repeatedly documented but remains largely absent from mainstream national historiography. In "Left Behind by the Nation: 'Stranded Pakistanis' in Bangladesh," Dina Siddiqi notes a "peculiar silence" in Bangladeshi scholarship about these communities, pointing to their systematic exclusion from traditional narratives of nation and liberation. More recent literature reviews by Rahman also observe that only scattered legal and sociological studies exist, highlighting the neglect of this subject in mainstream academic research (Rahman 2023, 147). A rare reference to film among these representations is Tareque

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Masud's *Noroshundor* (The Barbershop), which Mokammel describes as "a very well-made short film (where) courageous subject dealt with nuances" (Mokammel, Email Interview), for portraying the trust and identity of a 'stranded Pakistani' and a Bangladeshi by moving beyond the binary of collaborator and freedom fighter.

Mokammel makes both *Chitra Nodir Pare* and *Swapnabhumi*, like most of his other films, with the aim of presenting the underrepresented. In *Chitra Nodir Pare*, Mokammel portrays the loss caused by the departure of East Bengal's culturally vibrant Hindu population and the anguish of the remaining Hindus as a religious minority in the face of socio-economic realities such as land dispossession, economic marginalization, and reduced access to opportunities in a Muslim-majority society. The film explores how ethno-nationalism transformed village life, disrupted socio-economic structures, and deeply affected the psyche of the people living there. Growing up in the rural town of Khulna, Mokammel recalls the lasting impact of Partition:

> During my childhood, I grew up in Khulna town. Khulna was then a Hindu-inhabited area. Numerically, and socially as well, their presence was conspicuous. A lot of my neighbours and classmates were from the Hindu community. Most of them later migrated to India. It used to happen, especially after the riot of 1964, that one day Subash or Binod would come with a pale face and would say: "*We are going tomorrow*". "*Where are you going*?" I would ask. "*To Kolkata*" they would reply. I was then almost a child. So could not comprehend properly what "*going to Kolkata*" really meant. For me Kolkata was then a kind of a black hole where one after another my school mates or play mates vanished and whom I never saw again in life. That trauma must be very strong, as you may be surprised to know that when I was a student of class VI, almost a young boy, I decided that I would make a film

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> on the plight of the East Bengal's Hindus and the title of the film will be *Chitra Nadir Pare*". (Mokammel, Email Interview)

His *Swapnabhumi* presents the linguistic minority—the Bihari Muslims—bearing controversial identities of the 'stranded Pakistanis' living in the Bihari camps and colonies in Bangladesh, depicting their present conditions and the questions surrounding their repatriation. As Mokammel himself asserts:

> I made *Swapnabhumi* (*The Promised Land*) about the stranded Biharis in Bangladesh because it was a political issue of that time, that was, whether the Biharis should get citizenship rights in Bangladesh or not. That debate drove me to do the necessary research and then make the film on the Biharis. But before that, seeing the plight of the Biharis in Bangladesh, I wrote a poem "*Briddha Bihari*" (*Soliloquy of an Old Bihari Woman*). Later I thought as I make films I should make a documentary about the misery of the Biharis. (Mokammel, Email Interview)

Building on these perspectives, this article argues that *Chitra Nodir Pare* emphasizes traumatic remembrance so forcefully that it resists the balance between memory and forgetting required by Viet Thanh Nguyen's theory of 'ethical memory.' In contrast, *Swapnabhumi* partially fulfils this ethical imperative by foregrounding displacement and statelessness as ongoing struggles for survival and belonging. By interpreting Mokammel's films from the perspective of Nguyen's 'ethical memory', the article examines how Mokammel's cinematic remembrance simultaneously creates a tension between the ethics of remembering and forgetting, revealing the difficulties of reconciling personal trauma with collective amnesia in postcolonial Bangladesh.

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**Theoretical Framework**

To demonstrate the significance of cinematic depictions of history through Mokammel's films and to explore the psychological and historical dimensions of Mokammel's Partition films, this article draws on Postcolonial Studies, Psychoanalysis, Film and Historiography, and Memory Studies. The main theoretical framework includes the theories of Bill Ashcroft, R. A. Rosenstone, Sigmund Freud, Homi K. Bhabha, Giorgio Agamben, and Paul Ricoeur.

Bill Ashcroft, a Postcolonial theorist, defines "human history" as a synthesis of temporality and narrative sequence that he calls "narrativist history", which is a mode of historiography that privileges lived experiences over linear chronology (2001, 86). He also advocates understanding of any long historical processes by integrating human comprehension of time and memory, rooted in lived experience (Ashcroft 2001, 87). This article attempts to understand Partition history through the lived experiences of communities and individuals as depicted by Mokammel in his films.

R. A. Rosenstone, a historian and film theorist, in *History on Film/Film on History*, challenges the traditional boundaries of historical representation by analyzing cinema's capacity to reimagine and reconstruct the past. For Rosenstone, historical films are not mere illustrations of factual events but critical engagements with history, having the scope for alternative forms of narrativization that reveal emotional and experiential truths. Mokammel's films, therefore, can be read as historical discourses that, along with official narratives, make the silenced voices of Partition's victims audible.

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Sigmund Freud's concept of the 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) is significant in understanding *Chitra Nodir Pare* since the film explores the transformation of familiar spaces into unfamiliar landscapes due to the abrupt division between the two Bengals. Homi K. Bhabha reinterprets Freud's ideas in the postcolonial context in his "The World and the Home," where he analyzes the impact of dislocation in domestic spaces, which can transform the home into a site of trauma and historical infiltration. Bhabha argues that the "shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" (Bhabha 1994, 141) results from cultural displacement and political violence. Through the lens of Freud and Bhabha, the article will interpret Mokammel's cinematic spaces to understand the functions of memory, forgetfulness, trauma and loss of the depicted characters and interviewed respondents.

To examine the living condition of the 'stranded Pakistanis' in *Swapnabhumi*, this article applies Giorgio Agamben's condition of *homo sacer (*human being stripped of regular facilities and reduced to 'bare life') under special provisions (Agamben 2005, 8). The stigmatized role of the Biharis during 1971, repatriation difficulties, made them stateless and abandoned. They are indefinitely confined to refugee camps, exemplifying the condition of *homo sacer*. They live in a legal and existential limbo, subject to the arbitrary whims of state power, excluded from both political rights and national belonging.

Finally, Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of memory and narrative bridges the historical and psychological strands of this framework. His idea that narratives serve as mediators between time and experience aligns with Mokammel's storytelling technique, where personal recollections reconstruct a collective historical consciousness. Viet Thanh Nguyen's interpretation of Ricouer's philosophy in generating the idea of Nguyen's 'ethical memory' provides a framework for

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interpreting Mokammel's effort to restore silenced narratives (Nguyen 2017, 15) since 'ethical memory' rejects triumphalist or singular versions of history in favour of plural, uncomfortable truths.

While cinematic history may not replace written historiography, it significantly complements it. Overall, these theoretical perspectives offer a multidimensional framework for analyzing Mokammel's Partition cinema. They aid this article in exploring how history, memory, and trauma intersect in his films, revealing the deep psychological scars of Partition that continue to influence the postcolonial psyche of the nation and critiquing the imbalance between remembering and forgetting in the selected films.

## A Critical Reading of *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1999)

In *Chitra Nodir Pare*, Tanvir Mokammel depicts the lasting effects of the Bengal Partition through the story of Shashikanta Bhushan, a Hindu lawyer from Narail. The film examines some key themes of Partition, such as attachment to ancestral homes, the disruption of interfaith harmony, interreligious love, and migration between East Bengal (later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh) and West Bengal (formerly Calcutta, India). The story begins in 1947 with the mass migration of Hindus from East Bengal to Kolkata, and then moves to 1964, marking another wave of Hindu migration following the theft of a holy relic in 1963 from the Hazratbal Shrine in Jammu and Kashmir. The loss of Prophet's hair from the shrine rekindled communal riots across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Amitav Ghosh also refers to this incident in *The Shadow Lines* as the reason for the death of his novel's character Tridib during his visit to Dhaka with his grandmother.

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Shashikanta, the film's protagonist, resolutely refuses to leave his ancestral home in both 1947 and 1964. His single-storied house, *Panthoneer*, faces the scenic Chitra River where he lives with his children, Minoti and Biddut, and his widowed sister, Anuprava Debi. The film presents Partition not as a historical event with fixed temporal boundaries, but as a lingering and recurrent trauma. As Sengupta notes, Partition remains a potent historical marker for Bengalis. Many non-Muslims in East Bengal and non-Hindus in India did not immediately migrate in 1947; rather, waves of migration continued in subsequent years depending on individual and collective experiences of fear, violence, and uncertainty (Sengupta 2016, 1).

Figure 1: Screenshot of lawyer Shashikanta telling his widowed sister why he will not leave East Bengal in *Chitra Nodir Pare* (7:15-7:16)

Recalling his childhood in Khulna, Mokammel describes how the exodus of his Hindu neighbours and friends, who vanished "into a kind of black hole called Kolkata," (Mokammel, Email Interview) left a lasting impression on his young mind. This experience exemplifies what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory—a "sense of living connection" to the traumatic past (2012,

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104). Like members of Hirsch's "hinge generation" (2012, 103), Mokammel internalized his parents' and community's experiences of displacement and resolved, even as a schoolboy, that one day he would make a film on the plight of East Bengal's Hindus and call it 'Chitra Nodir Pare'. As Mokammel recounts in his email interview, Khulna was a Hindu-majority area with fifty-one percent of its population identifying as Hindu until the brief administrative confusion of Partition, during which it was mistakenly declared part of India for two days, triggering a wave of panic migration. He recalls developing a childhood aversion to the very word 'Kolkata,' a name he came to associate with loss and absence. Thus, *Chitra Nodir Pare* ends with a bus carrying Minoti, her aunt, and other passengers away from East Bengal, accompanied by the traditional children's rhyme 'Open Te Bioscope,' whose final word, 'Kolkata,' poignantly underscores the sorrow of departure. Mokammel explains the reason behind the inclusion of children in the film that they "tell a very harsh truth better" (Email Interview), and their innocent play unwittingly foreshadows the adult tragedy that follows. The bus carrying Minoti, her aunt, and other passengers departs, leaving behind the serene countryside of East Bengal. According to Mokammel, the right to live in one's *desh* (motherland) is a fundamental human right, and Partition, along with the concept of modern nation-states, deprived people of this basic right.

In reply to the critics' allegation of portraying the sufferings of the Hindu community sympathetically, Mokammel explains that his allegiance is to humanity, not any religious group. He asserts that "I am fully clear in my conscience that in my oeuvre of works I have treated the people of all the communities according to their merit and not to their communal identity" (Mokammel, Email Interview). As a Bangladeshi, Mokammel bears a collective moral responsibility for the failure to safeguard minorities, very much like the character of Shamsuddin,

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the Muslim lawyer who supports his Hindu friend Shashikanta. Referring to his other films, such as *Nodir Naam Modhumati*, *Rabeya*, and the mega-documentary *1971,* Mokammel clarifies, "The non-communal humanist approach by which I deal with my subjects is not understood by some people in Bangladesh. In that way, I am myself, a minority in my own country" (Ghoshal 2022, 444).

The film's setting spans the years from 1947 to 1964. For the first 34 minutes and 30 seconds, the story takes place in 1947, capturing the childhood of playmates Minu, Bolu, Salma, and Badal. When Minu is engaged in a rhythmic game, the transition takes place from 1947 to 1964, and the narrative shifts to the latter year. By this point, the childhood affection between Minu and Badal has developed into a romantic relationship. Except for a brief scene in Dhaka showing Badal's university and a rally against the Pakistani government on the road, the rest of the film is set in Narail. During Badal's departure from his Narail home, the nameplate of the house shows the name 'Siddik Mandal, 1947,' which gives us the hint that the property was acquired during the Partition—an indirect sign of his family's gain. However, this gain is tragically overshadowed by Badal's death in a political protest in Dhaka.

Somdatta Mandal notes that most films about the Bengal Partition are set in its aftermath and depict Partition through the themes of displacement and loss (Roy 2010, 75). *Chitra Nodir Pare* is not an exception to her observation, since the political unrest of the 1960s and Badal's death are not the key focus of the film. Instead, the film concentrates on the psychological impact of Partition on peace-loving villagers, whose lives are continuously disrupted by external political forces. Displacement, migration, and the threat of relocation are the continuous tensions that the

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film projects. As Kavita Daiya reminds us, Partition is "an unfinished past that scattered millions across the subcontinent and also, eventually, to other shores" (2020, 2).

*Chitra Nodir Pare* captures the dazzling beauty of the picturesque river Chitra, with boats and boatmen singing songs on the river. The film is shot mostly outdoors, centering around the home of Shashikanta, which serves as the threshold between the public and private spheres, opening a critical connection to Homi Bhabha's concept of the postcolonial home. In "The World and the Home," Bhabha analyzes "House 124" from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to explain the "unhomely" experience that arises from the blurring of boundaries between the public and private, or the world and the home (Bhabha 1994, 141). According to Bhabha, "a sense of the unhomely can creep into the familiar domestic sphere and can create an ambiguity of recognizing the world in the home and the home-in-the-world" (Bhabha 1994, 141). Unlike *Beloved*, in *Panthoneer* (the name of Shashikanta's house), the transition is both delayed and abrupt: the space transforms from a warm, homely environment into an unhomely and melancholic one, gradually emptied of its inhabitants.

The residents of *Panthoneer*, with heavy hearts, witness the departure of Biddut (Bolu), the younger son of the house, as well as that of their other Hindu neighbours. The sense of the unhomely first manifests in Biddut when the gardener catches him urinating in the graveyard and punishes him harshly, calling him *malaun* (a derogatory term for Hindus) and smearing him with dirt. Much like Nathaniel in Freud's essay "The Uncanny," Bolu suddenly finds his familiar surroundings transformed into an unfamiliar and claustrophobic space, threatening his very sense of belonging. The traumatized adolescent Biddut withdraws from his friends and insists on being sent to Calcutta. Eventually, he ends up living with his uncle Biren in a cramped household in

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Kolkata. After Shashikanta's death, Minu and her aunt also come to realize that they cannot survive in the increasingly hostile environment.

Shashikanta's sister, Anuprava Debi, has a desire to plant a sugar-apple sapling (Figure 1), symbolizing both hope for continuity and an unfulfilled maternal longing, especially since she has no children of her own. Ultimately, she abandons the house and her hope. Here, the Partition is depicted not merely as a political border but as a separation that disrupts the bond between people and their environment. The rigmarole of division and dislocation during the Partition is also reflected in the lunatic character who repeatedly questions people about their coming or going. His dialogues serve as a metaphor for the absurdity of the dichotomy between coming and going.

Comrade Jotin's appearance after being released from jail reinforces Shashikanta's concern over the absence of minority leadership after the elites' migration, as the lawyer asks, "Who will look after the interest of the minority? The Chatterjee-Benerjees and Mukherjees all left in the first wave" (*Chitra Nodir Pare*, dir. Tanvir Mokammel). Jotin laments that when upper-caste leaders departed, the Namasudra peasants, once the backbone of the secular Left, also began to leave, weakening progressive politics. As Mokammel also expresses in the Email Interview that this exodus of leadership left the Hindu poor vulnerable and voiceless.

The film's sound design captures the auditory imagery of rural Bengal through chirping hedge crickets, birdsong, boat paddles lapping against the water, and the festive rhythms of the dhak, *kanshor*, and *dhol* (musical instruments) during Durga Puja. These elements, along with the extensive use of outdoor settings including scenes at *Panthoneer*'s courtyard and rooftop, enhance the *mise-en-scène* and evoke the spatial and emotional essence of Bengal. A particularly haunting moment features a folk song, "porer jaega porer jomin ghor banaya amir roi" ("someone else's

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land, someone else's property, but I made a home to live"), sung by folk singer Abdul Alim. A boatman sings it while rowing a boat as Shashikanta listens from the ferry. The song is clearly diegetic and deeply embedded in the narrative, evoking a strong sense of a transient world in Shashikanta. Later that night, when bricks are thrown at the roof of the remaining Hindu houses to scare and threaten them to leave, a group of local men promise to guard those families. Shashikanta's home gradually becomes a site of surveillance and scrutiny, blurring the lines between private retreat and public spectacle since his neighbours start eyeing his property.

Discussions about migration and fear fill courtrooms, tea stalls, barber shops, and even playgrounds, as well as every corner of Narail. Shashikanta, increasingly worn down, eventually dies of a heart attack while facing the Chitra River, the very river that had long symbolized continuity, beauty, and belonging. Regarding the early development of the concept of "home" in the film, John H. Wood observes: "The notion of home is introduced very early in the film. Some children are playing on the riverbank, and there is a shot of migrating birds flying in the sky" (2015, 25). These birds foreshadow the inevitable displacements of characters like Minoti and her aunt, whose hope for security outweighs the pain of leaving their ancestral home. In a poignant scene, Minu looks at her home one last time, and she appears visibly shattered by the loss of her family, her love, and her childhood. The tragic narrative concludes with her migration to India after the deaths of her father and her fiancé, Badal, who was killed in a student protest in Dhaka.

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Figure 2: Screenshot of melancholic Minoti singing a sad song before her aunt after the death of her father in *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1:37:08-1:38:08)

The rape and suicide of the widow Basanti during Durga Puja symbolically mark the end of inter-religious harmony in Narail. Wood interprets this as "a chilling comment on the lapse in civilized values" (2015, 27). This series of traumas compels Minu to leave behind a landscape of memory and meaning. Towards the end of the film, Minu sadly tells Salma, Badal's sister, that her vision is finally clear with the aid of spectacles, suggesting not just visual sight, but her understanding of reality. Minu is no longer a visionary who wishes to live by the river Chitra forever. Minu, like many others, leaves East Bengal with both emotional devastation and diminished hope.

*Chitra Nodir Pare* critiques religious nationalism by illustrating how a riot in distant Jammu and Kashmir, sparked by the theft of the Prophet's relic from the Hazratbal Shrine, triggers fatal violence in Dhaka. Mokammel's film demonstrates how national borders cannot contain the flames of religious violence. John H. Wood argues that Mokammel "tries to show that the story of

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Bangladeshi nationalism has to be an account of the sloughing off of feudal privileges and religious obscurantism in quest of a secular and egalitarian society" (2015, 31). In this light, *Chitra Nodir Pare* becomes more than just a Partition story, depicting a powerful indictment of continued religious intolerance and a plea for pluralism. The post-Partition nations, the film suggests, must overcome their liminal identities and strive toward liberal values that can ensure security, dignity, and a sense of belonging for all.

**A Critical Reading of *Swapnabhumi / The Promised Land* (2007)**

While *Chitra Nodir Pare* depicts the shock of once-familiar surroundings suddenly turning alien to Shashikanta and other Hindu members like him, *Swapnabhumi* presents a haunting image of the 'stranded Pakistanis' in a similar condition as a *homo sacer*, as they are also caught in the relentless and unprecedented dread of uncertainty like citizens during any state emergency face. The documentary reaffirms that, unlike the more definitive Partition of Punjab, Bengal's Partition remains an ongoing and unresolved process. Its effects have repeatedly surfaced through displacements and communal unrest in South Asian history: "the 1950 riots in Calcutta, and anti-immigrant agitation in Assam; outbreaks of violence in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in 1961; scattered incidents in Assam and West Bengal in 1962; and all-over eastern India during the Hazratbal episode in Kashmir" (Siddiqi 2013. 159). History took a decisive turn when large numbers of Urdu-speaking Muslims migrated from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Delhi migrated to East Pakistan in 1963. Many of them were later were accused of siding with West Pakistan during the Liberation War of 1971. Clashes between Bengalis and Biharis erupted during that year and continued after the independence of Bangladesh.

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Mokammel's decision to make *Swapnabhumi* depicting the long-term consequences of stranding Pakistanis living in East Bengal/Bangladesh and their repartition crisis created confusion in the society. The film upholds the spirit of Annales historiography in the sense that the documented scenes not only focus the political events but also the enduring social and economic repercussions of displacement. Mokammel claims his learning came from Lalon Fakir and Rabindranath Tagore, who were "indifferent to caste, creed or language" (Ghoshal 2022, 442). In *Swapnabhumi.* Mokammel brings the stories of Biharis in Bangladesh into popular consciousness. He also believes that "forms of social media, i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels, etc., can play a positive role in forming public opinion" (Ghoshal 2022, 448), since "hatred comes from not knowing the other. If you know someone, you can argue, you can even quarrel, but you don't hate him as you also know his or her point of view" (Ghoshal 2022, 446).

Known for dealing with marginalized and silenced voices, Mokammel expresses the initially hardship that he faced from his fellow citizens in making *Swapnabhumi*: "When I decided to make a documentary on the Biharis, many eyebrows were raised! Some of my 'Bengali nationalist' friends even expressed their dissatisfaction" (Ghoshal 2022, 443). However, he adds, "seeing the humanist and positive approach of the film," many of those critics later offered support. Mokammel further notes that "the worst sufferers are still the Urdu-speaking Muslims from India, who suffered both in 1947 and in 1971. When they became 'stateless' […] I wrote a poem in protest on behalf of this community through the soliloquy of an old Bihari woman called Amina Begum. The film is based on it" (Interview, Mokammel 2007).

To depict this marginalized Bihari community, Mokammel selects the documentary form as a medium that is traditionally used to illuminate real lives and social realities. Early

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documentary makers, such as Dziga Vertov, John Grierson, Paul Rotha, and Robert J. Flaherty, formulated and popularized the genre. Vertov's *Kino-Eye* technique is famous for capturing "the inaccessible to the human eye," revealing truth through unposed reality (Toplin 1988, 19). While to Bill Nichols, documentaries do not simply mirror objective truth; rather, they "construct representations and arguments about historical reality" (Toplin 1988, 12); they are hybrid spaces, sites of "contestation and change" (1988, 12), where fact and interpretation coexist. Mokammel's method aligns with Nichols's concept of the "interactive mode," in which the filmmaker's presence shapes the meaning of the film itself. In *Swapnabhumi*, through a participatory approach that combines first-person interviews, voiceover narration, statistical graphics, and archival footage, Mokammel strives to document the reality of the 'stranded Pakistanis'. By preserving the physical presence, gestures, and emotional nuances of testimony, Mokammel achieves what John Hepp and Mark Stine describe as "a human and often emotional foundation on which to build a video documentary" (2015, 2).

Mokammel followed a few strategies in selecting respondents, firstly "the scholars or intellectuals who were experts on that subject" (Mokammel, Email Interview) and secondly "the persons who were direct eyewitnesses or were practically affected" (Mokammel, Email Interview) and lastly, the interviewees also needed to be "good talkers who can narrate the event correctly and in detail" (Mokammel, Email Interview). The issue of 'stranded Pakistanis' is a sensitive, often traumatic one; at the same time, talking about it is cathartic too for the respondents, as Mokammel reflects:

> The Bihari community in Bangladesh, about whom the film is about, is indeed an unfortunate community. They became stateless two times in history, once in 1947, and

> again in 1971. […] I did not have to particularly conceptualize to use trauma as a narrative device. The trauma was already there. Talking to me in front of our camera worked as some kind of catharsis for them. They really opened up. (Email Interview)

Narrated partly by Mokammel himself and featuring commentary by Chitralekha Guha, *Swapnabhumi* depicts three generations of Urdu-speaking migrants from Kolkata, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Hyderabad, who are collectively labelled as 'Biharis' in Bangladesh (*Swapnabhumi,* dir. Tanvir Mokammel). After their migration, some Biharis became involved in Pakistan's internal politics. During the Pakistan period (1947–1971), many Biharis were favoured in employment and commerce by the central government, which deepened Bengali resentment. One interviewee recalls that Bihar was "the most backward place in India," and the migrants arrived "without political leadership," making them vulnerable to exploitation by the West Pakistani regime (*Swapnabhumi,* dir. Tanvir Mokammel). The film thus captures the various levels of crisis the Bihari community experienced to save their lives and to manage livelihoods, resonating with Ernest Renan's assertion that the essence of nationhood rests not on "race, language, geography, or religion," but on "man… his desire, his needs" (Renan 1990, 19).

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Figure 3: Screenshot of a signboard before a Bihari Camp located in Mirpur, Dhaka, in *Swapnabhumi* (3:06-3:07)

*Swapnabhumi* begins with Mokammel's narration of the arrival of Biharis in East Pakistan in 1947 and continues with a summary of key legislation regarding their repatriation and citizenship, stating: "This is a story of six decades, three countries, and statelessness. A story about the Urdu-speaking community of Bangladesh" (*Swapnabhumi,* dir. Tanvir Mokammel). The terms 'Urdu-speakers,' 'non-Bengalis,' and 'Biharis' are used synonymously to describe Muslims who fled communal violence in India to the then East Pakistan. However, during the Liberation War of 1971, many of these Urdu-speakers who collaborated with West Pakistan were labelled as 'collaborators'. After Bangladesh gained independence, this was a primary reason for the marginalisation of Bihari communities. During the 1947 Partition, about one million Muslims from Bihar migrated to East Pakistan. For many, it initially seemed to be a promised land. Azmat Ashraf,

in his memoir *Refugee: Unsettled as I Roam: My Endless Search for a Home*, recounts his father's migration in 1953, driven by fears of anti-Muslim violence.

> Life for the Muslims who remained behind in India hung in a precarious balance, the communal hatred showing no sign of abating. […] As things got tougher and tougher for Muslims in Bihar, Hayat decided he had had enough. He had been hearing about green and beautiful East Pakistan where many Muslims from Bihar arrived, and those with skills and education were promptly finding employment (2020, 24).

In *Swapnabhumi*, Mokammel visits camps in Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Santahar, Dinajpur, Saidpur, and Chattogram to interview Bihari immigrants. He also interviews repatriated Biharis in Pakistan. These oral interviews reveal persistent social exclusion and systemic neglect of the 'stranded Pakistanis'. The status of the Biharis typifies Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, individuals who are stripped of legal and political protection, existing in a "state of exception" where ordinary rights are suspended (Agamben 2005). Today, roughly 160,000 members of this community live in 116 camps across Bangladesh (*Swapnabhumi*, dir. Tanvir Mokammel).

The 2008 High Court ruling and subsequent government statements reflect a legal and political acknowledgement of the Biharis' right to belong. The High Court ruling on May 19, 2008, declared that Bihari children who were minors in 1971 or born after Bangladesh's independence were entitled to citizenship: "The children who were minors in 1971 or born after the independence of Bangladesh are citizens of Bangladesh" (Reuters 2008). Moreover, *The Business Standard* (2022) reports that the government acknowledged the urgency of ensuring humane living conditions for Biharis still confined to camps:

> We want to see a human being as a human being. Maybe they didn't want to live here, but where will they go now? Their next generations were born in this country. We have to do something for them... They are living an inhumane life in the small spaces in Geneva Camps. (6 March)

Despite this landmark legal recognition, social realities for the Biharis have been slow to change.

*Swapnabhumi* does not overlook the painful complexities of memory and trauma. Besides presenting the Biharis' struggles for recognition, it presents the traumatic accounts of Bengali survivors of the 1971 war. Mokammel interviews Bengali victims of Bihari violence during the 1971 Liberation War. Sadi Mohammad, one such victim, recalls the violence inflicted on his family. Their house, which was used as a shelter for many of his family members, was set on fire by Pakistani forces aided by Biharis who mercilessly murdered his father, uncle, and sisters. Saidur Rahman, another victim, also recounts violence against his parents and siblings by the Biharis.

Mokammel gives an idea of generational differences among the Biharis to the audiences of *Swapnabhumi*. by asking the Biharis a series of inquisitive questions, such as "How is it to live in the camp?" "Do you want to go back to Pakistan?" "How do your Bengali classmates treat you?" While many older Biharis still dream of repatriation, younger generations born in Bangladesh give contrary responses. They reject Pakistani identity, claim Bangladeshi citizenship, and blame Pakistan for abandoning their community. For them, education and integration provide the only escape from ghettoized life. In some cases, as shown in *Swapnabhumi* (Figure 4), cross-cultural marriages between Biharis and Bengalis have begun to blur the boundaries between the two communities. These unions suggest what Bill Ashcroft (2001, 124) suggests as a "third space", a transcultural contact zone that enables the postcolonial nation to transcend rigid ethnic or linguistic

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binaries. Mokammel further expresses his observations in the Email Interview on the Bihari communities that "the generational gap was conspicuous" among interviewees since the younger generation had "no memory of 1947," while "the memories of 1971 killings and counter killings were more vivid." This generational divide shapes the film's emotional rhythm, capturing the elderly speaking of a lost homeland, while the young speak of an upcoming future.


Figure 4: Screenshot of an interview of a Bihari woman married to a Bengali family, in *Swapnabhumi* (1:09:42-1:10:00)

Despite these signs of hope, the Biharis' legal status remains precarious till now. As Zaglul Haider (2016, 4) points out, they do not qualify as *de jure* stateless persons under the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, yet in practice, they live as *de facto* stateless people. Though technically eligible for Bangladeshi citizenship under national law, their citizenship remains ineffectual: "They are de jure citizens, but de facto stateless persons, because

their citizenship does not work" (Haider 2016, 4–5). This dilemma of citizenship resonates in the voice of Javed Hasan, a Bihari interviewee, who laments being rejected by both Bangladesh and Pakistan. In Dina Siddiqi's *Left Behind by the Nation*, Hasan says:

> Bengalis are always telling us to become Bengali, but what does it take? I mean, here I am talking to you in Bangla. Tell me the kalma [the formal Islamic declaration of faith/here, a magic charm] that will make me Bengali, so I will no longer be called a Pakistani, Bihari, or a refugee (Siddiqi 2013, 172).

Hasan's words expose the contradictions of identity and belonging for those once instrumental in creating Pakistan, only to be abandoned by the state they helped build. Siddiqi describes their condition as a form of "civil death" (2013, 165), not exile in the literal sense, but a symbolic death caused by the refusal of both states to grant them recognition.

Such concerns raise broader questions about 'ethical memory'. In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen emphasizes the ethical responsibility of memory. Drawing on Paul Ricœur, he warns against both excessive remembering and excessive forgetting, calling for a balance that sustains life and prevents cycles of hatred: "We must remember to live, but we must also forget. Too much remembering and too much forgetting are both fatal" (Nguyen 2017, 315). Nguyen distinguishes between just and unjust forgetting, the latter arising from amnesia: "leaving behind a past that we have not dealt with in adequate ways […] or writing history to serve a prejudicial agenda" (2017, 315). Mokammel's *Swapnabhumi* challenges precisely this kind of amnesia. By giving voice to the 'stranded Pakistanis,' the film invites viewers to reconsider the silences of history. In this act, the documentary becomes a mode of what Homi Bhabha calls "un-speaking" history—releasing suppressed memories and reinscribing them into

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the known narrative: "To 'un-speak' is both to release from erasure and repression, and to reconstruct and reinscribe the elements in the known" (Bhabha 1994, 146).

Thus, *Swapnabhumi* does not simply document a historical crisis; it provides a space for ethical memory by refusing to allow the suffering of the Bihari community in Bangladesh to fall silent. It challenges the epistemic violence of erasure that renders marginalized histories invisible in nationalist narratives and encourages viewers to recognize the complexities of identity, belonging, and justice in the post-Partition South Asian context. By highlighting voices and testimonies often excluded by dominant histories, Mokammel reveals how such silences sustain injustice. The film underscores not only the fragile status of the Biharis but also the tangled legacies of Partition, migration, and citizenship, prompting audiences to confront displacement as both a lived reality and an ongoing ethical challenge. By reintroducing silent voices into the historical record, the film confronts the epistemic violence of erasure and opposes the nationalist tendency to forget. It urges viewers to engage with the intertwined legacies of Partition, migration, and statelessness, emphasizing displacement as not merely a historical event but a persistent moral issue for South Asia.

## Conclusion

Tanvir Mokammel's *Chitra Nodir Pare* and *Swapnabhumi* offer cinematic portrayals of history and explore their influence in addressing the historical amnesia surrounding the Bengal Partition by highlighting the lives of the marginalized during and after the 1947 Partition. Both films explore themes of remembering and recognizing the victims of the Partition, yet they

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approach these themes in different ways. *Chitra Nodir Pare*, through Mokammel's connection to personal 'Postmemory' of the Partition—marked by a melancholic tone and a pessimistic ending—shows the impossibility of reconciliation by focusing on the pain of displacement. Having witnessed the suffering of those forced to leave their homeland, land, property, and emotions, Mokammel reflects on an ongoing process of displacement. Since the wound remains unhealed, *Chitra Nodir Pare* offers no hope for healing trauma. Moreover, by depicting ongoing trauma, it risks reproducing what Bhaskar Sarkar describes as the "everyday mentalities, anxieties, and disillusionments" of Partition without providing a way to move beyond them (Sarkar 2009). Conversely, *Swapnabhumi*, despite documenting a bleak past, hints at reconciliation through scenes of intermarriage and the voices of a younger Bihari generation, who envisage coexistence beyond inherited grievances. It also makes no reference to Mokammel's direct or inherited memory of connection with the 'stranded Pakistanis', which might have allowed him to approach the cases of the Biharis and Bengalis more objectively. Therefore, the documentary film helps us take Shahid Amin's warning against dismissing sectarian memories as mere regressions (Amin 1995) seriously.

Mokammel's two films address the wounds of Partition as a "historical mistake" (Ghoshal 2022, 431) through profound humanistic storytelling. His *Chitra Nodir Pare* disregards the ethics of remembrance, which demands balance; in Viet Thanh Nguyen's words, "too much remembering and too much forgetting are both fatal" (2017, 315). However, it is significant that the film addresses the less talked about but crucial aspect of migration and displacement happening due to the Partition, which helps us connect to Paul Ricœur's distinction between "just" and "unjust" forgetting, cautioning that reconciliation cannot rest upon erasure or the manipulation of

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collective memory (qtd. in Nguyen 2017, 315). While *Chitra Nodir Pare* privileges remembrance as an enduring loss, *Swapnabhumi* opens a tentative space for hope and renewal. It fosters more equitable ways of engaging in the past and preserving the pain of Partition, without letting it become a perpetual grievance and thereby enabling the possibility of cultural healing across divided histories.

In this way, Mokammel's two films dealing with what Kavita Daiya calls "an unfinished past" (2020, 3) and what Urvashi Butalia describes as "the business of living with the consequences of that history" (Daiya 2020, ix), present the uneven texture of post-Partition memory in Bangladesh. Referring to Milan Kundera's assertion that "the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Mokammel, Email Interview), Mokammel frames cinema as a moral act of remembrance shadowed by the trauma it seeks to redeem.

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