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# Partitions and New Beginnings: The Bengali Diaspora in the Malay Peninsula

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## Abstract

Colonial Bengal comprised present-day Bangladesh, the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Tripura. It was partitioned twice: 1905 and 1947. After the Partition of 1905, the Muslim intellectuals and leaders realised that the interests of Indian Muslims were not safe in the hands of the Indian National Congress (INC). Therefore, they formed the All India Muslim League (AIML) in 1906. From then till 1947, these two political parties generally represented their own religious communities. Therefore, the Partition of 1947 was believed to be unavoidable, and its root was laid down in the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists articulated trauma, migration, and communal violence related to the Partition of 1947 through different methodological and theoretical perspectives. However, both Partitions affected Bengali migrants in the Malay Peninsula, an understudied area. This study spotlights two interconnected aspects. First, it discusses different migration patterns of the Bengalis and their diasporic history. Second, it illustrates the social interactions between Bengali Hindu and Muslim expats after both Partitions. By using a range of archival and non-archival sources, and qualitative approach, the study hopes to address the lacuna in the existing historiography of the Bengali diaspora in the Malay world, which will contribute to the recent flourishing of Partition studies.

## Keywords

Partition of Bengal, Bengali Diaspora, Malay Peninsula, Bangla-speaking communities, Migration patterns

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## Introduction

Connected histories and mobility are the core of modern Asian history. Transregional connectivity and mobility between South and Southeast Asia, particularly between Bengal and the Malay world, occurred much earlier, at least before the British colonial era, because both territories were located on the coasts of the Bay of Bengal. During British colonialism, these two coastal regions became more interconnected, enabling the mobility of people, the circulation of goods, and the dissemination of ideas. Bengalis migrated, and some settled in the Malay Peninsula during and after the colonial period, which had a long and complex history. This history became further complicated between the Bengali Hindus and Muslim migrating communities after the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and 1947. The Partition of Bengal of 1905 affected some Bengali expats, and it became visible after the second Partition in 1947. Scholars articulated trauma, migration, and communal violence related to the Partition of 1947 within the Indian subcontinent and beyond. However, some relevant questions about Bengal's second Partition and the Bengali diaspora in the Malay Peninsula are yet to be addressed. For example, what were the migration patterns of the Bengalis during the colonial period? What were the reactions of the Bengali expats to the Partition of 1947? How did the Bengali Hindu and Muslim diasporic communities interact away from home?

Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities formed different civil associations in Singapore and Malaysia and were involved in social activities simultaneously. However, both communities maintained a 'soft' distance, which was strongly visible after the Independence of Bangladesh. Such social interactions might be articulated as 'constructive disengagement' or 'civil indifference.' However, scholars have overlooked this sphere of the Partition of 1947. Therefore,

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this paper will primarily use a qualitative method, supported by quantitative exploration, and will focus on two interconnected issues. First, it will examine the various patterns of the Bengali migration to the Malay Peninsula and the formation of their diasporic space. Second, it will show the social interactions between Bengali Hindu and Muslim expats after the Partition.

This paper uses a range of archival and non-archival sources. The archival sources are population census, government records, administrative reports, and newspapers. Different newspapers published in British Malaya since the early 19th century have been consulted. The oral testimony of the Bengali diasporic community is also included as a primary source. These oral testimonies are recorded in the National Archives of Singapore.

Regarding non-archival sources, this paper uses a good selection of books, articles, and chapters published since the early nineteenth century. Moreover, some electronic materials, including online journals and websites, have been navigated. In doing so, the study hopes to address the cavity in the existing historiography of the Bengali diasporas in the Malay world, thereby contributing to the recent flourishing of Partition studies.

## Drawing the Bangla-speaking Regions and the Malay Peninsula

Bangladesh and West Bengal of India are the home of most of the Bengali ethnolinguistic group. The territory is called Bengal (Figure 1), and its boundaries have been repeatedly redrawn. The British made the Bengal Presidency in 1765, which covered a range of areas in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. The territory of the Bengal Presidency was restructured first in 1905, when a new province, called Eastern Bengal and Assam, comprising today's Bangladesh and north-eastern India, was created, with its capital in Dhaka. However, it was reunited in 1911, and Bangla-speaking people were brought under a single province. It was partitioned in 1947 for the second

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time along religious lines when West Bengal (Hindu-majority) became part of India, and East Bengal (Muslim-majority) joined with Pakistan.

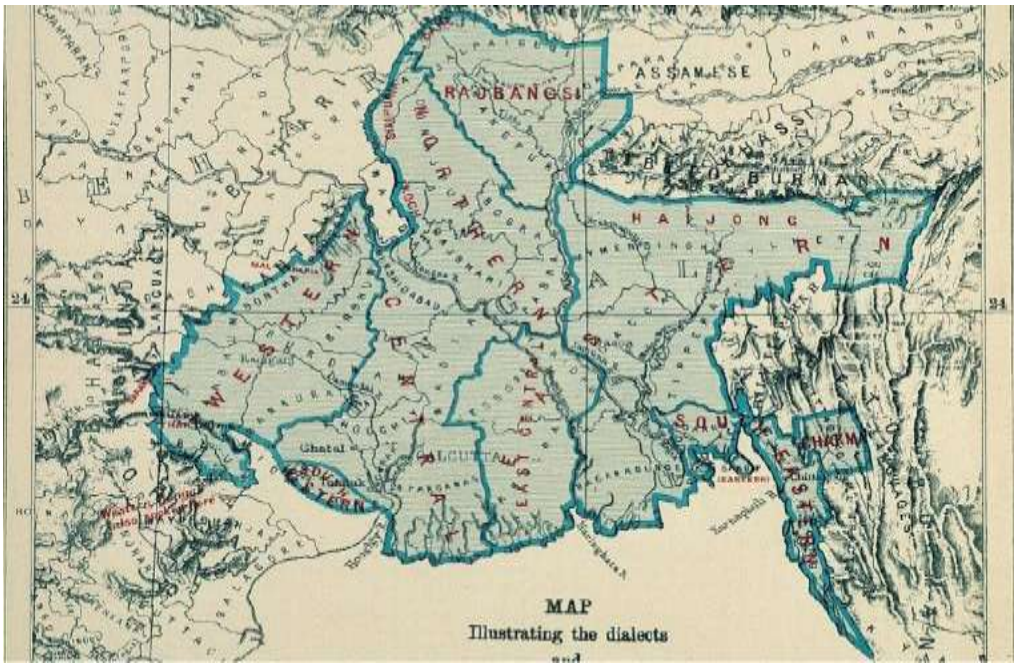


Figure 1: Landscape of the Bangla language using areas in Bengal **(**Source: Grierson 10)

According to a 1903 newspaper report, around 82 million people spoke Hindustani in British India, and the second-largest ethnic community was the Bengalis, numbering about 39 million (Northern Star, 1903). As of 2025, Bengali is the 3rd largest ethnic group worldwide, after the Han Chinese and Arabs, and Bangla is the 7th largest spoken language, the native language of Bangladesh, where nearly 165 million people use it as their mother tongue (worldometers). It is also considered the official language of several states in India, for example, West Bengal, Assam (Barak Valley), Tripura, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to a 2010 UN report, around 300 million people worldwide use Bangla. Among them, around 10 million native Bangla speakers are working overseas; this number does not include those Bengalis who were settled abroad.

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The Malay Peninsula is the region that includes modern Malaysia, Singapore, and the southwest part of Thailand. Hindu chronicles and Buddhist Jatakas provided information about the Malay Peninsula as the Golden Chersonese or land of gold (Sanskrit: Suvarnabhumi), which lies at the intersection of the Southeast Asian maritime routes. To the south, the Singapore Strait, southeast the South China Sea, southwest the Strait of Malacca, northeast the Gulf of Thailand, and northwest the Andaman Sea all bound this region. It is a country lying between two great oceans: the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

## Migration Patterns of the Bangla-speaking Community

There were two types of state-recognised migrations in the Lower Provinces of Bengal. Internal migration means the inland movement of coolies/labourers in the tea garden regions, including the Assam Valley, Sylhet, Cachar, and Chittagong. Colonial migration indicates overseas migration or the migration beyond the internal territory of the British/non-British colonies (Grierson 1887, 13). Generally, the Bengali migration patterns were free, forced, and bondage. Convicts and *kangany* labourers can be placed under the first two categories. Bonded labourers in the home and overseas enjoyed limited freedom. They had hardly lawful freedom of movement. Non-government and government agencies transported such labourers through inflexible systems. However, the Bengalis also migrated freely or willingly. During the early colonial period, some Bengalis migrated willingly to pursue better economic opportunities. These migrants can be termed free migrants. Apart from that, some Bengalis left British India for political persecution. The author has articulated sociologist Everett Lee's push-pull model to understand Bengali migration patterns. Rahman has illustrated several push-pull factors that prevailed in Bengal, including some natural disasters, economic hardship, and political upheavals (2023).

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## Push Factors in Bengal

*Famines and Economic Hardship*

Bengal experienced several devastating famines that forcefully displaced large sections of its population. After the Battle of Plassey (1757) and Buxer (1764), the British East India Company's excessive extraction of revenue and monopolisation of trade contributed to the Great Famine of 1770. Following the Permanent Settlement of 1793, many zamindars imposed illegal taxes on the peasant classes, further intensifying rural distress. In addition, natural calamities such as droughts and floods caused sharp rise in food prices, which together with these exploitative practices precipitated recurrent famines.

W. W. Hunter portrayed the dire harshness of the famines of 1866-67 and 1874 in Eastern Bengal, noting the sharp rise in the prices of daily necessities. He stated that the region was inadequate during the natural disasters in eastern Bengal, particularly in Dacca, Bogra, Rajshahi, Bakergonj, Faridpur, and Mymensingh (Hunter). The emigration was certainly stimulated by the famines of 1873-1874 (Report on the Administration, 1877). The woes of the people were drawn in a modern Bengali poem of Sri Chandi Charan Halder. It is reflected in his poem "*Dhurvikkho*" [Famine] that, after hitting the famine in Eastern Bengal, there were no tent or garner fields. Instead, a sense of deep distress everywhere in the land and soreness was seen in the face of people (cited in Rahman). According to Maharatna, the long-term behavioural reaction of the victims of famine was the rise in emigration to famine-prone regions (Maharatna). Such natural catastrophes caused possibilities to the labour recruiting agency because Northup implied that a vast number of emigrants boarded the ships at ports of Madras and Calcutta (Northup). According to a report dated 1860s, Calcutta was overwhelmed with suffering caused by natural disasters that tempted migrant

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agents to send their family members who were barely able to engage in immediate emigration (National Archives of Bangladesh (hereinafter, NAB), Report of the Government Medical Inspector).

The overall impact of colonialism was indeed negative. This was the case during the British East India Company period (1757-1857) where the three intermediary agents (gamasthas, zaminders and nilkars or indigo planters) exploited the peasant community of Bengal (Khan 1967, 278). Due to the drainage of the wealth, people became impoverished and this made them move to other colonies for the hope to have a good life. According to Roy, there would be a decline in average income in the eighteenth century (2010). The trend went on until the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, people tried to immigrate to foreign countries. Mushahid Ali recalled that economic scarcity had compelled his family and relatives to leave Sylhet to go to British Malaya (Personal Interview, Mushahid Ali, 19 July 2018, Singapore). At the start of the twentieth century, an educated Bengali Calcutta-based Hindu came to Singapore, named Hurrish Banerjee. He was a government worker whose income was too little and unpaid thus dropped the profession. To him, working with the British Indian government was a form of "slavery"; he decided to leave the job and seek a new opportunity in the Straits Settlements (Straits Times, 1903).

*Overpopulation*

Figure 2 demonstrates the steadily increasing Bengal's population between 1765 and 1901. The total population in British India was about 185 million in 1800; by 1900, it had increased by 100 million. In 1872, a report showed that Bengal province had the highest population per square mile in India, at 433. In contrast, the second- and third-highest proportions were 391 and 318, respectively, in the United Province and Bihar and Orissa Province (Gait 1913, 13-24). In 1875, C

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E Bernard informed the high density of the Bengal and recommended migration to avoid this pressure (NAB, Proceedings A).[1] The increase in population left terrific pressure on the rural economy; therefore, the lifestyle went down for those people who belonged to the poor class. It further deteriorated due to the severity of periodic famines. The increase in population caused land-related problems. A journal reported that the increase in population by 44% in 1921 caused the reduction of cultivable and agricultural land from 3.0 to 2.1 acres per head, which threatened the rural population's employment possibilities and income (*East Pakistan Labour Journal* 1956). Therefore, Khan remarked that people migrated from South Asian countries for famines, overpopulation, epidemics, poverty, and landlessness (1963, 3-9). During the postcolonial era, people migrated from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan due to excessive population pressure (Brown 2006, 24, 25, 42).

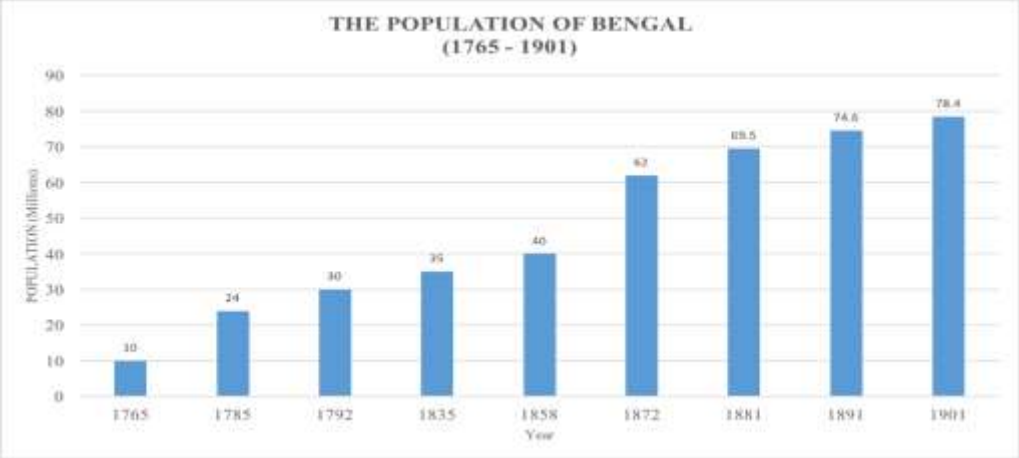


Figure 2: Population in Bengal, 1765- 1901 (Sources: Risley and Gait 47-8; *Census of British Empire 1901* 88)

[1] On 14 February 1875, the Officiating Secretary to the Judicial Department wrote a note on pressure on the population in Bengal, and on the issue of how the best means may be adopted of encouraging emigration out of any regions where the pressure may be excessive.

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*Convict transportation*

Rahman suggested that the Bengal colonial government brought offenders from Bengal to the Malay Archipelago (2023). The government of the Straits Settlements deployed these convicts in different sectors because the punitive labourers were beneficial, as it was a new approach of colonial mistreatment. Foucault reported that the penal servitude was more effective, beneficial and moneymaking for the colonial economy (1980, 38). Previously, these forced labourers were restricted to the British colony of Bencoolen (nowadays the West Coast of Indonesia). However, following the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the British colonial authority brought them to Penang, Malacca, and Singapore (Kim 1993, 267). Among other South Asian convicts, Bengalis were commissioned to make roads in Singapore (Earl 1837, 353). They made the St. Andrew's Cathedral and government buildings in Singapore (Mahajani 1960, 95-96). Aiyar recommended that the Straits Settlements were the "Sydney of India" till 1873 for being convict destinations (1938, 12). With the separation of the Straits Settlement from the Indian government in 1867, the Governor of the Straits Settlement allowed the involuntary servitude to become assimilated with the mainstream society through the special pardon (McNair and Bayliss 1899, 76, 143).[2]

*Political persecutions*

During the British colonial rule, local leaders and peasants organised a series of anti-British movements in Bengal. Apart from that, during the nationalist movements in the early twentieth

[2] In 1825, a register of the convict prisons at Singapore was made, and abandoned in 1873, and McNair and Bayliss discussed the history of the convict establishments at Bencoolen and the Straits Settlements.

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century, particularly anti-partition movement (1905-1911) and the anti-colonial movements, the British government introduced various suppressive acts and regulations to stop anti-colonial activities. Many revolutionaries fled to the Malay Peninsula, particularly Singapore and Malaya, as it was a relatively close and safe place for them (Koh et al. 2006, 60). Many Bengali revolutionaries and anti-British demonstrators migrated to Malaya to escape harassment and convictions. Sengupta stated that a few medical students fled from Bengal Malaya for political persecution and sought shelters in some rubber estates in Malaya (2013). For instance, one of the Bengali anti-British demonstrators named Dr Dinesh Chandra Chowdhury (1899-1971) was a final-year medical student in Calcutta, but got a message from Dacca that the law enforcers wanted to arrest him. Therefore, S N Bardhan, who had already migrated to Malaya, brought him to Malaya in 1928 (ibid.). It is also seen in recent Bangladesh. From 2009 to 2024, many opposition political leaders and activists left the country to avoid political persecution. Therefore, many Bangladeshi politicians, social workers, and journalists relocated to India, Europe, Australia, North America, and Canada.

## Pull Factors in the Malay Peninsula

### *Created Jobs for Skillful and Unskillful Migrants*

The British East India Company founded its first settlement in the Malay Peninsula in the 1780s. Before the arrival of the British, plantations and mines were the primary source of the Malay economy. European capitalists invested money in rubber estates, tin mines, and infrastructure sectors. With the growth of entrepots, trade and commerce flourished in British Malaya. These widespread activities opened new job sectors. These pull factors attracted people and enabled them to migrate from British India and China. However, planters preferred mostly

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labourers from British India, as Gin illustrated that the British planters primarily relied on South Asian rather than Chinese labour. They recruited Indian labour in different sectors, for example, roads, railways, tin, rubber, coffee, and sugarcane plantations (2009). When the rubber plantation was booming in the early twentieth century, British capitalists invested money in the expansion of the rubber economy. Indian labourers were employed in greater numbers (Aiyar 1938, 6; Kim 1993, 267; Jackson 1961).

Among diverse South Asian diasporic communities, the Bengali migrants played an essential part in the workforce under British colonialism and facilitated the expansion of British capitalism. After the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the investment of British capital increased in its colonies.[3] They needed cheap labourers in their industries and plantations. Besides, as the slaveholders in the Malay Peninsula had agreed to stop slavery on 28 November 1829 (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (hereinafter, *SFPMA*)), the local and British planters had a strong demand for labourers in supporting the colonial economy. In this circumstance, the indentured labour system was developed (Tinker 1974). These indentured labourers worked in tea plantations within British India and beyond, particularly in the Caribbean region, Africa, and Malaya. This system was abolished after World War I in 1920. A coal mine manager in the

[3] In 1785, the first steam spinning mill was installed in England, and in 1789 in Manchester. The number of cotton mill steam engines built between 1785 and 1800 was eighty-two, fifty-five in Lancashire alone. After that, the British Industrial Revolution flourished rapidly, and the investment of British capital increased. See (Williams 1944) for information on the development of British capitalism.

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Federated Malay States showed interest in recruiting labourers from Bengal whether through indenture or kangany system (Kaur 1990).

The authority of British Malaya always wanted skillful Bengali professionals. Sengupta[4] documented that Bengali physicians started to arrive in Malaysia and Singapore in the late nineteenth century. He informed us that Dr S N Bardhan of Comilla served as an Assistant Surgeon in Negri Sembilan in 1908. He also reported that Dr. P N Sen of Dacca arrived in the Malay Peninsula in 1907/08, who was posted in Singapore (Sengupta 2013, 26, 31). Later, many Bengali doctors were also recruited contractually by private clinics; therefore, the period of the 1950s and 1960s is considered the prime era for the Bengali doctors in Malaysia. Besides, the political stability dragged the Bengali educated migrants to Malaya (ibid. 32).

*Bengali in Network Mobility*

Network or chain migration sometimes turned into mass migration. Chain migration denotes when migrants took their friends, family members, relatives, and neighbours to a new destination where he/she worked. Some Bengali professionals also brought their relatives and neighbours to British Malaya. For instance, a railway officer of Kota Bahru named C D Bhattacharya brought his nephew to Malaya. Mushahid Ali remembered that the people of eastern Bengal, particularly Sylhet, mostly came to their relatives to find a better opportunity in Singapore. A Bengali from Sylhet named M A Majid sheltered many fellow citizens and his relatives in

[4] Dr P R Sengupta, the first general surgeon in Malaysia, successively worked in various private and government hospitals from the 1960s. In 2003, the Governor of Sarawak awarded him the title of DATU. Dr Sengupta documented his experiences and the contemporary issues in his book, which is one of the primary sources regarding the history of the Bengali physicians in Malaya.

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Singapore. Sengupta described that my relatives and other countrymen from Bengal came to Malaya due to S N Bardhan's success in medical sectors. Some of these newcomers were employed in various hospitals. K C Sengupta brought his siblings, including P R Sengupta's father, to Malaya.

*Personal Factors*

Lee showed different factors of human migration, including personal factors. Spouse migration is considered a personal factor (1963). Ishii has shown how the trans-border marriage migration in Asia. She stated that it was a different pattern of movement from home to a new destination (2016). Some Bengali migrants who worked in British Malaya returned to get married to a woman of the same ethnic group. A Bengali, renowned gynecologist and obstetrician in Singapore, named Dr A C Sinha, married Mrs Hena Sinha and brought her as a spouse (National Archives of Singapore, Oral History Interviews (hereinafter, NAS, OHI), Mrs. Hena Sinha, 21 Oct 1983, Accession Number 000354). Some Bengali convicts also came back to Calcutta to marry Bengali women and went back to Singapore. Dolly Sinha Davenport migrated as the wife of Dr Ranjit Sinha.

Sometimes, miscegenation facilitates multi-ethnic and interracial marriages among the migrants. Some Bengali women who grew up in Malaya or men who went as labourers married the local people. Nayeem Sultana studied a case of Kalim Miah, a Bangladeshi transient worker who went to Malaysia in the late 1990s (2008). When his contract was over, he did not return home but rather started a new business and obtained Permanent Residential status. Later, Kalim Miah got married to a Malay girl (*Bumiputera*) and attained Malay culture (2008, 148). Therefore, the process of less Bengaliness or the erasure of Bengali culture occurred.

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The preceding narrative demonstrates various patterns of Bengali migration, which can be articulated by Lee's push and pull factors. Initially, religious identity was not prevailing. Instead, ethnic and cultural uniqueness is attached to them firmly. Bengali migrants were involved in South Asian diasporic communities and were vital in forming organisations and associations. For example, in 1916, an Indian multi-ethnic association was formed in Singapore to generate funds for the wounded British Army during the World War I. Both Muslim and Hindu committee members were migrants from Bengal, Punjab, and the United Provinces. The committee organised a mass gathering at the racecourse to generate a fund for the British Army. The meeting instantly raised $3,000 for the Red Cross Fund. However, after the first Partition of Bengal in 1905, the Bengali migrants, Hindus from West Bengal, and Muslims from East Bengal formed religion-based organisations in the 1920s. It became more visible after the Second Partition of Bengal in 1947, which will be discussed below.

**Various Organisations and Functions of the Bengali Migrants**

The interests of the Partition of Bengal 1905 differed for the Bengali Muslims of Eastern Bengal and the English-educated Bengali Hindus of West Bengal. Both communities reacted and responded differently towards the Partition. Bengali Muslims from Eastern Bengal supported the Partition, whereas Bengali Hindus of West Bengal rejected the partition plan and started anti-British movements. Even some communal violence occurred in Eastern Bengal during the Partition. Its indirect effect is seen among the Bengali migrants in British Malaya. Bengali Hindu and Muslim migrants founded various organisations based on social, cultural, and religious functions during the first half of the twentieth century in the Malay Peninsula. One of the earliest organisations was the Malayan Bengalee Association (MBA), which started operations in Malaya

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during the 1920s. Its membership was based on a common language and ethnicity, including fresh migrants or the descendants, whose forefathers had come mainly from Calcutta, Dacca, Chittagong, and Midnapore. The Association's pioneers were P N Sen, A B Paul, and B C Majumdar. However, the MBA was officially listed in 1952, and the first elected President (1951-1956) was H K Choudhury. Following the establishment of Malaysia in 1963, the MBA was renamed to the "Malaysian Bengalee Association" (Sengupta 2013, 60, 64).

Under the auspices of the MBA, they celebrated Durga Pooja and Kali Pooja (Deepavali) in Seremban in 1928, with a significant amount of donation provided by Dr Paresh Nath Sen (Sengupta 2013, 190, 40). In the 1930s, the Bengali community built a "Kali Temple" at Rasah in Seremban. During the same period, they purchased a piece of land in Seremban to open a hostel for Bengali students. The land was not used to construct the hostel; Later on, it was used to celebrate Pooja festivities from the 1950s. Nowadays, MBA celebrates many religious functions, including Laxmi Pooja, Saraswati Pooja, and Dol/Holi.

In the early 1920s, Muslim migrants from Bengal and their offspring established *Bangiya Moslem Sammilani* (Bengal Muslim Association) in Singapore. This association organised various cultural, religious, and social functions. For example, it arranged the Silver Jubilee of George V (1865-1936) at Rangoon Road in Singapore in 1935. The programme was a three-day-long event. The majority of the attendants were Bangla-speaking tradesmen and lascars. The first day was related to offering prayer or *Doa Selamat* at the Queen Street Mosque for the King and his empire in Singapore. The second day was a Bangla music concert, and the third day was a special dinner held at M A Majid's house, who was the Secretary of the Association (Sunday Tribune

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(Singapore), 1935; SFPMA). Around 150 guests joined the dinner. On this occasion, Majid presented an admiring letter to the Viceroy of India (*Straits Times*, 1903).

In 1938, a new Management Committee was appointed for the Sammilani. A Bengali descendant, SIM Ibrahim, became the President of the Sammilani (*Malay Tribune* (hereinafter, *MaT*), 1938). They interacted with other diasporic communities and forged strong ties with them. This is reflected in the acceptance of H S Moonshi, a renowned Tamil Muslim doctor and Justice of Peace, as a patron of the Sammilani. Many guests from other diasporic communities were present at the reception of Moonshi.[5] He was also the Vice-chairman and Joint Secretary of the Mohammedan Advisory Board and was involved in the Muslim community's well-being in Singapore (*MaT*).

In 1938, on the birthday of the *Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)*, the Sammilani arranged a *Meelad Shareef* and a religious talk. After the religious function, the Sammilani served a public feast, where more than 1000 guests from different diasporic communities were present (*MaT*).[6] However, the Bangiya Moslem Sammilani failed to register under the Societies Registration Act, which consequently disqualified it from functioning in the early 1950s.

The Bengali Muslim diaspora created social spaces in other port cities in Southeast Asia, particularly in Rangoon. Didarul Alam of Chittagong came to Rangoon in the 1920s and became the editor of two Bengali periodicals, namely *Juger Alo* (Light of the Era), a monthly magazine,

[5] It was mentioned earlier that Muhammad Ally was a Bengali and the Secretary of an Indian multi-ethnic committee in 1916.

[6] Notable guests included Capt. N M Hashim, A M S Angullia (Justice of the Peace), Dr H S Moonshi (Justice of the Peace), Syed Gulab Shah, and Syed Abdullah bin Yahya attended the feast.

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and a weekly *Sammilani* (Rendezvous). The Bengali Hindu and Muslim diaspora also formed different civic associations in Rangoon, such as the *Khadim ul Islam*, Bengal Mohamedan Association, and Chittagong Moslem Society. Forty Hindu and Muslim literary activists founded the *Bangla Sahitya Sammilon*. Moulvi Muhammad Abdul Monem was the editor of *Sammilani*, a literary journal of the organisation (Iqbal 2020, 185-86).

For Bengali Hindus, Ronendra Karmakar, his father, and a few notable persons founded the Bengali Association Singapore (BAS) in 1947 (NAS, OHI, Ronendra Karmakar, 18 October 1983, Acc. No 000343). However, Association members were inactive for a few years before A C Sinha registered it with the Registry of Societies in 1956 and elected the first President. Members of the association were primarily second or third-generation Bengalis who migrated from the undivided Bengal (NAS, OHI, Hena Sinha, October-November of 1983, Acc. No. 000354). Though Bengali Hindus used to celebrate Durga Pooja in-house in Singapore, it began to be celebrated publicly on a large scale from the 1950s onwards (Rai and Mani 2017, 254). In this respect, the BAS played a significant role in organising some main religious festivals, such as Durga Pooja, Laxmi Pooja, Saraswati Pooja, and Dol (Straits Times, 1903). In 2013, a newspaper reported that about 23,000 people, regardless of race and religion, used to join the Durga Pooja in Singapore in the early twentieth century (Telegraph, 2013).

Before the Independence of Bangladesh, BAS was the sole registered association of the Bangla-speaking community in Singapore. During the early 1970s, some Bengalis of eastern Bengal met informally and arranged social functions through the Bangladesh High Commission. Meanwhile, a new wave of Bangladeshi migrants started arriving in Singapore. In 1977, a Bangladeshi businessman, M Kader, sought to establish a new organisation for Bangladeshi

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migrants. However, the Registry of Societies denied his request, citing that there was already an organisation for the Bengalis. Later, some Bangladeshi professionals, mainly academicians, under M A Aziz's leadership,[7] successfully set up an organisation named the Singapore Bangladesh Society (SBS).

Founding SBS members were of diverse professional backgrounds and permanent residents who migrated to Singapore from the 1970s onward. Bengali descendants, whose parents had migrated in the early colonial period, were not involved in the SBS. M A Aziz was the first President and held the post from 1981-85 (Straits Times, 1903; Khondker 2009, 129). The SBS continues to organise a wide range of activities with the aims of promoting mutual friendship between the peoples of Bangladeshi migrants and Singaporeans; practising cultures and traditions of both countries; arranging social and cultural activities; maintaining brotherhood and cordial relations with all communities in Singapore; and celebrating the different national days of Bangladesh and Singapore. The SBS also drives blood donations and arranges *iftar* parties. Some Bangladeshi temporary migrants attend these functions alongside the Bangladeshi residents. These functions create a feeling of a home away from home for both groups of migrants.

## A Ripple Effect of the Partition of 1947 and 'Constructive Disengagement'

In general, most Bengali Muslims have been members of the Singapore Bangladesh Society, whereas Bengali Hindus have been members of the Bengali Association Singapore. Members of these two Bangla-speaking communities continue to perform parallel activities with minimal social interactions. Such interactions, although minimal, could be articulated as

[7] A Professor from Bangladesh migrated and employed at the National University of Singapore.

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'constructive disengagement', which means that the two groups are interacting at a mutual but respectful distance. It is the art of social disagreement among people indifferent to each other. Both Bengali Muslims and Hindus constructed diasporic communities with little social interaction. The idea of 'civil indifference' is also helpful in understanding this social relationship (Khondker 2008, 184, 185). The concept, also known as civil inattention, refers to the subtle social practice of acknowledging the presence of others while simultaneously respecting their privacy and maintaining appropriate social distance. Sharon and Koops (2021) have illustrated the significance of civil inattention to regulate behaviour in public spaces.

The most crucial question is: both communities in West Bengal of India, and Bangladesh share common cultures and heritage, including the Bangla language and food habits; why were they fragmented into two communities in Malaysia and Singapore during the late 1970s? The main reason was probably the birth of Bangladesh, which parted the Bangla-speaking community along lines of national identity. However, there are other historical aspects which should also be considered. During South Asia's late colonial and early postcolonial periods, politics took a communal turn among the Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities. The first partition of Bengal in 1905 seeded separatism based along communal lines among educated Muslims and Hindus. Though it was annulled in 1911, these experiences tilted Bengali ethnic identity in favour of a religious one, which had a ripple effect on the Bengali diasporic community in Malaya after the partition. This communal division is reflected in the formation of civil society organisations in British Malaya in the 1920s, for example, the Malayan Bengali Association or Bengal Muslim Association.

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The failure of Chitta Ranjan Das's Bengal Pact (1923)[8] and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's Undivided Independent Bengal Movement led to the Second Partition of Bengal in 1947. Consequently, some 12 million people were displaced forcibly in India and Pakistan during the second partition (Brown, 2006, 24). These partitions of Bengal based on communal lines affected Bangla-speaking expatriates in the Malay Peninsula. Some Bengali Hindus who migrated from Eastern Bengal to Malaya and their descendants opted to leave for Calcutta after 1947. For instance, Sarojininath Bardhan (1874-1927) and Bhupendra Chandra Majumder (1890-1983) migrated from Eastern Bengal to Malaya, and their descendants settled there and developed their Calcutta-based networks in Malaya after the partition of 1947. Most South Asian political leaders were split along communal lines under the headers of the Malayan Indian Congress and Penang Indian Muslim League. Consequently, Hindus and Muslims began to organise separately in post-1947 British Malaya. For example, the Bengali Singapore Association celebrated only Hindu religious and Bangla cultural functions, though a significant portion of Bengali migrants in Singapore were Muslim.[9]

[8] In December of 1923, C R Das proposed the Bengal Pact in coalition between Muslim and Hindu leaders in Bengal. He tried to retrieve unity and distrust between Bengali Hindus and Muslims after the Partition of Bengal in 1905.

[9] Dolly Sinha remembers that the BAS celebrated only Poojas and Bangla cultural festivals. She was involved in the Association's activities in the late 1960s and was President from 1979 to 1988. As her father was a government employee, her family moved from Eastern Bengal (being the daughter of parents who had their base at Dhaka and Comilla) to the United Provinces of British India for work in the United Provinces Municipal Board. She was brought up and educated in the United Provinces. She arrived in Singapore in 1966 after getting married. She also informs how she had encountered a few Bengali families in Singapore who had come from the same province.

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Nowadays, relations among the Bangladeshi diasporic community have often been influenced by Bangladeshi national politics. For example, during the election of the Management Committee of Bangla Language School in 1992, two Bangladeshi lecturers of the National University of Singapore contested for the post of President. They tried to draw their compatriots' attention by using both 'communal' and 'liberal' sentiments. The term 'communalism' was introduced by the colonial occupants in British India during the nineteenth century for achieving their 'political' motives. Communalism has spread beyond the subcontinent during the postcolonial time among the overseas Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis (Bates 2001, 2)**.** Referring to a school textbook that contained an Indian flag, one candidate criticised the other for his silence and argued that Bangla schools' textbooks should keep away from national identity. This faction raised the question of why the recommended textbooks had been selected from Kolkata-based Hindu writers, whereas most students were from Bangladesh. They wanted a proportionate representation of textbooks and authors from both West Bengal and Bangladesh. However, the other faction denied the idea of equal proportionate representation and stated that the teaching of the Bangla language is the main purpose of the school; therefore, equitable representation of textbooks is unnecessary. It appears that the specific splitting line between the two factions was drawn by a subtle sense of 'communalism' and 'liberalism' (Khondker 2008, 185-87).

Members of the Bengali civil society associations realised the need to open Bangla language schools or centres to educate their children. With the Singapore government's approval, SBS and Bangladeshi professionals started two Bangla language learning centres in Singapore: BLLS (Bangla Language and Literary Society) and BLCF (Bangladesh Language and Cultural

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Foundation), established in 1994 and 2000. The number of students increased steadily, and presently, two more branches of these centres have been opened, and the Singapore government has provided a grant of $54,000 to each centre. The government has also allocated public schools during the weekend to conduct classes ("Personal Interview," A.K.M. Mohsin, 16 July 2018, Singapore). Rumu Paul remarks that it is such a relief that his daughter can read Bangla novels now (Telegraph, 2013). The schools meet every Saturday for 3.5 hours with instructors from West Bengal and Bangladesh (Khondker 2009, 129). Currently, approximately four to five thousand children are enrolled in Bangla language courses in these institutions ("Personal Interview," Dolly Sinha Davenport, 23 July 2018, Singapore). Most of the students are the offspring of the Bengali community, originating from Bangladesh.

## Conclusion

The geographically favourable location of Bengal and the Malay Peninsula facilitated maritime connectivity and mobility between the two regions. Due to the better economic opportunities in Malaya, the Bangla speaking people migrated to the Malay Peninsula during the colonial and postcolonial period. Using qualitative inquiry, comparative analyses, and sociologist Everett Lee's migration model, this study shows the factors of the Bengali migration and their socio-cultural spaces. However, the political decisions in Bengal in 1905 affected the Bangla-speaking diasporic community. They formed parallel social and cultural associations in the 1920s. Such separatism was visible after the Second Partition of Bengal in 1947. Bengal was divided based on the Hindu-Muslim religion. After the Partition, the Bengali Muslim population of East Pakistan or East Bengal was high compared to the West Bengal of India. With a referendum, Sylhet

joined East Pakistan, while Calcutta and Assam opted to keep with the Union of India. Therefore, Sylheti migrants were known as 'Pakistanis', after the partition of 1947.

South Asian migrants split based on the religious line across the globe, including in the Malay Peninsula. The Malay Indian Congress became their prominent voice and vehicle, and the Indian Muslims began to organise separately (Brown 2006, 124), particularly the Bengalis. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, social bonding between the Bengalis of West Bengal and Bangladesh was minimal. Singapore Government discouraged religious-based violence among the expats; therefore, the Bengali migrants were never involved in any violence, but they established separate associations, while the Bengalis from West Bengal and Bangladesh share and practice collective cultures, including language, cuisine, and heritage. Their social interactions can be articulated as civil indifference. Thus, the present study substantially contributes to the Bengali migration studies and the recent flourishing of partition studies.

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