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Crisis of Belonging and Rehabilitation: Partition of India

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Abstract

In the year 1947, India witnessed partition and huge influx and exodus of people. This paper focuses on the case of Bengal and the problems of rehabilitation of the refugees of East Bengal with particular emphasis on their idea of 'desh' and 'home.' The major question lies in answering the broad question- Where lies the 'home'.

The idea of nation is very relative as defined by Benedict Anderson in the book "Imagined community : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism". The cognitive revolution about nation lead to a dilemma among the diasporic communities of East Bengal in India which resulted in far greater political consequences. The concept of 'desh' imagined by the refugees of East Bengal created an interchange of cityscape, social community, and also the characters of society. The imagination about the right over their "nation" lead them create their own "desh" in a place where ever they lived, be it their homeland, where they stayed mentally or house, where they lived physically.

Thus, migration carries with it a whole gamut of emotional dilemma of identity and belonging.

KEYWORDS:

desh, home, refugees, partition, migration, dilemma

1) Introduction

In this sense the concept of home should be cleared. ‘Home’ is a place of personal belonging, a place full of nostalgia. When the East Bengalis refugees came to West Bengal they tried to forge a home of their own in an alien environment far away from traumatic partition experience. But, ‘*bastu bhite*’ for them lay in East Bengal even though they were active citizens of West Bengal and claimed Indian nationality. After partition of 1947, India witnessed a drastic influx and exodus of race and culture among people.

2) Where is the home? : ‘Desh’ and ‘nation’

A poem by Bishnu Dey written during the partition of India perfectly captures the emotional impact of partition on the refugees of East Bengal who in search of their ‘home’ try to negotiate with the alien environment. The concept of ‘*desh*’ and ‘nation’ evokes two different notions of territoriality. Anasua Basu Raychaudhury analyses the meanings of the two terms. ‘*Desh*’ is deeply connected with nostalgia which depicts one’s own belongings. Nation on the other hand is an imagined community far away from the concreteness of a ‘*desh*’. The idea of domesticity is linked with the idea of nation. The home is the ‘*desh*’ and the ‘*desh*’ resides in home. The displaced people is trying to forge a home look for their ancestral environment. A documentary film by Supriyo Sen called ‘Way Back Home’ *Abar Ashibo Phire* perfectly captures the emotion of his parents (refugees from East Bengal) for their lost homeland and how in their attempt to recreate a microcosm of ‘*desh*’ within the domestic space in an alien land goes futile and results in an uneasy compromise with the new environment. It has been found through a number of interviews with the refugees that most of them would like to pay a visit to their ancestral land but would not like to stay there. Supriyo Sen in his documentary film shows the journey of his parents who were refugees from East.

Pakistan at the time of Partition of India in 1947 to their native place in Bangladesh. His mother while recollecting the memories of her childhood remembers about the festivals that were enjoyed by Hindus and Muslims alike. His mother sighs with the thought of not being able to familiarize herself with the environment of Kolkata since in her subconscious mind she constantly searches for that domestic life in her '*desher bari*' which is now so difficult to re-impose in a new land. The notion of a fragmented domesticity comes to the fore as it is the result of the two domesticities borrowed from the ingredients of two nations. The willingness to visit the birthplace at least once in life comes from this aspect of fragmented living.

Clearly, one domesticity cannot be replaced with another. The director's mother further remembers about her elder sister, Kamali di who though despised by the society fell in love and married a Muslim man. When the partition happened and Hindus started infiltrating into West Bengal, Kamali di remained there. The director says it is this search of lost ties, lost domesticity peopled by familiar faces that made them journey back to Bangladesh.

3) Sacredness of home: *Chhere Asha Gram*

Chhere Asha Gram (The Abandoned Village) edited by Dakshinaranjan Basu represent partition victims as individuals frequently haunted by memories of homeland. Dipesh Chakrabarty while addressing the aspects of memory and history takes up excerpts from *Chhere Asha Gram* in order to give 'home' a spatial reality with its past and future. "What gives the 'native village' its sacredness is patriliney, its ancestral connection.

Worshipping of the land of the village was the equivalent of worshipping one's ancestors. The language of secular aesthetics is provided, on the other hand, by three different ingredients, all indefinitely modern in character. They were: the idea (and hence the relics) of antiquity, connections the individual village may have had with recent nationalist history, and modern secular literary descriptions of the beauty of the landscapes of rural Bengal."¹¹ This shows how the bucolic living was lost amidst the buzzing environment of Kolkata. The

'home' away from home was transported in different ways where hierarchies, gendering of spaces became apparent.

Many scholars who deal with post colonial theories defined a term called "Forced migration", in which they perceived the migration to be a complex psychology where one does not migrate according to their own choice, situation forces them to do so. These migrations can be either in latent form or as a consequence of violence.

During 1947 partition, the situation was a consequence of violence where the Hindus of East Bengal were forced to migrate to India. Those migrants moved to Indian sub continent for their lives, rather to save their families, especially the women. Now if we look into the scenario of the period after 1950s, where the violence caused due to partition was less, yet we find many migrants from East Bengal, who moved to Indian Sub continent especially 'Nama sudras and the dalits'. Here the reason for the migration of these 'nama sudras' or the 'dalits' were not due to violence caused by partition of 1947 but to earn a living. Even in absence of violence these migrants were "forced" to migrate from their homeland or 'desh' to a completely new environment for the sake of survival. Thus in both the cases be it migration during 1947, where people migrated to save themselves from the reckless violence or after 1947, where people migrated in order to find work for their living, people were forced to leave their 'desh'. None of the situations shows migration as a choice but a necessity.

5) Women's Role in Migration

The lives of the migrant women vis-a-vis men were not much different yet they occupied a luminal space in their private and public lives. Just like war, the spoils of violence induced by partition made the female's body the site of exploitation. Most of the Hindu families feared that women in their house could be raped by Muslims during the time

of partition in East Bengal, 1947. Also after the partition, many households were facing financial shortage. In such a situation women sometimes fell prey to the prostitution market in order to support their families financially. Moreover women lived a much respectable life before the partition. After partition they had to come out of their houses in order to earn a living. These had both pros and cons. It was good in the sense the women got an opportunity to prove themselves that they could come out of the house to earn as well. They broke the stereotypical idea that women should stay at home and look after the household. On the other hand, the women, especially the married women had to look after their household along with going out to work. This further brings in the question of private and public spheres. It seems that the women were breaking the private spaces and entering into public domain. In the book, *Nowhere people* by Sabitri Roy, Dhruba, the sister of Dhiman, a political activist is also a left activist. Another character called sarbani who after leaving her abusing husband tries to make a living out of her own. She does not take help from anyone. On the contrary we find the wife of Dhiman, khana was unable to move out of her house to work. She had to stay at home to look after the household. Thus the female agency was getting proliferated in myriad ways.

6) Relevance of this dilemma in today's world

Still today we find this dilemma in our society among the “ghotis” and the “bangals” among the people of Bengal. There has been always a cognitive partition among them in terms of food habits, sports, way of living etc.

There is a distinguishing feature about the food habits among the people who came from East Bengal commonly known as “Bangals” by the locals and the people who are the inhabitants of India commonly called the “ghotis”. According to the people the “ghotis” tend to give more sugar in their cooking while the “Bangals” don’t. The underlying scholarly

emphasis is thus placed on the nature of segregation that undergoes within a largely heterogeneous Bengali society. The segregation occurs not only in the culinary tastes of the families but also in the formation of refugee colonies. Nostalgia creeps in when the home faraway from being transported, instead gets translated into something of a mixed variety which is neither a slum dwelling nor an affluent one. The middle class groups thus remain in the domain of nostalgia.

7) Conclusion

The recollection of a traumatic memory involves a process of forgetting. Our main focus should be to identify and historicize the forgotten spaces. Migration entails a loss of home and homeland creating a situation of identity crisis for the migrants. What thus brings to our attention is the migrant's dilemma and the struggle undertaken to create a private and public space in their domestic life.

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