

at East



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Of other partitions

A discussion that focuses on Eastern India's stories of Partition that somehow remain outside the general narrative of Partition of India. It will begin with presentation by Moushumi Bhowmik based on field recordings from The Travelling Archives.

Speakers: Udayon Misra; Moushumi Bhowmik; Debjani Sengupta; Vishwajyoti Ghosh and moderated by Karthika V. K.

10:00 to 11:30 March 25, 2017

Seminar Rooms I to III, Kamaladevi Complex



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URSTORIES
Every Story Needs To Be Told

India International Centre Annexe Art Gallery
Gandhi-King Plaza, C.D. Deshmukh Auditorium
Seminar Rooms I to III, Kamaladevi Complex
Fountain Lawns, Quadrangle Campus

Of Other Partitions

(Transcript)

MARCH 25, 2017

Seminar Rooms I to III, Kamaladevi
Complex, India International Centre

A discussion that focuses on Eastern India's stories of Partition, that somehow remain outside the general narrative of the partition of India. Moushumi Bhowmik presents here field recordings from The Travelling Archives.

Moderated by **Karthika V K**
Publisher

Panel **Moushumi Bhowmik**
Singer and archivist

Debjani Sengupta
Historian, Writer – Delhi University,

Udayon Misra
Political Scientist

Vishwajyoti Ghosh
Illustrator, Writer



Moushumi B: I work in Bengal primarily, but there is no such place by the name of Bengal as such. There is West Bengal, there is Cachar, there is Bangladesh, there is the diaspora in many other parts of the world, so our project explores what was, could be, and what is not Bengal. It is a fragmented and essentially a contested land that we're dealing with here. It's a more of a construct, it's the making of a mind and in our case it is the making of an artist's mind. Even though we're taking on the NE, Bengal's presence in the NE is

a very significant presence. So where does one draw the line, where does one begin to talk of partition, in the context of the NE. Because with continuous borders and with geographical contiguity, as well as topographical, as well as cultural contiguity, such as between Meghalaya and Sylhet if we take for example, where do you start to draw the line and when? For me and as we have understood in our work, partition did not happen in 1947 only, it is from a long time, not just one moment in history. A decision is taken and it becomes

a moment in history, but a moment in history does not only happen because a decision is taken, many events lead to a decision. And the event does not stop at that moment either. So the partition is not something that happened in '47 and ended there. For me, I'd like to say that partition is not something that happened during '47, partition is something that we've been living for a long time. But the point is what happened in '47 and after that and how we lived. We did not live as this harmonious whole; my experience tells me

that we never lived as a whole. But we lived in a state of sort of disharmonious co-existence. We lived with conflict but we could still live like that, what partition did was that it seemed to suggest the moment when we could no longer live together. My experience in living in the Northeast suggests that there are multiple partitions that we're talking of here. Multiple divisions were bred in me while growing up in Shillong where I grew up with the idea of partition, with the idea of separation with the people I lived with and that is a consequence of not only '47 but other kinds of divisions-separations that we felt amongst ourselves. And in spite of going to a school where we spoke a homogeneous English, learnt the same books and sang from the same hymn book, yet the divisions were quite stark. This thus becomes a reality to live with and confront on a daily basis and try to overcome as well. So it's not only a reality that you acknowledge as your fate but it's a reality that you live beyond with and then you try to create something beyond that reality. In our work with the travelling archive, I think that's what we've been primarily trying to do. We left Shillong at the end of the 80s, after I had done my ICSE. Our house was sold, '78 was a time of extreme turbulence, so our house had to be sold. My father had a simple government job so he took a transfer elsewhere, so we left. My sister, was already studying outside the Northeast, so we left and I came to Shantiniketan and then for 25 years I never went back to Shillong. My mother's never gone back since she feels so much pain and she cannot deal with it. She says she cannot go back to a place where we had a home and we no longer have. That's another kind of partition that we're talking about

here. When I went back after 25 years, I realised that there was a Shillong I never knew existed, because we lived such ghettoised lives as a community - it was a little world of our school and our family's friends. Those are little pockets in which we live and we do not look beyond and there were things we never knew. I always saw '78 as a moment in time when things ruptured, when things cracked up. But I never knew, I never understood why '78 happened at all - what was the genesis. I started looking beyond my world, beyond Bengalis, beyond my cocoon and started to listen. The project I work on is basically about listening. We look at sound as history, where sound itself becomes a historical document.

I'll start with the story of Cherrapunji. Cherrapunji is known these days as Sohra. The name refers to a kind of orange. Here is another history, contained in the name where one tries to reclaim the past. A name that is sort of being imposed on us and we try to go back to another name which was our own - this of course has happened with many places and many place names. Cherrapunji was where we would go when our extended families came. It was always foggy, misty, wet and very beautiful. If you look beyond the fog you see a sort of etching in the distance - the etching was that of a hill which were called the hills of Sylhet.

Two years ago we went on a project where we worked on borders; the project is based on certain texts. This text was by Delwar Hussain, a British Bangladeshi from his book - *Boundaries Undermined*. The book takes a look at the underbelly of the lime stone industry across the Khasi hills and moves on to Sylhet as well. The transportation

of the limestone from the Khasi hills to a place called Chatak in Sylhet has been a continuous process. As a part of following the story we travelled to the border with the purpose of recording the sounds of the border - wondering how does one listen to the sounds on the border. During this process we recorded the ropeway, the conveyor belt, the people's stories, etc. In the course of this we heard that there was once a railway station or an attempt at least to build a railway station. It was intriguing to hear this because being a hilly area Shillong doesn't traditionally have railway stations. We went exploring that and kept asking people about what the story of the railway station was that we had been hearing. Our enquiry led us from a place called Bholagunj to a place called Saubar. It is a little village close to Cherrapunji. Because it is so remote, cars don't go there, so we walked with other sound artists. As we approached we heard the sound of singing, little children were singing. We thought that they were singing carols because it was around Christmas time. The place is picturesque and quaint and is apparently one of the oldest villages in India. We heard the children playing a local instrument along with Khasi songs. This was a part of a movement where the people were trying to reclaim their tradition of old Khasi songs which they had written down in a book and wanted their children to learn before it was forgotten in the annals of history.

We learnt later that apparently the British had attempted to build a train line but they couldn't operate it. We were also surprised to know that there was a Ramkrishna Mission in this village. The school was set up by one Babu Tarini Purkayastha.

This became a story of return, of connect- of revival-an attempt to connect places and also face the inability to do so at times. When Babu Tarini says his name, he has the assurance of a man who can travel freely through different races and times, in an era where that was possible perhaps- And then it becomes also the sound of places. The next story is by a writer called Asan Aziz Ul haq, who is an author from Bangladesh. Asan's original home was in Bardhaman of what is West Bengal now. His book is called Agun Pakhi (the bird of Fire)- a story based on his mother, where he describes the stubborn refusal of his once docile mother to refuse the home, this in spite of the entire family deciding to leave for Pakistan. She asked her family to give her one good reason to leave. Eventually she did have to go with everyone else. The land in Bardhaman where their home was built was dry and smoky. Quite in contrast when they reached East Bengal, they are surrounded by greenery. The writer feels alien here and doesn't like the change in locale. In fact he says that it stifles him just the way his mother feels stifled in their new home.

I am reminded of Ritwik Ghatak's film 'Komal Chandhar' where the character from East Bengal who has to come to the Indian side of Bengal stares at the sky and comments about how the skies are smoky here- eventually This side and That are always a matter of perspective, depending on where you stand.

The third story is based on another book by Pakistani Journalist, Anwar Shahid Khan who wrote about his father's story- Padma Surkhhai(meaning- Padma turns Red- in the form of a diary). His father was a student who came from Lahore

to Dhaka to study Physics in 1971 (this is another partition). He got caught in the war. And because he was an Urdu speaker he got caught in the war of languages as well. He had to go into hiding; he had to stay with some of his Bengali friends- he was just 20-21 years old. When he finally returned home, he was a changed man. He had seen too many deaths and the sight of blood revolted him.

(Extract played) – Timur reads from his father's accounts and also questions it. In the background is the singing of the story of Karbala. So it becomes a story of ongoing wars.

'This is the story of a man caught in the war torn lanes of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The world is a repository of strangeness. At other times it is a place of wonder. While as students of science humans have reaped the benefits that the world has to offer, there has been no attempt to tackle the wrongs and the bad, as a result it continues. There's only one remedy for this- travel. Till the time people don't meet each other, know each other's essence, till the time they don't become each other's guests, they will never be able to respect each other nor be close to each other. Those who don't travel are like frogs, who spend their lives in a puddle without knowing the world beyond. Life has taught me that there is nothing black and white about truth or lies, what is a lie today can become a truth tomorrow and yesterday's truth today's lie. Today when I think of it, I think all borders have one truth- one dimension and one mission-that is to stop the free thinking mind from travelling. Maybe borders are upheld to keep the memory of the dead alive, more than that of those living. While on the one hand these borders often make

refugees out of people, at the same time these are the very borders that lead to the death of all emotions, feelings and passion in people necessary for living. People live their lives as Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, etc but these lives often exist at the cost of humanity and that of those who are more dead than alive and even those whose lives have been lost because of this useless carnage. I realised this when I went to India for the first time in the summer of 2015 and visited the house of a relative in Calcutta. This was the same house that I have not been able to see for many many years and the thought of which made my ancestors weak in sorrow, leading to eventual death. The house was in Khidirpore and in spite of the fact that they had to leave the house; it was something they could never forget. Will it ever be possible to really cross these boundaries and make a different home?

All these stories only tell us that we carry our histories with us into the future, they may be fragmented and yet they exist within us.

Debjani: We discussed the geographical sights that affect the partition of the country. There are so many other smaller partitions that have happened. In many ways these incidents tell us how the people have changed, how the language has changed, etc. In the East the border is very porous. People have moved from one end to another in different ways & in search of work. When we talk about partition, it is not only about communally charged thought process, there are many who have decided to stay back and not to move.

The Northeast dislodges a number of assumptions that we have

about partition and 1947. In the NE all these questions become complicated because the people who moved were tribal. They moved because their problems were different from that of others. For instance during the time of partition the Buddhist Chakmas thought that their districts would be in India so they had shifted accordingly & raised the Indian flag. But what happened was that their districts fell in East Pakistan and they were seen as disloyal and began to be harassed officially. As many as 40,000 Chakma families eventually moved into the Caro hills. So the movement of the tribals, the Buddhists, etc, complicate the narrative of the Hindus & Muslims. Another issue that happened in this regard was that of Sylhet, which became the only place that had a referendum regarding the movement of the people or not post partition. The people here collectively decided whether they wanted to stay in India or go to Pakistan. This vote effectively became a reorganisation of India on communal lines; secondly it also helped in carving out a more homogeneous state of Assam. Assamese as a language helped in this homogeneity in some ways. The Hindu Assamese voted to remain in Bengal. While in West Bengal, the Hindus wanted the Muslim pockets to be cleared out, in Assam, the Muslims did not want a partition and they did not want to leave. As a result the present day NE came into being in 1947. So the division happened in the Barak valley. Only 4 thanas remained in Assam and the rest went to East Pakistan. This entire re-organisation of the area was a product of 1947 and it also brought about a lot of counter narratives other than the larger hegemony of narratives. We also look at Tripura in this regard because it showed a

different kind of crisis. The Tripura kings had always been very close to the Calcutta metropolitan culture. One of the kings was in fact a great admirer of Tagore, he was a photographer of great renown and he helped many Bengali Hindu settlers to come into Tripura before the partition. But with the partition, within Tripura you already see the Bangal khedao andolan (the movement to throw out those from East Bengal). An indigenous organisation of Tripura is of the opinion that the Bengali Hindus had apparently ousted the indigenous inhabitants and taken away the lands. Questions arise about who is an infiltrator, who is a refugee, who is the migrant and who is moving where- becomes very charged in this area and this is because of a number of historical reasons and it is not only the partition. If you look at the migrations that have happened in this area from the early decades of the 20th century, you see that people have always moved here, but where have they moved, and how they have moved changes pattern with the 1947 partition crisis. Because of this perhaps 1947 becomes a catalyst of sorts that brings about a kind of reorganisation of the geographical contiguity in terms of religion.

Udayon Misra : The Chittagong hill tracks, is the story of subterfuge which many of us are not very well aware of. When Radcliff drew the final line and the news that Chittagong went to Pakistan was being given to Mountbatten, Radcliff hid the file because he says he didn't want to make the news public since Nehru and Patel would be very angry and the evening dinner would be spoilt. And he says, "It's ever so small a matter". The Chittagong hills were one of the most developed regions in the Northeast at that time, and as

a result it affected the fate of the Chakmas, the Hajongs, and other tribes. The revelation of the Chittagong hills going to Pakistan came much later and the Chakma leadership wasn't aware of the fact that they had been allotted to Pakistan. Since then the Chakma issue has refused to die down whether it is in Bangladesh or Arunachal Pradesh. The second point is about Sylhet, which assumes a very ambiguous situation because the Sylhetis were never too happy to be a part of a backward Assam. They were always of the opinion that they would suit better in Bengal because they thought Assam was a backward region. It became the common demand of the Sylheti leadership right up to a point when the idea of referendum came where they said they wanted to go to India, but by then the Muslim population wanted to stay with Pakistan. This discussion is however incomplete without reference to All India Congress and the Muslim League and the dynamics which led to Assam being a part of India.

Whenever the discussion surrounds the Northeast, partition becomes a central point. While working on the partition papers, particularly the legislative assembly proceedings of the 40s, I had a very eerie sensation because many of the statements and the resolutions passed by the late 40s in the Assam legislative assembly, the debates that were taking place over land, immigration, identity and language were majorly divided in opinion between the Congress and the Muslim league leaders. It is uncanny to see that the nature of the debate hasn't changed through history: it was the same debate in the 90s and even today. If you look at the newspaper editorials from 1946, '47, '48 in the

early 80s and those today, the problem of the Bengali refugees in Assam forms a central point of reference. Right now, with the conversation around the citizenship bill, etc the problem of the Bengali refugee is seen as a challenge to the concept of an Assamese identity, even though the Assamese identity is also now a part of the twenty eight other ethnic organisations that have joined hands, so it is the indigenous identity that is threatened. In the end we see that the whole partition politics was embroiled in the occupation of land, which is also associated inversely with identity of the indigene. Also, pan migration has been an integral part of the Assam geo politics even before partition. But this movement was not always a spontaneous movement, because it was also associated with the policies of the Muslim league government in Assam- which in fact made much of this a planned migration. Letters from the then Assam chief minister to Muhammad Ali Jinnah reveal that Muslim people were brought in from East Pakistan to ensure that the ultimate demand of the Muslim league that Assam is not a Hindu majority province is sustained. So this movement also became a sponsored act by the government of Assam at that time. In 1946 when Congress came into power things changed and the whole land act was reviewed differently and provisions were brought in. Many of the issues thrown up by the partition, still remain which is why the situation brought about by partition in Assam is different from partition in Bengal or Punjab. This is also because in Assam the coming of people from East Bengal with a culture and developed language of their own was seen as a cultural threat to the indig-

enous Assamese people. This is directly linked to the present day number of people who speak In Assamese- statistically this is a decreasing number, which in turn makes it a complex situation of revival vis-a vis the situation in Bengal. Also the amount of literature that has come up through the years from Assam are far less in comparison to the Punjab partition, this is also because the politics of identity and ethno nationalism has submerged the stories and anecdotes of partition. The politics between the centre and the government of Assam has also played its role here, when Gopinath Bordoloi had written to Nehru telling him about the fact that they had already taken in so many refugees that they could just not take any more. The reply from the centre was that the aid to Assam would be stopped if the refugees were not taken in. Despite the antagonism for other communities, Assam has taken in about eight waves of refugees. As a result of all these influences the shadow of partition has been very long in Assam.

Vishwajyoti : It is interesting how we have been handed down partition. For Bengali kids like me who grew up in Delhi, it was a very harmonious existence with the Pakistani refugees. It was an opportunity to understand what is actually a landlocked country, and a riverine country and knowing the difference between them. So a lot of partition is a post memory, post truth phase which also reflects on the way the third generation has been handed down the stories of partition and how they have gone about seeking those stories and recording them. The more recent history of those men and women who grew up in refugee colonies reveals how they suddenly turned entrepreneurs and went

about setting up their own shops or tailoring units, their claiming of pension from the Government department of rehabilitation. A lot of the stories sought out by the third generation are their attempt at a closure of sorts. A lot of the stories happening in the Assam- Bengal part of the partition sounds like a film filled with coincidences, where people who meet find connections from two or even three generations coming together in what maybe a strange occurrence. What is special about these partition stories is the sense of reconnection between different generations.