

UPROOTED AND DIVIDED



MEGHNA
GUHATHAKURTA

I am not a historian by training. Hence imagine my surprise when I found myself researching into family histories of the 1947 Partition of Bengal during my first sabbatical from Dhaka University where I taught International Relations! The reasons for taking up such a subject, as I discovered later, were manifold. First, it took me a long time to realise that my family and I, like every other citizen of the current state of Bangladesh, were directly and indirectly a by-product of the Partition to the extent that even our daily struggles sometimes evolved around it.

Second, as noted by many scholars, even after two generations the migration across borders continues. It is still debated and deliberated in waves among family members, perhaps not for the same reasons, but from circumstances which arose from the same event. Third, as a feminist scholar, I realised it is not enough to declare that the personal is equally political in one's academic work but that it is necessary to confront it in living out one's own life.

I now explain my choice of family histories as a method of research. Dominant historiographical trends construe the 1947 Partition of

the subcontinent as a product of the colonial state as well as a landmark in the progressive march towards achieving modern nationhood. In subsequent years this nationhood came to determine questions of citizenship and social exchange and to define personal identities for the people occupying the newly defined territories of India and Pakistan.

A major critique of this view has come from the subaltern school which maintains that there exist groups like peasants, women and others whose voices have remained silent or marginalised and who may possess a notion of community different from, even in opposition to, that of the nationalist project. My focus on family histories uses the above perspective, both as a point of departure as

well as a springboard from which to explore the problematic of looking at the social history of a people who, though disempowered by developments beyond their control, have at the same time struggled hard to retain an element of control in their effort to adapt to the new situation.

Family histories provide us with a conceptual tool through which such processes could be better understood. To focus on the family



Manan Morshed, from the series *Leftover Stories*, 2016.



Too many people were coming in at short notice and family resources were often inadequate to bear the burden.

as an important inter-mediary site is to see how memories of individuals and generations are constructed and negotiated and how personal identities of gender, class or nation are formed, conformed to or contested and confronted.

I have studied the case histories of two families: one a Muslim family from Barasat, West Bengal, and the other a Hindu family from Barisal, East Bengal. In the latter case it is my own family. However, I am not the prime narrator here, but my aunt who was a witness to Partition. In both cases the interviewees are men and women who crossed the border in 1947 or afterwards as a result of the fallout of Partition.

The structures of both families are of course different. While the family from Barasat was land-centred and hence patrilineal and location-specific, the family from Banaripara was not dependent on land—it capitalised on education and the service sector. But many of the marriage alliances which took place were with the landed gentry, and these alliances were used for resource pooling within my family.

In the first instance almost everyone married into the same district or at least neighbouring ones, in West or East Bengal. Apart from the members who migrated to Bangladesh and one who settled in another village in West Bengal, most of the family lives in the natal village though they have separate households. In the second instance, marriages took place with families in other districts, but located essentially within East Bengal. However, as the members of the Hindu family were not directly dependent on

land, and the ancestral home existed mostly at a symbolic level, even for the previous generation, the residence pattern was scattered.

But a general trend emerged where the inclination was to move towards the urban centres: Mymensingh, Dhaka, Calcutta. Though this was prompted by the need for white-collar jobs, the gravitation towards the metropolis was not always through patrilineal ties, but often by using connections through marriage. Thus many cousins in the Hindu family grew up in their *mamabari* or maternal uncle's house. All this was a pre-partition syndrome. When Partition occurred, each member of the family took his own decision.

Calcutta was the mega city and metropolis of British India, and hence the focal point of migration. Urban migration had increased in the '40s, especially during and after the famine of 1943. Dhaka and Mymensingh in the eastern parts too had their attractions. The Muslim family from Barasat, though land-centred, also lived in the vicinity of Calcutta. This determined their mindset when the option to move came up. Both concerns of property and living in the vicinity of Calcutta with educational and employment opportunities for their children became important considerations.

The Hindu service worker had, however, started his/her migratory trend towards Calcutta long before everyone else, both in relation to education and employment. As the second case shows, this was true for them as well. This pre-partition migration, like any other urban migratory trend, used family connections and