



Carrion birds feast on victims of bloody communal riot.

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 as an important inter-medial 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 contacts to establish a 'chain' which enabled other members of the family to follow. But when Partition came, this 'chain' was stretched to its limits and often broke down. At this precise juncture, migrants became refugees. Too many people were coming in at short notice and family resources were often inadequate to bear the burden. Many 'fictive kinships' and extra family alliances too were made at this point.

The findings of the case studies are organised into four sub themes: (a) Communal identity and the decision to migrate; (b) The

construction and deconstruction of the nation; (c) Resource base and social mobility; and (d) Gendered interpretations of the family, community and nation.

### Communal identity and the decision to migrate

In both families the actual decision to migrate was taken at the height of the communal conflict. In both cases it was the post-partition communal riots which created the context. For the Muslim family it was the 1964 riots, for the Hindu family it was the 1950 riots.

In 1964, Barasat was affected by Hindu-Muslim riots. At that time the family (let us say, Mobarak Hossain's family) consisted of J Ali the father, his wife and their nine children of whom Mobarak was the seventh. Out of the nine children three elder sisters and three brothers remained in Barasat. Only Mobarak, his younger sister Arjoo, and his elder brother Momtaz subsequently migrated to East Bengal, now Bangladesh. The areas surrounding their village were hit hard. People fled their homes to take shelter in the fields. When the Indo-Pakistan war came in the wake of the riots, it was no surprise to see many Muslim families supporting Pakistan in the war. Mobarak recalls that during the war they listened to BBC radio in the mango grove out of earshot, and joyously cheered for Pakistan. People began calling them *Pakistan-panthi*, followers of Pakistan. They felt cornered.

In the meantime, families around Barasat were gradually sending their children away to Pakistan. But Mobarak's family refused to budge. There seemed too much at stake: their property for example. Moreover, by this time everyone in the family was comfortably off, each with his own side business, mostly shopkeeping. That they had their own high school in the village was mentioned as a plus point. Besides, no one wanted to go to a 'backward place' like East Pakistan leaving behind their property. So the general feeling was to keep an open mind about it: *Dekha jaak, jacchi jabo* (Let us see and then decide).

Mobarak's elder brother had already accompanied his uncle to East Pakistan for reasons that will be discussed in the next section. But in 1967 Mobarak's father instructed him and his youngest sister Arjoo to join their elder brother in East Pakistan. Why? And why Mobarak and Arjoo out of the remaining six brothers and sisters? The answer to the first question was supplied by Mobarak's father himself. 'Your brother lives in a foreign land, so you must go in case he needs help. One needs a family member in times of crises.'

At that time Mobarak had passed his school finals and was seeking admission to Bangabasi College and then to Surendranath College in Calcutta. To his family it seemed that Mobarak, an extrovert from childhood, was 'mixing too much with his Hindu friends.'

The threat of the Naxal movement also pervaded the air. So with his three elder sisters married off, and two older brothers to look after the property, Mobarak was the best possible choice to 'send away'.

Arjoo, the youngest daughter of the family, eleven years old and unmarried, was chosen for reasons of security. After the 1964 riots it was no longer considered safe to keep an unmarried girl at home. Hence, Mobarak and Arjoo reluctantly left West Bengal to join their brother in Pakistan.

For my own family living in Dhaka the decision to migrate was prompted by circumstances created by the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots. Here is how my aunt Tapati and my uncle Jyotsnamoy described the situation. At that time the family consisted of Sumati, the widowed mother, and her four children—Jyotirmoy, Arati, Jyotsnamoy and Tapati. Jyotirmoy, the eldest son (my father), was the sole bread earner and had just started his teaching career at a college in Dhaka. He had also married Basanti (my mother) who was a headmistress in a girls' school.

After the riots, Arati, the elder sister, married and settled down in Bihar and Sumati together with the two younger children, Jyotsnamoy and Tapati, migrated to Calcutta. Jyotirmoy and Basanti (my father and mother) remained in Dhaka. I was born in 1956. In my father's generation, only Jyotsnamoy and Tapati are still alive.

The riots started in late January 1950. Quite suddenly, rumours of the killing of Hindus were heard in Dhaka. Arati was teaching at Basanti's school and was already on her way when news about the riot broke. Jyotirmoy was stopped in time from going out and Basanti too stayed back. Only Arati was out on the road. Jyotsnamoy tried to catch up with her on a bicycle but did not succeed. Arati did not reach her destination. She too learnt of the riots and got down at a friend's house. The friend's house was attacked by an unruly mob and they barely managed to escape by the backdoor. They took shelter in the neighbouring house from where they could hear the mob debating whether they should charge in and kill everyone or not. Suddenly the mob was called off by someone, and later everyone took refuge at a Hindu police inspector's house which had virtually become a refuge centre. Since there was no safe way of communication at that point, Arati and others who took shelter like her, spent the whole day and night in terror, their whereabouts unknown to their families. It was not until the next afternoon that Arati was found and brought back home.

This incident had a radical effect on the family. Arati's wedding was to take place as planned, in curfew-ridden Dhaka. Only close relatives and some friends were to attend. Their houses were guarded by young students and friends who formed brigades, keeping watch on the roofs at night to ward off any assault. After the wedding Arati was to go to her new home in Giridih, Bihar with her husband. Tapati and Jyotsnamoy would accompany her to Calcutta. The decision to migrate was made almost overnight! But Jyotirmoy and Basanti decided to stay. Tapati was too young to understand why. She just mentioned that her eldest brother was persistent in his refusal to leave and would not give a clear answer.

However, much later his friend and political colleague K K Sinha said in his memoirs: 'He (Jyotirmoy) always ended by saying that the intellectual horizon of the young Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan was undergoing a revolution. A new generation was rising and it was that which sustained his confidence and faith. The new intellectual elite that was rising was much more virile, much more creative and much more open-minded and flexible and he felt that he was sharing the joy of this emergence of the new rising sun.'

Jyotirmoy was a follower of MN Roy's Radical Humanist Party and believed that he should stay in his homeland (whatever be its nomenclature) and work for his country and not subscribe to the communal frenzy which by then seemed to have taken over most of the middle class Hindu families. But due to the peculiar circumstances arising out of the 1950 riots, he failed to communicate his confidence to most of his family members. Only my mother shared his beliefs and remained with him.

We therefore see that despite the prevailing current of affairs, each family member was negotiating notions of communal identity for himself, according to his own perception of security. Mobarak's family members carefully weighed their well-being with their perceptions of security just as my family debated the idealism of my father vis-à-vis the practicality of siding with the mainstream. In both families, however, the fate of the younger women of the family (the unmarried girls) was decided for them.

### The construction and deconstruction of the nation

Just as communal identities were negotiated within the family, notions of nationhood too were constructed and deconstructed therein. In Mobarak's family the construction of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims was quite a popular idea and one which was earnestly believed in by his eldest uncle, S Ali. In fact, in 1947, S Ali opted for Pakistan because he, like many others of his generation, believed that Pakistan was the homeland for all the Muslims of the subcontinent.

Mobarak remembered that he had grown up in an atmosphere where the politics of the Muslim League held sway. In addition to taking his family with him, S Ali asked his nephew Momtaz, then a