

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 *manabari* 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 Momtaj 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 jak, jachhi 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 Sundarbanath 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 friends 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 Momtaj, then a school boy in his teens, to accompany him to the 'promised land'. His father did not object because at that time the whole family was in two minds about moving, and it seemed that S Ali was merely taking the first step.

But following their arrival in East Pakistan, the political atmosphere in the country gradually started heating up with the demand for autonomy for East Bengal. Campuses were hotbeds of politics. Mobarak had got involved, if only marginally, in student politics. After his arrival he was asked by friends to join the New Students Federation, the student branch of the Muslim League which had supported the Ayub regime.

But in 1969 he was won over by the Bangladesh Chhatra Union, the student wing of the Communist Party which had a fairly strong base at Jessore. The 1969 anti-Ayub demonstrations in the eastern wing of Pakistan had left little doubt in anyone's mind, including Mobarak's family back in Barasat, that the concept of Pakistan as the homeland of Muslims was foredoomed to failure.

In the case of my family only my father seemed to retain a non-nationalist vision. He did cherish a concept of the homeland, a sense of rootedness in his birthland and a commitment to stand by democratic ideals. He met his death at the hands of the Pakistan Army in 1971 when he was accused of possessing an identity which he had always resisted, i.e. of being a Hindu. His professed identity of a humanist was not to be found anywhere in the vocabulary of Yahya Khan's barbaric regime.

On the other hand, my grandmother, uncle and aunts who, haunted by a sheer sense of insecurity, had migrated to India did not have any convictions about nationhood. Some of them felt for their birthland but they never ceased to coax, cajole and pester my parents to migrate to India or any other country. The trauma of the 1950 riots remained and their vision was still tainted by it.

For them, Muslims in the abstract were still the Other and by that definition they themselves were Hindus. Like many Hindu families in West Bengal they used the categories of Bengali and Hindus as synonymous, thus excluding Muslims from their sense of nationhood. Most of these families until recently were oblivious or chose to remain oblivious of the Bengali nationalist movement across the border in East Bengal until the 1971 liberation war.

Resource base and social mobility

In both narratives, the importance of the resource base of the family has featured time and again. This has been the prime factor in the process of decision-making: to move or not to move, whom to include in the family while constructing marriage alliances and kinship networks or breaking joint households into single ones. Indeed, education, employment opportunity and favourable marital alliances can open up horizons for an individual in a new place. But what is important to remember in the context of Partition is that these are also political spaces which enable an individual to contest and protest the feeling of otherness which he/she faces in a new place.

After migration when Mobarak entered college, he first joined a students' party that was aligned with the Muslim League. But later he found assimilation easier when he associated himself with the strong demand for a Bengali identity. The concept of 'homeland' embedded in Mobarak's consciousness was under constant threat. It was threatened by communal uprisings in the homeland itself when he was construed by the dominant community as the 'other'. It was also threatened when he failed to identify with causes and movements in his new surroundings.

It is important to see at what point in one's life migration takes place. Life-cycle is an important element in both narratives. It makes a difference if there is a primary breadwinner among the migrant's family, on whom one can fall back on during crisis. A lack of skills and adequate qualification can be a disadvantage as in the case of Jyotsnamoy whose schooling was interrupted by Partition and who as the only male member had to look after the practicalities of getting the family settled.

Even after he raised his own family, he had to struggle hard to give his three sons a good education. Therefore, the family always stated that if Jyotirmoy (the sole breadwinner at the time of Partition) had come to Calcutta, the family fortunes would have been different. Their conjecture is not without basis. In fact, this also runs contrary to general migration patterns, where it is the breadwinner who migrates first and then 'pulls' in the others.

Gendered interpretations of the family, community and nation

My methodological intervention aims to reveal the gendered narratives in family histories. Since in both the families interviewed, I found women who were unmarried at Partition and as a consequence were forced to migrate for reasons of security, this task was made easier for me. Arjoo, Mobarak's sister, was barely twelve when she was forced to leave her mother for the security of East Pakistan where her elder brother lived.

The incident is related in her own poignant words: 'Everyone got panicky. I remember some outsiders came and put fire to some houses in Kazipara, a nearby village. I panicked. At that time my mother and I were alone in the house. I ran and hid in the sugarcane field for an hour. My mother didn't go with me. Being the youngest in the family I used to be the only one to go to the Kazipara primary school. The rest of the family had attended the village school. But after the riots my father put pressure on me to go and stay in East Pakistan with my brother. Both my mother and I resisted at first, but my father said he would stop my education if I didn't listen to him. My mother then laid out the options and said that either I go or my education would be stopped. I was determined to get an education, so I went.'

About community relations she said: 'I have fond memories of my school at Kazipara. I still maintain contact with some of my friends. I had mostly Hindu friends. I remember no signs of discrimination but there were differences. For example, I remember we had a crazy teacher called Ganesh. Hindu girls used to say *aggy* while answering to the roll call while Muslim girls said *ji*. Once my Hindu friend said *ji* instead and Ganesh sir immediately reacted. 'You are a Hindu,' he said. 'Why should you say *ji*.' Arjoo's perception of nation or homeland was mediated through kinship and marital relations. She got married to someone whose ancestral home was in Jessore. It meant double dislocation for her. Not only did she feel herself an outsider in East Pakistan or Bangladesh, she was also an outsider in her in-law's house.

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Arjoo feels proud of her natal village in Barasat. She visits it often though sometimes she has to fight with her husband for that right. When her husband asks her why she goes there so often, her response is that as long as she has the strength she will go. 'Once I lose my strength I will automatically stop.' She visits with her children, a boy and two girls. Once when she took her boy there he was surprised when he got down at Barasat. He remarked, 'Mom! But we have only come to Jessore.'

Tapati on the other hand felt more insecure in her perceptions of family, community and homeland/nation. This was perhaps due to the disturbing and traumatic experiences of her adolescence and adult life. Tapati's miseries did not stop with Partition. In 1957 she married and began to live in a joint family, which soon broke up. 1971 brought the tragic news of Jyotirmoy's death at the hands of the Pakistan Army, but most tragic of all was when in 1980 her husband died of a heart attack leaving her to fend for herself and their two unmarried daughters.

In her own words, 'I could never find a secure home. I lost my father when I was barely some months old. Throughout my life I have been compelled to leave one home for another. Even now that is my reality.' Tapati has no nostalgia about her homeland, some memories perhaps, but she never glorifies them. Her life has been too unsettling and she still relives the trauma in her everyday life. She is afraid whenever she reads in the papers that the Tenancy Act could be revoked, withdrawing the rights of the tenant. She quakes with fear that the house she is living in might suddenly collapse because it is built on uncertain foundations. Her only concern is the security of her daughters and herself.

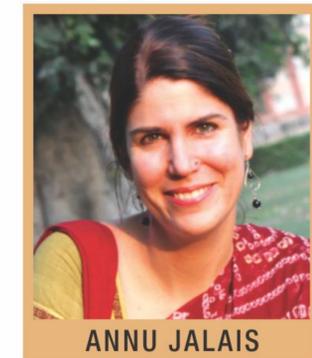
The Bengal Partition compelled divided or migrant families, whether of Hindu or Muslim origin, to render different narratives according to different orientations in their resource base: whether land-based or service-oriented, or located near or linked to a mega city like Calcutta. Likewise, individuals within families speak with many voices given their resource base, life skills, age and gender. Questions of migration and mobility not only link up to the events of Partition but also to the quest for education, employment and the sustenance or breaking-up of marital and kinship ties.

Family histories of Partition, therefore, make a strong statement about social transformation. They reiterate that families are open to change, transforming themselves and thereby changing social reality. Times of transition are trying as such changes, brought about suddenly, create havoc and an upheaval that continues to haunt one into another century.

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ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED



ANNU JALAIS

THE TEARS THAT STILL BIND

Ten years ago I met Gazi in Bangladesh's Satkhira region, in a small island called Koikhali. He had come with his immediate family about 60 years back, at the stroke of midnight, with nothing but the clothes on his back. Although in the beginning he had been able to keep in touch with the rest of his family in India, he had not heard from them in many years. The Indian government had started building a wall and anyone trying to travel to the other side without official documentation was beaten, locked-up or killed. He told me about his family and the circumstances in which he had left; so I, who had a passport and travel permits, decided to visit his 90-year-old brother and family back in India. Following the address he gave me, I went to a village in the Basirhat subdivision in the district of the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal. When I located the house and found the old man, I showed him a photo of his brother and his children. His eyes started to water. We struck up a conversation and I probed, 'Why did you not leave?'