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BOOK EXCERPT

‘Ghoti’ and ‘Bangal’: The roots of the pervading psyche of us versus them among Bengalis

An excerpt from ‘Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian Experience’, edited by Gorky Chakraborty and Supurna Banerjee.

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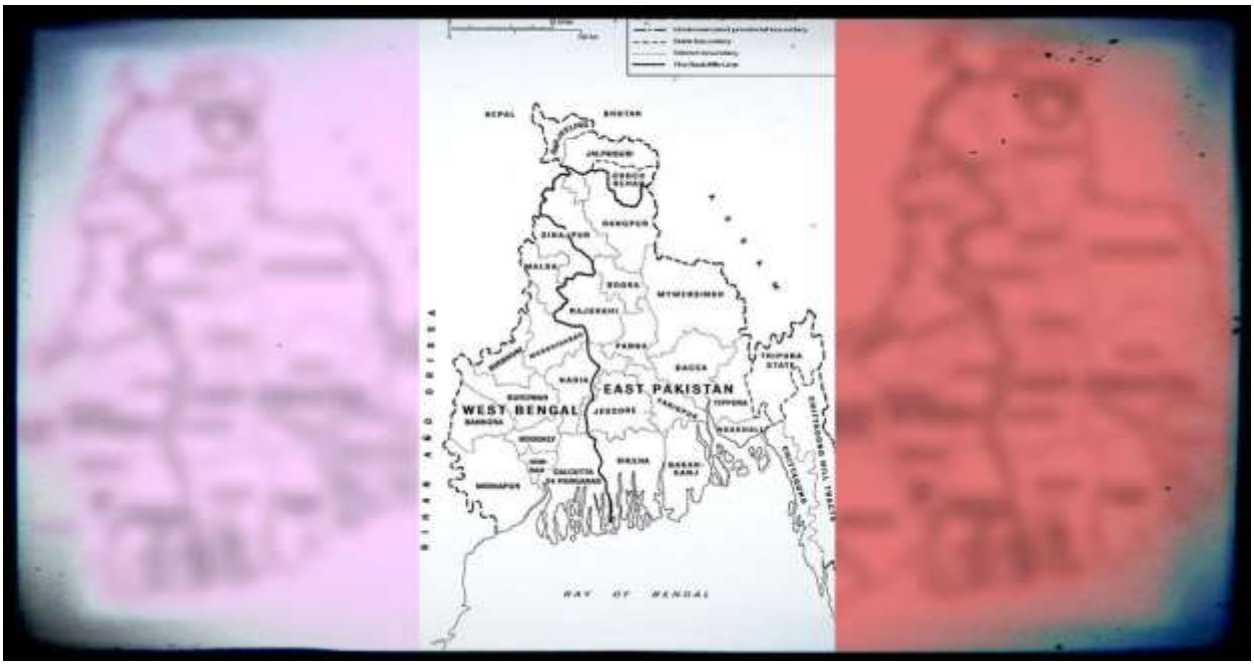


How Bengal was partitioned by the Radcliffe Line in 1947. | RNRCTG / CC BY-SA 4.0

In order to comprehend the nuances of the relationship between these two sets of Hindu Bengalis – East Bengalis or Bangals and West Bengalis or Ghatis – it is

necessary to rewind to pre-Partition days. Although emerging as separate political entities only after 1947, the concept of East Bengal and West Bengal has existed in the common Bengali psyche for centuries preceding 1947. The river Ganges is looked upon as the great divider.

Bengalis usually view themselves as hailing from “this side” or “that side” of the river. The relationship between the Bengali-speaking Hindu population in the eastern part of Bengal and that in the western wing has been guided by this notion of “self” and “other” right from the eighth century, where the “other” is always viewed through the looking-glass of “self”, whose virtues are extolled, often exaggerated, to lend an aura of superiority. But why this distinction? Are not the bonds of race, language, and religion strong enough to iron out such apparently “trivial” differences?

It is true that given the ties of kinship, cultural values, and community behaviour, the notion seems somewhat ambivalent to an outsider. But if one cares to lift this veneer of unity and take a closer look, the reality appears behind this facade of apparent oneness, largely located around some fundamental differences in food habits, customs, rituals and, above all, dialect, which set apart the “self” from the “other”. The feeling of east and west, of “them” and “us” was very much a part of life in undivided Bengal. Middle-class East Bengali Hindus had made Calcutta their temporary abode from the second half of the nineteenth century because of the opportunities the city offered in terms of education and employment. The locals disdained these temporary migrants, who remained the butt of ridicule among the Ghatis. RN Sen reminiscences that boys studying in Calcutta at the beginning of the twentieth century often heard the ditty: “Bangals are not human beings/they jump onto trees/although they have no tails”. The Bangals were looked down upon as uncultured, rustic country bumpkins, unfit to be a part of the “urbane” society of Calcutta. Everything associated with them – their dialect, their customs – were derided and joked about. A popular rhyme among the Ghatis was:

Du char lathi parle ghare,
tabe Bangal bujhte pare.

Another went:

Dhopa jaane kon jon kangal,
Shekra jaane kon jon Bangal

It is in this context that the relationship between Bangals (who were uprooted from their ancestral homes and swarmed across the border in post-1947 to crowd Calcutta) and the Ghatis should be studied. Did the divide between the Bangals and Ghatis, inherent in Bengali society from the pre-Partition days, widen or begin to diminish in the context of the catastrophe that threw open the floodgates of migration? Did the Ghatis come forward to heal the raw wounds of forced migration?

The general perception of the Calcutta locals in the early 1950s was that the Bangal refugees were a tremendous economic liability and that their rehabilitation would make enormous demands upon the meagre economic resources of the nascent province of West Bengal, and jeopardise its prosperity and future development. Partition had reduced West Bengal to one-third of its previous size or 36.4 per cent of the area of the parent province, and at the same time saddled it with a huge population. The average density of the city of Calcutta (area, 32.33 square miles) was around 88,953 persons per square mile in 1951, a whopping increase from 751.2 persons per square mile in undivided Bengal in 1941. The food-grain situation presented a pathetic picture. In 1949, the production of rice, the staple diet of the Bengalis, was estimated at 3.2 million tons, as against the requirement of 3.6 million tons.

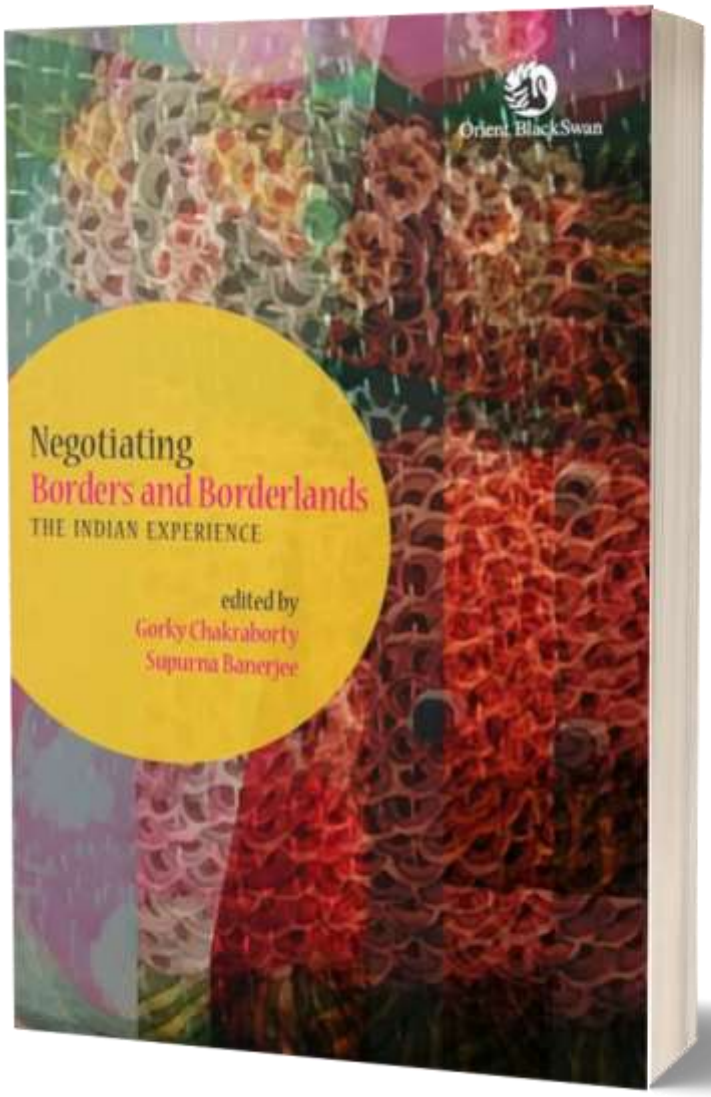
The West Bengal Premier, BC Roy, declared that West Bengal had a food deficit of 2 million tons of rice and cereals. In fact, the state was suffering from a deficit in the production of different food crops, vegetables, and other essential food items. In the revenue sphere, Partition dealt a severe blow as a huge proportion of the proceeds of the jute duty and income tax dried up. In March 1948, the Central government informed West Bengal that the share of income tax receipts had been reduced from 20 per cent to 12 per cent, or in other words, share worth Rs 6 crore had been cut down to Rs 3.5 crores. The government of undivided Bengal had a succession of mainly deficit budgets for a few years before and after Partition.

Amidst such trying times, the host population increasingly nursed the view that "generous" relief and compensation from official agencies as part of the rehabilitation package would act as a magnet to attract more migrants. For them, the simple equation was: the greater the quantum of relief measures, the more the number of "fortune-seekers from across the border". A vicious circle would thus be created, from which the state would find it hard to disentangle itself. The local population asked: Why should we sympathise with them when they show no affinity to West Bengal, and consciously and constantly hark back to their "glorious past"? That the pre-

Partition contempt remained strong is evident in the writings in some leading Bengali journals of the time, published from Calcutta.

A "highly provocative" article in *Prabasi*, one of the most widely read Bengali journals of the period, offers a glimpse of the mentality of West Bengalis. Writing nearly three years after the catastrophe, it is interesting to note that the author still refers to the East Bengalis as atithi or guests who, as per the norms of a guest-host relationship, should remain forever grateful to the locals for providing them with refuge and shelter. A one-way flow of services should be matched by a reverse show of obligation. However, the author laments that such courtesies were seldom shown by the rustic East Bengali country bumpkins, whose behaviour often bordered on rudeness. He then goes on to unleash a tirade against the government. He ridicules the government for dissipating its precious time and money in refugee rehabilitation, at the cost of the welfare of local residents, who have been elbowed to the background now that their province had been taken over by the outsiders. He felt that the outsiders had, with the blessings of the government, besieged the province, while the West Bengalis were being reduced to nonentities.

Sri Vishnu Sharma, the author of this article, urged the locals to agitate against this partisan policy of the government. He asked the West Bengalis to shed their image as the epitome of tolerance. Instead of welcoming all and sundry with open arms or remaining mute spectators to the heinous plan to barter their province away to the Bangal barbarians, they should act decisively. Drawing their attention to the charged situation in Assam, where the atmosphere was rife with anti-Bengali agitations, the author instigated the Ghatis to behave similarly. If they wanted to ensure a secure future, it was time they took suitable measures to thwart the plan to gift West Bengal to the Bangals. The bottom line of the article is: West Bengal is for the West Bengalis, and they are not willing to surrender an inch without a fight. In the same issue, the editor urged the minority Hindus to cling to their bhita at all costs. He accused the migrants of being cowards and not showing enough courage to face the challenge. Come what may, he wrote, migration was not a solution to the problem; instead of fleeing the scene of battle, the migrants should stay put and fight it out. The editorial criticised the East Bengal Hindus for being escapists, ready to flee at the "slightest pretext". It is ironic that Sharma's article was written in 1950; the worst communal riots in the post-Partition era had scarred East Bengal just a few months earlier, the embers of which were still smouldering. Coming at this juncture, to a hapless migrant, the article reeks of nothing but contempt and derision.



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