

**CARTOGRAPHY OF POWER: HINDU-MUSLIM  
RELATIONSHIP IN THE MIXED NEIGHBORHOODS  
IN CALCUTTA, 1947-1992**

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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**“Cartography of Power: Hindu-Muslim Relationship in the Mixed Neighborhoods in Calcutta, 1947-1992”** submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Anuradha Roy, Former Professor, Dept. of History, Jadavpur University, and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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Further, I strongly feel that this work is indebted to the citizens of Kolkata in many ways. The thesis is an experimental effort involving a sizable amount of ethnographic data. Being an introvert myself, this posed a significant challenge. I hardly know anybody apart from my family members. How would I gather and contact a diverse group of interlocutors in the mixed neighborhoods in Kolkata where I have no prior connections? It may sound amusing, but Facebook turned to be my greatest ally. In several platforms in the social media, I posted my requirement. And, to my surprise, I received overwhelming response from both the communities. Almost all my interlocutors warmly welcomed me and participated in the discussion spontaneously. The days of ethnography brought me a wealth of experiences and lifelong memories. A beautiful bottle of fine *attar now* adorns my shelf, a gift from a 72 year old businessman from Zakaria Street. Without their support, the thesis would not have been possible.

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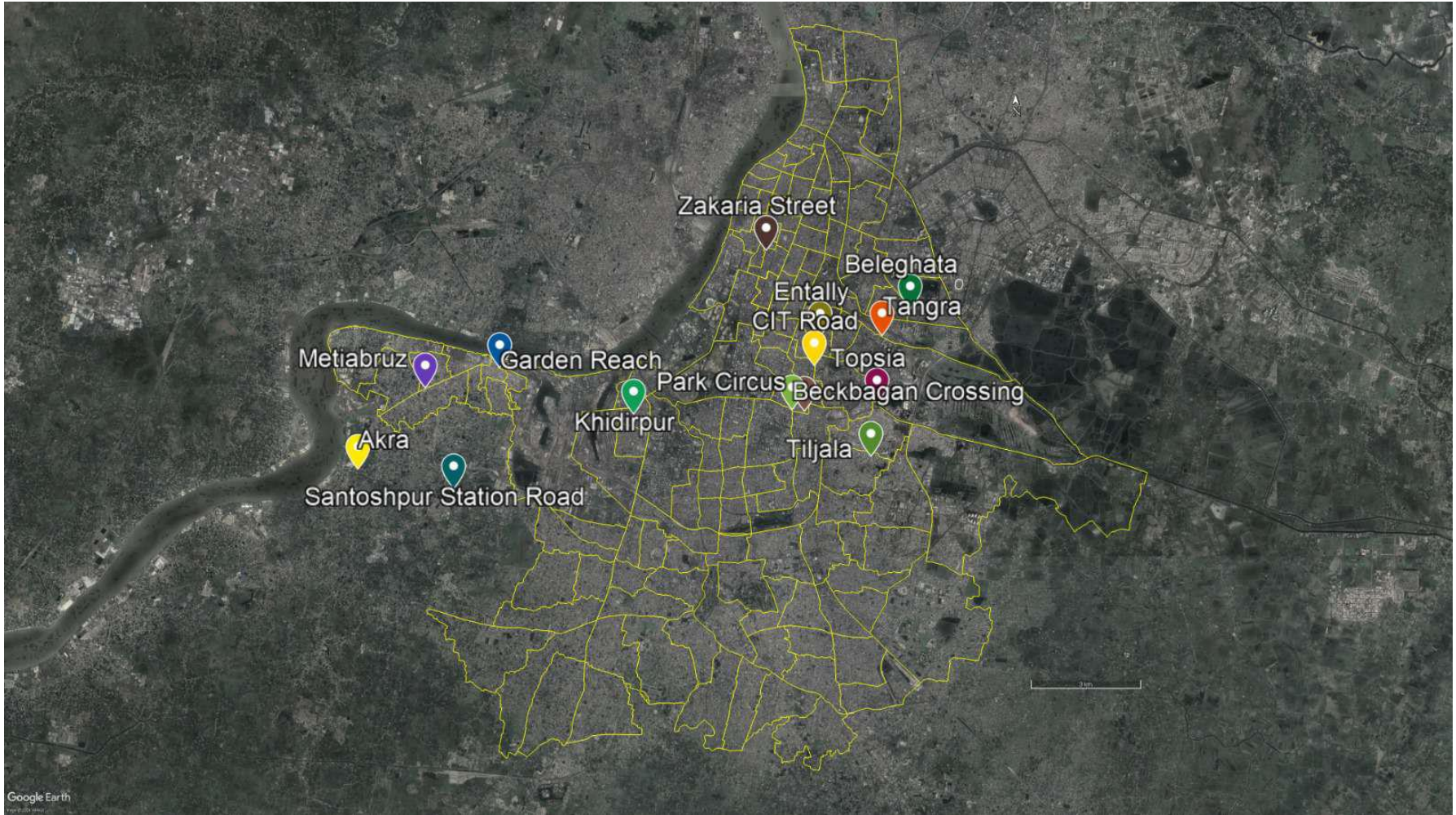
On a more personal front, I am grateful to my school-buddies who, despite staying in different continents, were available 24\*7 to listen to my monotonous rants, and offered necessary solace in tough times.

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**Map : Neighborhoods in Kolkata with Diverse Hindu and Muslim Populations**



# Places of Field Visit

## Locations



Tiljala



Tangra



Entally



Park Circus



Beckbagan Crossing



Garden Reach



Metiabruz



Santoshpur Station Road



Akra



Khidirpur



Topsia



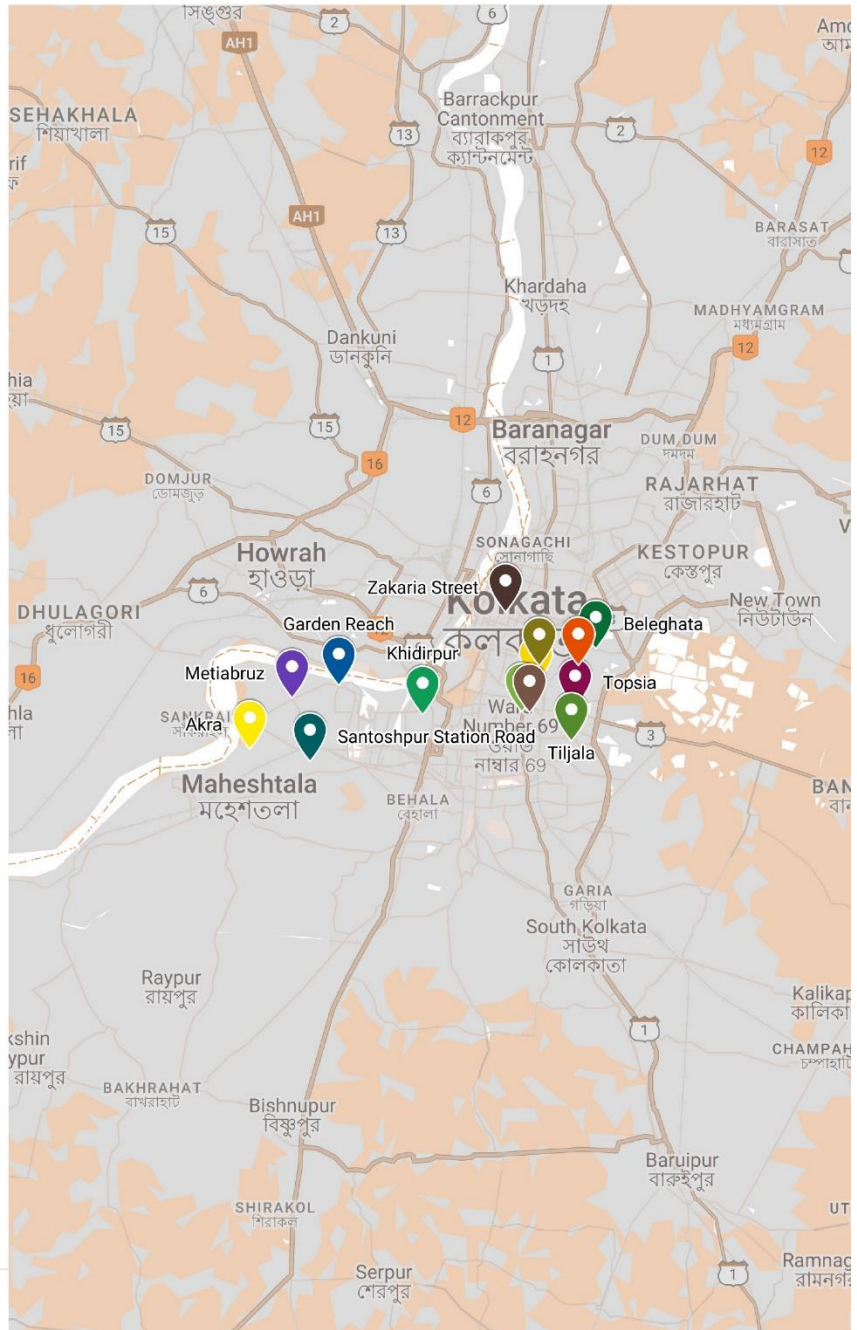
Beleghata



CIT Road



Zakaria Street



## INTRODUCTION

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2024, the Prime Minister of India, clad in a traditional golden silk Kurta, a cream-coloured *dhoti* and a silk *uttariya*, entered the newly constructed Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. He was the center of attention as he walked, a solitary figure, towards the temple, climbed its stairs and entered the sanctum sanctorum to perform the religious rites—prostrated himself, and later, delivered a stirring speech after the formal inauguration of the idol of Ram as well as the temple. Thus, January 22 marks a portentous moment in the history of the country when the head of its government emerged wearing two headgears: one signifying his constitutional status as the chief head of the Government of a Sovereign, Secular India; the other as the chief ‘*yajman*’ (main host) of the *Pran Pratishtha rituals*.<sup>1</sup> The mainstream media dubbed it as the ‘Historic Ram Moment’. The first sight of the temple complex and the way it was decorated for the consecration ceremony was nothing less than a ‘film set’. It was telecast live across all TV channels and the ‘*pran pratishtha*’ ceremony was described as ‘world cultural awakening’, or ‘Coming of the Second Republic’, or ‘the *sanatan* renaissance’ or as ‘the beginning of ‘a civilizational state.’<sup>2</sup>

The inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya is not a religious event in which the politicians have been invited out of courtesy; it is the culmination of the most consequential political agitation to remake India into a Hindu state where the politicians of all persuasions are being

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thewire.in/media/backstory-the-temple-template-and-how-the-indian-media-has-learnt-to-conform-to-it>

<sup>2</sup> <https://theprint.in/opinion/telescope/mandir-modi-media-an-ayodhya-story-that-should-help-bjp-cross-400-in-lok-sabha-election/1937896/>

summoned to perform a legitimizing role.<sup>3</sup> To be present in Ayodhya was not to honour Ram. It was to acclaim the coronation of Hindutva as the religion of the Indian state, to become a signatory to a declaration of Hindu supremacy, to make a cross-party show of solidarity with one religious community and repudiation of all others, the Muslims in particular. The claim to the Ram temple and the erasure of the Babri Masjid was framed together within the imagined power and glory of the nation. Not accepting or opposing it was portrayed as unpatriotic.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely why the Prime Minister declared categorically, Ram is ‘not a dispute’ but ‘a solution’, Ram is not the ‘fire’ but the ‘energy’. Hence, no wonder, Ram is the faith of India; Ram is the foundation of India. Ram is the idea of India; Ram is the law of India.<sup>5</sup>

The coming of Ram with millenarian hopes is not an isolated event. While one needs to take account of the several trysts between the Hindu nationalist tendencies and the broadly secular federalist structure of the National Congress that dominated Indian politics up to the 1970s, the decade of the 1980s was particularly significant for the full-scale ethno-mobilization culminating in the demolition of the Babri Mosque on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992. Similarly, without understanding the way in which the BJP secured a landslide victory single-handedly in the Lok Sabha Election of 2014 and began the official march towards institutionalizing Hindutva in official circles, the events of 22<sup>nd</sup> January cannot be understood.

It is next to impossible to grasp these giant waves of transformation in a few words or even in a single academic volume. Bluntly put, while this march towards Hindutva as a state ideology can be understood in terms of the electoral politics, coalition games, investment of the large-scale

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<sup>3</sup> <https://theprint.in/opinion/congress-boycott-right-ayodhya-event-not-about-ram-but-coronates-hindutva-as-state-religion/1925091/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://thewire.in/communalism/ayodhya-rss-bjp-vhp-ram-temple>

<sup>5</sup> PM's Speech after the consecration ceremony, widely available and quoted across media channels

corporate capital, digital boom, and media disposition; the local/regional dynamics of changing relationships between the Hindu and Muslim communities are equally important. In fact communal relationships across time and space have always been locational and temporal. The present thesis is an attempt to provide a glimpse towards the micro-narrative of this dynamic focused particularly on Kolkata.

The thesis broadly aims at understanding the changing contours of relationship between the middle-class Hindus and Muslims in the mixed neighborhoods in Calcutta during 1947-1992. The theme calls for further elaboration to avoid generalization and understand the nuances of the work. This is a study which is largely ethnographic in character with historical underpinnings. Ethnographic explorations are often critiqued for lacking objectivity because the respondents might gauge the attitude and opinion of the researcher and frame their accounts accordingly. I have tried to overcome this limitation to the best of my ability; firstly by combining ethnography with macro-history, often authenticated by the archival sources, and secondly, by recording diverse voices from both Hindu and Muslim communities, revealing plurality and oppositional nature of opinions within each community. I have, however, chosen the interlocutors, from the middle-class sections of both the communities. This was partly a question of my convenience to be explained soon, but also due to the realization that communal and class identities are historically entangled. Before delving more into this issue, let me first begin with the basics: A. Who; B. Where; C. When; and D. How.

**A. The subjects:** The middle-class Hindus in Kolkata majorly refer to the Bengali-speaking-salaried and/or professional class, while only a handful of them represent the middle-ranging business people and entrepreneurs. For their Muslim counterparts, they majorly belong to the Hindi-speaking middle-ranging commercial classes and a few of them are salaried professionals.

The age group in conversation, has been varied and wide: the interlocutors are between their thirties and eighties. The discussions I had with them were mostly in their drawing rooms, which often ensured participation of the full family including both genders.

At a glance, it is clear that people who are manual labourers are not included in the survey. This has two reasons. The first one is, to be honest, pragmatic. It has not been possible for me as a researcher to get access into the houses of this class mainly because of my class position and also due to the nature of my questionnaire. When I did try, since the questions revolved around their intimate community histories, the limited responses I got seemed to be on the surface level. More or less, they have answered around familiar tropes of being too occupied in work, having no time left to invest in ‘Hindu/Muslim’ mischief, that the events of communal polarization are simply a tool for securing power by political leaders and so on. Also, Hindus and Muslims might not be ‘*bhai/bhai*’(brothers in arms), but they are not also pitted against each other as arch enemies. Due to lack of contact, it has not been possible to gather adequate samples to bring up the nuances within their arguments. It seemed that they had an obligation to portray themselves as ‘clean’ and ‘peaceful’ in front of someone like me who has no organic connection with them due to my class privilege. In fact, why should they open up on such a complex and sensitive issue before someone who cannot be trusted? I do not have the training of an ethnographer who knows the technic of achieving the trust of those who are different from me. It would have needed many more years of training and patience to get hold of their intimate histories. As the Covid pandemic hit the world, it closed the doors of the academic institutions (the libraries and the archives) and restricted access to the homes of my interlocutors. This also complicated the possibility to make inroads into the working class slum areas in these neighborhoods.

This brings me to the second reason. I found a host of interlocutors who are like me—especially from the Muslim middle-classes. For them, I was someone ready to listen to their side of the stories, a safe space to open up. They have repeatedly mentioned how much they aspired to become the ‘true middle-class’ with a cultural refashioning of the self, how they have longed to be judged through the same lens with which one judges a traditional Hindu *bhadralok*. The Bengali Muslims, however, found the lens more readily at hand than the Hindi-speaking ones, for the latter it is still a difficult task. On the other hand, the Hindus in these areas have found someone in me who can realize their sense of estrangement living in a Muslim majority *para* by the merit of being a Hindu myself. Another kind of Hindu response is also possible. For many Hindu households, I was an outsider, who is fortunate and privileged enough to have a house in a ‘clean’ and ‘peaceful’ Bengali locality and has been spared the horror of living in close quarters with the Muslims. This leads to the third aspect of the story. The middle-class Hindus, when asked about what they think about the ‘Muslims’, responded pointing directly to the lower class Muslims who are more ghettoized, live in squatters and shanties, and work as daily wage earner in the unorganized sector. Often, they belong to the class of menial service providers- garbage pickers, newspaper vendors, fruit sellers, butchers and so on.

One reason for such a skewed outlook is definitely due to very limited representation of the Muslim middle-classes in the salaried professional organized sectors. This has, of course, long term socio-historical roots though gradually this situation has been changing too. Yet the fact remains that, in the psyche of Hindu *bhadralok*, the Muslims in general have never been given an intimate place except in rhetorical terms. On the other hand, the vertical mobility in some sections of the minority has led to a heightened sense of anxiety and insecurity among the Hindu middle-classes who have always held ‘education and culture over money’. Being ‘cultured’ for

them works by the logic of caste system: it is an innate and ascribed status which is rarely to be found among the minorities. Therefore to them, the Muslims either belong to the ‘uncultured’ lowly classes or they are the ‘culture-less’ extravagant nouveau-riche. The middle-class Muslims are practically invisible to them. Due to their limited presence as their colleagues/classmates in the schools, colleges and universities, the middle-class-ness among the Muslims is a ‘rarity’, a mere exception. This is also due to the fact that Muslims, in general, find it hard to get a residence in a Hindu-majority neighborhood. Hence, despite maintaining obvious differences from the lower-class Muslims, the middle-class Muslim houses too are very close to the congested slum areas. This spatial dynamics thus re-enforces the communal stereotypes prevalent among the majoritarian collective psyche and this brings up the second question.

**B. Where/Location:** My survey spanned through widely distributed localities like Entally, Park Circus, Tiljala, Tangra, Beniapukur, Garden Reach, Metiabruz, Khidirpur, Santoshpur— across east and west Axis of the city. The interviews with the respondents were taken majorly in their houses. Some were telephonic, some meetings were held in public spaces like in a coffee shop, but rarely an interview was taken outside their neighborhoods. Generally, these areas are dubbed as ‘notorious’, ‘crime-friendly’, and ‘unsafe’—all denoting a lack of restraint and law and order. They are also portrayed as ‘mini Pakistan’, with adjectives like ‘filthy’, ‘nauseating’, ‘congested’. Thus, these descriptions are commonly used to brand a particular religion as ‘unclean’ and ‘unhygienic’, and also as ‘lawless’. For the middle-class Hindu residents, these neighborhoods are considered un-gentrified, inhospitable, and even unsafe to travel. Especially, the western part is often perceived as ‘far off’ places. Just to give an example, Metiabruz is 12 km away from Esplanade but Dumdum is 15 km away from Esplanade. Eyebrows don’t get

raised if some one's destination is Dumdum instead of Metiabruz. I have often been told-  
"Metiabruz? That is so far way/*se to onek dur*".

Now the question comes, why these areas are specifically targeted for such negative branding? Contrary to popular assumptions, these locations are simply not 'mini-Pakistans'. Also, a number of Hindu families, Bengali / non-Bengali both—reside here, often for at least last three-four generations. But Muslims are there in a large number too. The areas under my survey also have considerable sections of migrant labour households and slums belonging to both the Hindus and Muslims. The thesis argues that the idea of home is related to the extension of the outer world, hence it breeds a sort of anxiety among the interlocutors when they construct their identities vis-a-vis the other communities based on their claims in the city. Thus the Hindus, who belong to the majority community in the city as well as in India, feel intimidated and persecuted while staying in these areas. They look at their co-religionists who live in traditional Hindu *paras* as the privileged citizens. On the other hand, the Muslims who had been ghettoized in these areas feel intimidated once they step out, more so in recent times. The feelings of antagonism, otherization and estrangement are not measurable in absolute terms; they vary in degrees and manners; often socio-political events enable contingent conditions for a certain type of behavioral pattern and identity formation. Therefore, the mixed neighborhoods form a wonderful backdrop in which certain contesting identities could be located in a kaleidoscopic manner.

**C. When/Time Frame:** The years between 1947 and 1992 play through the thesis. It explores how the city bore the brunt of Partition riots, the policies of refugee rehabilitation, and how those affected the communal schisms, the riots of 1950 and 1964, how the Left politics made its impact on the inter-communal relationship in Bengal and so on. Initially, I intended to put a stop with the Babri Riots. Indeed, this is the last major historical event in my thesis. Also, this was the last

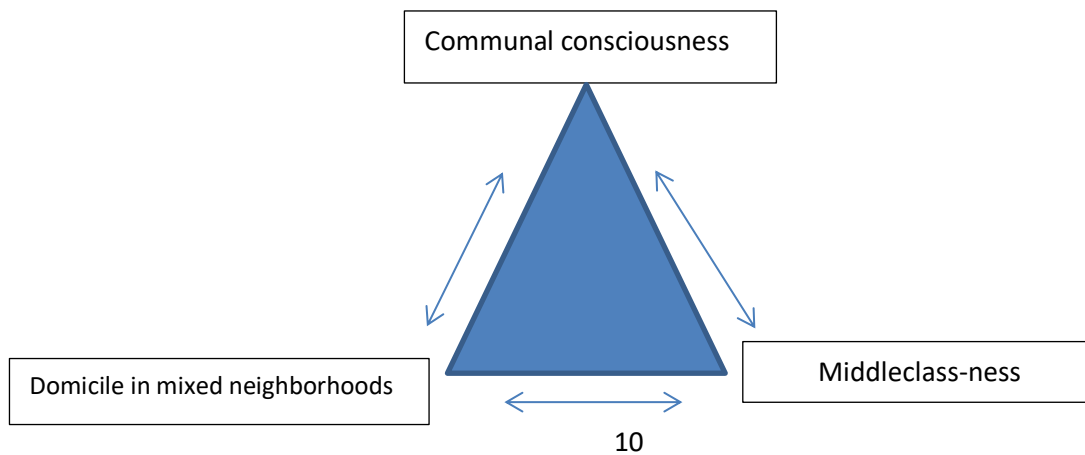
major communal outburst in the city, that too after a gap of three decades. Of course, as it is evident, this work is not a narrative solely on the riot violence. However, the descriptions of post-1947 riots in Calcutta are rare in the academia, and to bridge the gap, the thesis has dealt with them significantly. Yet, the work aims to achieve something more. It seeks to bring up the everyday contestations among the stakeholders in a neighborhood and understand how these have evolved through a series of socio-political events operating at the backdrop. Hence while being in the field, trying my hands at ethnography, I have found out that the supposedly watershed events do not always match the lived experiences of the oral narrative. So in chapter 3 and 4, I find that to delve into the dynamics of communal relationships which are, of course, hierarchical, it is imperative to look into their spatial settings in which these are en-framed and embedded. The city-space transformed fundamentally in the 1990s with the onset of Liberalization and the consequent boom in the South Asian urbanity. This has, in more than one way, impacted the contours of communal relationship between the residents leading to newer hierarchies (chapter 5) and regrouping of identities. Also, the interlocutors have repeatedly talked about how they have sensed greater polarization after 2014 and perhaps this has made the decades of Nehruvian followed by Leftist secularism and an overall pluralism a distant reality, alive only in collective memories and myths. Hence the chronological narrative in this thesis is often both thematic and historical: after all, it is an attempt to locate the histories of mentalities in motion.

**D. Methodology/How:** Based on these premises, it seems clear that the thesis is actually a blend of two forms of narrative: historical and ethnographical. However the archival materials of the post-colonial years are hardly kept systematically, often they are inaccessible under the mysterious domain of ‘confidentiality.’ Freedom to access this information and the Right to

Know are limited for scholars of this period. Yet, the limited archival sources available for the period up to the 1950s on Calcutta have helped to shape the first part of the thesis. The archival records on the impact of Partition, on the riots and rehabilitations and on the marginalization of the minorities (Chapter 2) have helped to reconstruct the years between 1947 and 1960s as a work of traditional history. The contribution of ethnography is limited for this period as the people with living memory of the 1950s-60s must be, at least, in their 80s now. Yet the stories of violence, the way it spread, the way it was managed, and the way it was remembered are significant to understand the subsequent years which marked a very negligible presence of communal violence. One cannot but feel that the lack of violence partly means lack of documentation by the state and by the media. Does this lack of documentation mean lack of History? The second part of the thesis (chapter 3 and 4) is an attempt precisely to bridge this gap. If all was well, how can one explain the outburst of Babri Riots in 1992 after 30 years? How can one explain the intense polarization and small-scale violence frequently taking place in and around Kolkata in recent years? Hence, I had no option but to resort to ethnographic surveys of people living in the mixed neighborhoods.

I argue that though the communities perceive each other in dynamic and multifaceted ways, yet the construction of the majority-minority relationship is not based solely on statistical representations. It is constructed through a complex framework of power relations embedded in spatial settings and social representations. Keeping this in mind, I have asked the respondents a wide range of questions—since when they are here, why their ancestors had chosen this place, what sort of transformation has been taking place in the home and in their world, what were their electoral choices, what aspirations they have, how far is it related with other aspects of life, how they fashion themselves as the representatives of middle-classes, what are the limits of their

interaction with their religious others, who claims the commons in a *para* and so on. The oral interviews, thus, are the access to the forbidden archive which holds individual stories of pain and happiness, achievements and losses, jealousy and friendship, empathy and violence. Alongside, of course, the thesis intends to ask some macro-historical questions: what were the moments of departure in Partition riots and its aftermath which affected Calcutta cartographically and ontologically. To what extent, co-habitation and accommodation were successful in these localities? How much ‘residuals’ emerge out of the ‘everyday’ in the localities? Is it at all possible to carve a well-grounded history of post-colonial communal practices between the groups? To what extent, did the Left regime after 1977 bring about cultural changes in terms of class and communal ideology? What went wrong in the 1980s which made Ram Janmabhoomi Movement a success nationally and also had impact in Calcutta? How did the formation and expectations of the middle-class change with LPG reforms and how did the ‘fear of small number’ affect them? Only a fluid methodological approach can hope to answer both the sets of questions. With such an approach, the thesis wishes to capture stories of not one Partition, but many other smaller ones happening every day, with its own variegated textures of pain, guilt and violence. This is how history plays out in the joint sphere of individual and collective memories which are symbiotically related. Such a symbiosis can be understood if we keep in mind the following prism relevant for this work.



This structure broadly sets the thematic premise of the thesis and each of the component demands individual discussion and justification to locate the work in its conceptual context. Communalism in India is a subject extensively discussed by the historians and other social scientists. There is a big body of writing particularly on the growing communal consciousness in colonial India and how it led to the partition of the country. There is a rapidly expanding literature on the Indian middle-classes too. And it shows how middle-classness reinforces communal feelings. I will engage with these writings in the next chapter. In this introductory chapter, I would rather keep my focus strictly on the third aspect of my theoretical premise, i.e. urban neighborhoods and the place of Muslims there, which I hope, would add a new dimension to the existing literature on communalism and wherein lies my chief claim to distinction.

### **Neighborhoods and the Muslims:**

Since the aspect of the multiple contestations in forging a middle-class identity and its constant yet dynamic relationship with the communal question is the subject of next chapter, let me now focus on the scholarships on the third aspect of the theoretical premise: the neighborhoods.

The landscape called ‘city’ in South Asia is inconceivable without their neighborhoods. The *wadas* of Maharashtra, the *pols* of Ahmedabad, the *paras* of Bengal, the medieval *mohallas* and those *bastis* at the edge of colonial *urbs* are not merely addresses on postcards and in worn-out ration cards of urban dwellers.<sup>6</sup> Outside the cartographic imagination, these are where people breathe with their experiences and subjectivities. These are not non-descriptive dots or amoeba-

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<sup>6</sup> Sadhan Jha, Amiya Kumar Das and D.N Pathak eds. *Neighbourhoods in Urban India: In Between Home and City*. (New Delhi: Bloomsbury , 2021).p1

shaped spatial puzzles on the map on a town planner's drawing board. These neighborhoods make possible the very act of living in a city.<sup>7</sup> More than planned physical spaces, a neighborhood/*para* signifies localized spatial communities that celebrate kinship like ties between neighbors. A cluster of houses along a street where neighbors live like an extended family, a club, a sports field, a temple, and a water-reservoir comprise the space of a *para*. The cultural life of the *para*—including the festivals and the informal associations—reinforce the sense of a neighborhood community.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore a neighborhood occupies a unique location in the life of a city. It is located in between the home on one side of a social axis and the anonymous and alienated city on the other. The idea of a neighborhood mediates and connects the interiority of homes with the anonymous city. Due to this unique spatial function, it also has its own spatial agency and subjectivity by which it can exert pressure on the lived experiences of the communities. If home is equated with the idea of 'privateness', it also invokes its putative opposite, that is, 'publicness'. However, the 'public' and the 'private' are not simple opposites; they should be understood as complementary rather than oppositional spheres.<sup>9</sup> Built in this framework, the thesis brings up the myriad ways through which the interlocutors accessed, inhabited, and attached meanings to their home, imagined the city and molded their social relations, cooperation, and conflicts—largely mediated through their neighborhood experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.p2

<sup>8</sup> Nabaparna Ghosh, *A Hygienic City-Nation: Space, Community, and Everyday Life in Colonial Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). .p2

<sup>9</sup> Sanjay Srivastava, *Masculinity, Consumerism and the Post-National Indian City* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022.). See Chapter 1

However, the warmth of home and kinship-like ties is highly selective and exclusionist. In fact, the spaces in a *para* have always been segregated by religion, caste, and ethnic differences. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the propertied middle and upper-class, upper-caste, and largely English-educated Hindu urban professionals engaged in an urban management of space that re-configured their *paras* as microcosms of a Hindu-Bengali nation. A closer look at everyday life in the *para*—voluntary associations of *bhadraloks* at *para* clubs, health camps, annual festivals, and seasonal theatres revealed the everyday processes that carved a regional Bengali identity. The Bengali identity that the *bhadraloks* advanced was far from secular: the bodily conduct they encouraged and the music and theatre they patronized, all drew on Hindu religion and were marked with exclusionary caste practices. Caste-based *paras* had earlier shaped a divided landscape, but while such divisions were a spatial custom, the association of hygiene with caste in the early twentieth century portrayed non-Hindu and lower-caste bodies as ‘diseased’ and ‘dirty’, demanding they be excluded, through spatial segregation, from the city and its administration. The language of hygiene that the British deployed to keep Indians away from white neighborhoods ultimately became part of a racialized language of colonial modernity embedded in the regional and global relationships of inequality. This new language of modernity ordered space in colonial cities, fracturing city space along multiple axes of race, caste, class, and religion. For the Bengali babus, the language of hygiene got heavily overlapped with Hindu caste practices.

Such fractures within a neighborhood are evoked through geographies of differences leading to multiple boundaries. For example, Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay in his recent work describes the streets as an ensemble of spaces, which hosts ‘life’ as it is, the streets perform a social function

wherein various kinds of boundary crossings occur.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, the streets have been the object of anxieties about social intercourse and forms of collective belonging and exchanges. Such exchanges are unpredictable but vital forces in the life of a city. I have used this argument to show how the streets perform as the line of control in the mixed neighborhoods between the Hindu and Muslim zones of habitation. Often to the Hindu middle-classes, this line of segregation denotes a combination of value-laden spatial differences. The beginning of Muslim *muhallas* also means beginning of dirty, nauseating, congested, and filthy localities which was and can never be a part of Bengali ‘city-Nation.’ Hence, I argue that such an understanding of ‘home’ and the ‘world’ essentially formed a geography of backwardness which entails rigid discursive binaries such as rational/irrational, modern/backward, civilized/savage, order/chaos and so on. Similarly, Bandyopadhyay plays with the binaries between ‘motion’ and ‘obstruction’ in urban settings. For him ‘obstruction’ is vilified by the bourgeois sensibilities of motion. In the ‘bourgeois autobiography of capital’, motion is a painstakingly constructed ideology in the backdrop of imagined and real obstructions, while obstruction stands for capital’s discursive ‘other’. I deploy these concepts in understanding the inter-relationships between the communities. For the Hindus, the proximate presence of the Muslims is an ‘obstruction’ to the over-all upliftment of their neighborhood, in broader sense, to the nation. The Hindu middle-class looks at themselves as the channel of positive changes, as epitome of motion, which stands as a metaphor for energy, positivity, and progress—a norm; and obstruction as delinquency. This became more pronounced since the 1990s with real-estate boom in south Asian urbanity. Certain notion of backwardness is deliberately propagated to disrepute a neighborhood or part of a neighborhood. Once certain places become universally reviled across class and other divisions

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<sup>10</sup> Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, *Streets in Motion The Making of Infrastructure, Property, and Political Culture in Twentieth-century Calcutta* (Cambridge: CUP, 2022).pp 1-10.

and pictured as vortexes and vectors of social disintegration, then it becomes far, far easier for policy officials and developers to justify a wholesale transformation of those places and the expulsion of their residents on the pretext of socially progressive ‘regeneration’. Even that term, ‘regeneration’, is a stigmatizing label, for it suggests that the place to be regenerated is full of degenerate individuals (and the same with ‘revitalization’ – what was not vital about people living there before?).<sup>11</sup> Such schism also happens through the practices of ‘gossip’ and ‘ridicule’, which are used as cultural weapons to construct a narrative of domination and hegemony in the *para*.

Keeping these in mind, numerous contestations of identities emerge within these spaces. The neighborhoods explore the local, ambiguous, elusive, and undocumented components of history and space through its everyday practices, unwritten rules, contesting identities, and marginalized city-dwellers. The everyday goes beyond the political, or the extraordinary, as the space of silent, mundane, and ordinary acts. Nabaparna Ghosh explained the everyday in a colonial city as ‘split in the middle’, with one part attached to official time and the other part alienated from the civil society.<sup>12</sup> Expanding on this idea of a truncated everyday, the mixed neighborhoods too evoke fractured and truncated ideas of home and the world. In the everyday-ness of conversations and through the mundane, we get to understand how processes of community and neighborhood formations get intermeshed with each other.

In the existing academic literature, the Muslims in the Indian cities are looked through the lens of exclusion and segregation. One of the most substantial volumes in this regard is edited by C

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Kirkness and Andreas Tijé-Dra eds. *Negative Neighborhood Reputation and Place Attachment*, (New York: Routledge ,2017). p242

<sup>12</sup> N. Ghosh , *A Hygienic City-Nation: Space, Community, and Everyday Life in Colonial Calcutta* . p14

Jaffrelot and L. Gayer<sup>13</sup>, which produces a fascinating portrait of India's Muslim communities in various urban settings. It illuminates empirical conditions and tests theories about ghettoization, integration, and political attitudes of India's urban Muslims. This volume provides many insightful ideas but does not have any chapter dedicated to Calcutta Muslims. Nida Kirmani's book is another addition to the same genre but is focused on the narratives of women living in a predominantly Muslim colony Zakirnagar in South Delhi. She demonstrates the complexity of their lives and the multiple levels of insecurity they face on a regular basis. Unlike other studies on Indian Muslims that focus on Islam as a defining factor, this book highlights the ways in which religious identity intersects with other identities including class/status, regional affiliation and gender. Treating the Babri Riots, Gujarat carnage and 9/11 as the backdrop of the story, she looks into the ways of articulation of identities at the local level and increasing religion-based spatial segregation in Indian cities.<sup>14</sup>

Coming back to the question of Bengal, Joya Chatterji's celebrated work *'The Spoils of Partition'* (Cambridge:2007) reveals how the Partition fundamentally altered communal relationship between the Hindus and Muslims, with deeply destabilizing consequences. She discusses at length about the mass migration and the struggles of the Bengali Hindu refugees in the new province and also discusses what Partition meant for the Muslims who did not leave Bengal. She, in great details, looked at how the Muslims now reduced to a small and vulnerable minority radically, adjusted to the changing circumstances. Anwasha Sengupta's article "Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta's Muslims after Partition" is based on the similar

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<sup>13</sup> C Jaffrelot and L. Gayer, *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation* (New York: Columbia University Press,2012).

<sup>14</sup>Nida Kirmani, *Questioning the 'Muslim Woman' Identity and Insecurity in an Urban Indian Locality*( New Delhi: Routledge,2013).

theme.<sup>15</sup> The academic literature is flooded with the migration patterns of Hindu refugees, how they settled in Bengal, what were their political choices, how they eventually got organized and carved a discourse of citizenship, whether caste hierarchy had any role in their rehabilitation and so on. Except a few above mentioned books, the Bengali Muslims are only given a tertiary importance in these works. Even in the works of Chatterji and Sengupta, the time period does not extend beyond the 1960s.

The celebrated anthropologists M.K.A Siddiqui and Nirmal Kumar Bose published a number of volumes on the city Muslims which were excellent academic surveys on their origin in the city and their heterogeneity. While they are helpful to locate the perennial minority status of the Bengali Muslim middle-class in Calcutta, they never aimed to provide a fuller understanding of the communal relationship in the city.<sup>16</sup> In more recent years, Anasua Chatterjee conducted an ethnographic study on Kolkata Muslims in her book *'Margins of Citizenship: Muslim Experiences in Urban India'* (Routledge: 2017). Her work is based on Park Circus Muslims and she situates them in their lived social realities by putting the notions of marginality in perspective. Another book *'People Without History: India's Muslim Ghettos'* by Jeremy Seabrook and Imran A. Siddiqui (Pluto Press: 2011) is focused solely on the life of the urban Muslim poor in Kolkata. They are results of painstaking ethnographic endeavors bringing out the nuances of everyday living, questioning successfully the myth of monolithic ideas of Muslimness and providing sharp critique of existing inequalities and the crisis of democracy and secularism. However in these works, the role of the majoritarian Other is either as the perpetrators of violence, or as passive bystanders of all the changes happening to the minorities.

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<sup>15</sup>Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay eds. *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*. (New Delhi: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> MKA Siddiqui, *Muslims of Calcutta: A Study in Aspects of Their Social Organization* (Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India, 2005). Nirmal Kumar Basu: *Calcutta 1964: A Social Survey* (Bombay: Lalvani, 1968).

Contrary to this, the present thesis aims to provide multidimensional views on how both the communities participate as active agents in framing the nature of their evolving relationship embedded in the backdrop of a shared neighborhood.

As more will be seen in the third chapter in greater detail, Muslims in Calcutta are as old as the city itself. Muslims of every trade and occupation thronged the city majorly from north-western India. Some were the seafaring Muslims from Tamil Nadu (Maraykars); some were those from the eastern parts of Bengal who were primarily engaged in occupations such as petty clerkships, book-keeping and bookbinding. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which had resulted in large-scale persecution of Muslims in northern India, was also another factor that had played an important role in bringing large numbers of Muslims in the city. Another process, which resulted in the development of extensive Muslim neighborhoods in Kolkata, involved the deportation of family members of the erstwhile Indian princely states and their subsequent resettlement in the city close to the headquarters of British rule. But another fact that also remains relevant is that Muslim experience in Calcutta has always been spatialized to a very great extent. Early Muslim settlers in Calcutta are found to have preferred congregating in groups, and pocket-like Muslim neighborhoods have existed within the city's geography since the earliest years of the community's presence in it. These migrants stayed in Calcutta, made it their home, but it did not entail intimate neighborly relationship especially with the *bhadralok* Hindu middle-class. The strong emphasis on having a '*bhadralok*' Hindu culture which is casteist and exclusionist, acted as a barrier against forming a cordial relationship between the Hindus and their Muslim neighbors.

This is further elaborated by Nabaparna Ghosh through her book on town-planning. For example in July 1925, the opening of a beef shop in Mudialy, in south Calcutta, led to loud protests in the neighborhood. It was the store's location—a three-minute walk from both Hindu and Muslim houses—that triggered the protests. Sheikh Keramat Ali, a meat seller, had opened the shop after local Muslims complained that there were not enough beef stores in the region. Although the Muslim neighbors welcomed the store, Hindus complained that it was an affront to their religion. They grouped together, protesting that there were already enough beef stores in the city, and a new one was not needed. Two Hindu gentlemen, leaders of associations that oversaw health and hygiene in the locality, demanded that Ali close his store. They explained that the Hindus on their way to work had to pass by the store every morning, and that the sight of beef, placed on display, offended their religious sentiments. The growing, frequently violent protests forced Ali to close his store. The protests showed that the Hindu-Bengali city-dwellers exerted a powerful influence over their neighborhoods, suspending the needs of other communities. Hindu neighbors organizing to pressure Ali into closing his store did invoke city laws to show that the beef shop was indeed outside the space assigned for such stores. Yet, pointing out the violation of law was only a small part of their protests. Much of their protest centered on how a beef store was culturally inappropriate in a neighborhood where Hindus lived.<sup>17</sup> Thus, there had always been limits to cohabitation and neighborliness had been hierarchically en-framed. Going back to the theoretical triad of class and neighborhood dynamics, I argue that the identities of otherness exist perennially, however, they are invoked with newer meanings and with more intensity at specific socio-political conjunctures. Thus, no wonder, the communal polarization in colonial India had immense role to play in creating boundaries and carving blocs between the

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<sup>17</sup> N. Ghosh, *A Hygienic City Nation*, p1

communities leading to greater segregation and ghettoization of the minorities in the post-colonial cityscape.

### **The Structure of the Narrative:**

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first one is essentially thematic: it talks about the genesis of the colonial middle-classes in Calcutta, how the Hindu and Muslim middle-class had a different trajectory of growth, how they evolved through their entangled relationship with the colonial modernity and how, most importantly, they fashioned their selves and the other in this process. The chapter locates how through these processes, two re-publicized religions became constitutive of the realities of nationalist politics in post-colonial India.

From the second chapter onwards, I have tried to interlink two broad schemas at two different levels in this work, which have made the chronology of the events both historical and thematic. At the first level, I have argued, how the internal partitions within the city have always been hierarchical based on caste, class, and ethnicity and how these divisions have reinforced communal differences in colonial and post-colonial years. At the second level, I take recourse to extensive archival materials to reconstruct the years between 1947-1960s focusing on the riots of 1947, 1950 and 1964 as well as about the movement of population and its political repercussions. Further, I have resorted to ethnographic findings to locate the process of '*identitarianism*' at everyday levels in the micro-settings of the city in more recent years.

The second chapter talks about how despite repeated efforts to order the city by the government, the neighborhoods evoked a paradoxically simultaneous existence of an awareness of mutual boundaries along with a lack of geographical precision. This leads to multiple, complex, and

fluctuating relationships that exist between the individuals, spaces, and structures involved in the social and spatial construction of place. This chapter attempts to trace these schisms in Calcutta since her early years, and see, how different planning schemes redrew its cartographies and renewed the divisions, how impactful was the ‘stormy decades’ of 1940s on the body of the city and how Independence and Partition brought revolutionary shifts in its character. It also locates the exploration of communal relationship in Calcutta by understanding the city with its many partitions. The chapter shows how the communal parties on the eve of Partition and post-colonial years manipulated the existing fault-lines, how the issue of providing relief to the victims of the Bengal Famine (1943-44) was an opportune moment for consolidation of the Hindu Mahasabha, how the Partition riots squeezed the Muslims into congested ghetto-like enclaves within the city and how finally the *bhadralok-chhotolok* binaries got re-enacted in Hindu-Muslim clusters overlapping every other forms of discrimination. Each event of communal outbreak led to re-ordering of physical space within the cityscape which gerrymandered the imagined boundaries among the communities. Thus, it argues that the notion of the ‘city in decline’ achieved permanence across the centuries and each time, the hierarchies of race, class, occupation, caste or religion were evoked to adjust the shifting of blame for the supposed doom.

The third chapter is a chronological narrative on the routinized forms of soft violence on the Muslims. Considerable discussions have also been made on the communal riots in the first quarter of 1950 and its legacies. Both the origin and development of the riots of 1950 and 1964 were causally connected with incidents taking shape in East Bengal. Horrific and gory details of Hindu evacuation across the borders initiated retaliatory measures on Muslim minority in and around Calcutta and led to a vicious cycle until strong army and police repression could quell the

violence. While the disturbances altered the social fabric of the city for decades to come, systemic suspicion about the minority in the official circles strengthened and legitimized internal schisms between the Hindu and Muslim citizens. This chapter also delves into deeper understanding of ‘violence’, ‘prejudice’ and ‘conflict’ – how they are inter-related, one leads to the other, and yet these three sociological expressions of inter-community relations have an autonomy of their own.<sup>18</sup> What happens if the conditions to transform this conflict into violence are not entirely present? How to articulate the differences? What about the prejudices then? How far the borderline engagement of cultural differences between the communities was consensual? How conflict re-aligned customary boundaries? We found out how Muslims became ghettoized in specific *muhallas* after the communal outbreaks. Yet some of these enclaves comprise a number of old Hindu Bengali middle-class residents along with extensive slums of migrant Hindus. Hindus, in these enclaves, are minority in terms of demographic figure. Are they so culturally? The next chapters would find out about the everyday contestations of Hindus and Muslims in these enclaves through the lens of altered, if not reversed, majority and minority dimension.

The fourth and the fifth chapters signify the methodological break in this work. These chapters attempt to propose an alternative approach to the study of identity — one that uses the lens of space to allow for multiplicity, flexibility and complexity in the continuous production and reproduction of identities. By asking several questions and initiating a discussion at a level playing field, I argue that the ideas of selfhood are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by,

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<sup>18</sup> Ashghar Ali Engineer ed. *Communal Riots in Post Independent India* (India: Sangam Books, 1984). Pp3-4

and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>19</sup> It is through locating ourselves in such narratives that we constitute our social identities and ‘come to be who we are (however, ephemeral, multiple, and changing)’.<sup>20</sup> The process can be called ‘emplotment’ that translates events into episodes. Thus, the idea of emplotment is useful in the way the people construct their narratives. By fixing meanings, these narratives allow for the instability of identifications, and their ‘troubled’ natures, to surface. Hence, these chapters should be judged as an attempt to understand how people make sense of their world by understanding the dialectics of dwelling within the spatial settings of neighborhoods in Calcutta. They show that proximity does not guarantee intimacy especially in quarters where residents belong to different religious orientation, that too Hindus and Muslims who are the ‘quintessential other’ of each other. These localities also provide an excellent window to realize the formation of mini ethno-national symbols through the space of quotidian contestation. This, in turn, provides avenues for establishing power and hierarchies with communal identities. Thus, like the nations, the neighborhoods are not only lived in and experienced, they are also imagined and narrated. Stories situate neighborhoods between a past and a future; they also attribute textures and flavours to them. While for the Muslim interlocutors, these neighborhoods ensure warmth of homeliness against the violence of the urban, for Hindu residents, this statement works in reverse.

These two chapters, if read together, show how the liberal accommodative outlook of staying together in proximity with the Muslims is indeed rarely seen among the Hindu respondents. As it is, Muslims are not encouraged at all to have a home in Hindu areas. Now, in these mixed pockets also, inner boundaries are coming up fast. The Hindu neighborhoods are forming

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<sup>19</sup> Nida Kirmani, *Questioning the Muslim Women*, p. 15

cooperative like structures, obviously constitutionally unsanctioned, to prevent the local Muslims to rent and buy property in their areas. On the other hand, some are selling off their property at high prices to Muslims and moving away to more ‘gentrified’ localities such as Behala, Garia and obviously, to New Town. Thus the Hindus, who see themselves as the majority, as the one with power by dint of their number and richer ‘cultural capital’, their discourses of staying in Muslim dominated pockets act as a conflict between relatively powerful and relatively powerless for prestige and status. With the political changes over recent years, as the dominant discourse started to revolve around primordial identity sentiments, this divisive everydayness is becoming regularized. The narrative would then be more meaningful with the final chapter majorly focused on the 1990s.

The last chapter has twofold inter-connected motives– it begins with the growth of Hindutva politics in the post-colonial years, how the Sangh Combine has adapted itself to changing socio-political requirements with necessary additions and alterations in their core principles and how the decade of 1980s witnessed proliferation of intense mobilization of ethno-religious symbols. In this connection, the chapter discusses in detail about the Babri Riots and its impact in Calcutta. I argue with examples that despite limited casualty at this time, the Left Front Government did never come up with an ideological challenge to the growing ethno-nationalism. Taking cue from the land-grab drive witnessed during the Babri Riots, in the final section, I have talked about the changing social structure of Calcutta, how a mega boom in south Asian urbanity redrew the social fabric in the mixed neighborhoods, and thus I would close the narrative in the way I began it. I began by portraying the colonial and immediate post-colonial years and I end by pointing out the new hierarchies, emerging continuously, within the city-scape. The chapter actually provides hint towards the journey from the era of *mandir* (temple) politics to the new

Hindutva which is a governmental formation with considerable institutional heft that converges with wider global currents and enjoys an unprecedented level of mainstream acceptance. The agenda of neo-Hindutva with its massive resources to obliterate the pluralist past is relevant for Kolkata also. While the older citizens majorly spoke about a peaceful co-existence with their Muslim neighbors, the younger generation talks about a sort of permanent cleavage in their social relationship.

Due to the nature of the work, the methodology is not strictly conventional. While I have used hundreds of government reports and newspaper reports to reconstruct the years after 1947, I have also taken generous help from contemporary digital media including the trending stories from Twitter and Facebook. Finally with my limited capability and reach, I have wished to provide a space for voicing the lived experiences of the people who feel that their side of the story is always unheard. This thesis does not belong to the genre of conventional history. However, the chronicles of the present have brought us to some perilous questions and I feel compelled to find answers to them. With rising tide of polarization in the country along with an increasing majoritarian drive to legitimize machineries for Hindutva, this thesis channelizes the crisis inwards. Instead of looking at the binaries of Nehruvian era belonging to the domain of liberal secular sanitized politics and the present regime as inherently authoritarian and anti-minority, I have looked into identitarian fault-lines from within. Following Satish Deshpande, while narrating the stories of identity formation, I argue that they are way too complex for

categorization, especially when it involves perceptions of self and ‘others’.<sup>21</sup> The space in which the relationships are negotiated and contested is discursively marked and corporeally practiced. In a physical concrete space, ideological boundaries are built by the residents which are ‘utopic’ in their ‘heterotopic’ settings. Thus, the traditional majority-minority concept linked with enumeration, statistics and demography falls short here and leads to diverse sets of constructions of the ‘other’ and multiple forms of assertion of power.

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<sup>21</sup> Satish Deshpande, “Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth-Century India”, in P. Chatterjee and P. Jaganathan ed. *Community, Gender and Violence*, Subaltern Studies XI, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000). pp 167-211

# I

## COMMUNAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE COLONIAL MIDDLE-CLASS: A

### THEMATIC BACKGROUND

There is no dearth of literature on matters of communalism and middle-classes. In the post-independence period, the Cambridge group of scholars found nothing new about politics based on communalism. For them, in such a shapeless country as India, politics has always been structured around religion, caste, community or factions and motivated by self-interests. At times of antagonism, these relationships were marked by the processes fitting the description of the concept of communalism. Communalism is seen as a phenomenon that existed since time immemorial. It provided the only means for the pluralities or religious groups to interact as well as counteract with each other. Therefore, they conclude, that the phenomenon of communalism is not modern at all—it always existed.<sup>1</sup> C. A. Bayly, in his classic monograph, writes about the communal outbreaks orchestrated by the elite Hindus and Muslims and their linkages with religious sentiment, practices and symbols, and demonstrates how political and economic rivalries have been entangled with religiosity in various parts of the country during pre-colonial times.<sup>2</sup> This prehistory of communalism, cannot, however, deny the significant ways in which the colonial politics modified the existing communal fault-lines through the introduction of new socio-political and economic structures and processes that brought about massive shifts in Indian society. Communalism, as we see today, is a product of the modern age, which unleashed new

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<sup>1</sup> Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal From Famine to Noakhali* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005). See “Introduction” which provides a long historical approach to the study and growth of communal politics in Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> C. A. Bayly, “The Pre-History of “Communalism”? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860”. *Modern Asian Studies*, 19(2), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312153>, pp177–203.

historical forces in the colonized countries. And it is pertinent to note that, the rise of the middle-classes was one of these forces too.

Among the second group of writers, who regard communalism as a modern phenomenon, a consequence of the emergence of modern politics, Bipan Chandra has been the most prominent one.<sup>3</sup> For this group, communalism emerged as the absolute other of nationalism. The latter signified rising above group/caste/class/ religious boundaries and participating for the 'struggle' for independence through a joint forum. Bipan Chandra sees communalism as a reaction par excellence: it is a belief that, because a group of people follows a particular religion, they have as a result common social political and economic interests. For him, ideology and consciousness, which help people to take subjective cognition of objective realities, are crucial in this respect. Communalism is a false consciousness as it perceives reality in a distorted form. This false consciousness falls in gaps created by the inadequate development of true consciousness. The inadequacy is displayed by the failure to develop a strong national consciousness and clear linguistic-cultural and class identities. Thus it is a distorted and perverse reflection of reality where the real consciousness is threatened.

One, however, does not feel convinced about the description of 'true/'false' in regard to consciousness. The concept of reaction par excellence arising out of unequal opportunities under colonial modernity and imperial exigencies often has a tendency to shift the blame of separatist leanings solely on the Muslims. It is, as if, the Muslim traditional elite refused to accept modernity in the beginning and later deliberately chose communal politics to fill the lag in the

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<sup>3</sup> Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (Delhi: Vikas, 1984), *Communalism: A Primer* (Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2004)

spheres of education, employment and political gains compared to the Hindu elites. This conclusion makes the rise of the communal riots and the birth of Pakistan convenient to explain, but obviously does not justify the nuances and multiple other possibilities within this broad schema. In this chapter, I will focus on the process of identity formation of the colonial middle-classes to provide a more nuanced view. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the most crucial period for emergence of national Hindu elites who were better-placed than the Muslims in general in the matters of education and employment: the two most important channels to gain respectability. How far this lag was important in shaping the identity of the self and fashioning of the other, what kind of choices could emerge from these uneven historical developments, and what were the moments of certainty and confusion—are discussed at length in the later sections of this chapter. Though the time-frame of the thesis is set in the post-colonial years, the predicaments of the modern middle-classes and modern communal politics are organically linked with the colonial period, which we must consider to lay the groundwork.

A third group of scholars ventured within and instead of looking for binaries between nationalism and communalism, they point out several other hues within the spectrum of choices. On the one hand, we can refer back to the ideas of a fractured modernity among the colonial elites and how the traditional symbols kept on playing important roles in their lives and making decisions regarding social practices.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, a critique can be directed against the modernist framework of knowledge which is characterized by homogenization. It repressed many voices of the colonized by marginalizing the modes and language of representation

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<sup>4</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minnesota: Minnesota Press, 1993); *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (chapter 3-5) (Princeton :Princeton University, 1993); “Our Modernity”(lecture given in Africa in 1996): <https://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/files/partha1.pdf> . Amiya P. Sen ‘*Hindu Revivalism in Bengal* (Delhi: OUP, 1993). Joya Chatterji, : *Bengal Divided*(Delhi: CUP, 2002)*chapter 4*, Anuradha Roy, *Nationalism as Poetic discourse in Nineteenth century Bengal*(Kolkata: Papyrus,2003). Replete with examples from contemporary Bengali literature, these works suggest a strong tendency of revivalist sectarian political thought among the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

through which they could articulate their experiences and resistance. The politics based on this knowledge structure did not recognize those forms of articulation of popular resistance, that were not based on the colonial (Enlightenment, too) premise. In their conceptualization, communalism is among other things, a category constructed on the premise of European enlightenment and its paradigm of rationality, which became a universalizing force. Nationalism, it is argued, borrowed the same paradigm of knowledge structure and, in turn, suspected the politics and voices of the other. A 'construction' of the same repressive knowledge, communalism too needed to be deconstructed for any libertarian effort. Instead, communalism was thought to be located in the structures of power relations; so in Bengal, for instance, communalism becomes synonymous with the actions of the peasant community. Thus, once the essentialist characteristics and definition imposed by the nationalists is purged, communalism emerges as counter-assertion by the communities against all those assertions that are defined and informed by modern rational knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

For the sake of convenience, we can attempt to understand communalism by dividing it into two categories— popular and elite. In the case of Bengal, the former was largely rooted in the horizontal divide between Muslim peasants and Hindu landlords (and also other superiors), and the latter in the vertical divide between Hindu and Muslim middle-classes. The two were not mutually exclusive and even though having origins in two different material realities, ultimately they converged in the process of identity formation, thus providing the background to extreme bitterness and violence. However for this thesis, elite or middle-class communal consciousness seems to be more important and the rest of this chapter is dedicated to its analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> Gyanendra Pandey cites many such cases from the colonial Northern provinces, wherein the crowd in 'communal violence' is invested with passion, the riot is a product of the primordial hostility between Hindus and Muslims, and communal violence is an outcome of the eruption of temporary fury of ferocious crowds. See Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (OUP: Delhi, 2006)

## New Cultural Politics of the Colonial Middle-Class

There is no doubt about the fact that the Indian middle-class was a product of British rule and the resultant re-structuring of economy, social norms, cultural modes and politics. Everywhere, this class was marked by their specific lifestyles, tastes and values, though these may vary from one situation to another.<sup>6</sup> They were supposed to be the leaders in the society's journey towards modernity. The following qualities are usually associated with this class – they valued individual achievements and individual prosperity, they preferred certain social practices and forms of sociability, they built their own public sphere and they had a distinct form of domesticity, family relations and gender roles, by which its members distinguished themselves from other social groups. Also, they developed certain shared ideals like control of emotions, a particular work ethic and a strong belief in progress. The safest way to describe the middle-class might be through the patterns of consumption that would distinguish them from the Indian princes and rural magnates on one hand, and also from the workers, peasants and artisans on the other. As for their social composition, most of them were upper caste Hindus, Ashraf (high-born) Muslims, or other such high-status groups, and many came from the so-called 'service communities,' that is, from families and social groups who had traditionally served in the courts of indigenous rulers and large landlords. Not only did this mean that they had sufficient economic resources, but they also possessed sufficient educational training to shape and participate in the on-going public

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<sup>6</sup> Utsa Ray, *Culinary Cuisine in colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class*, (Delhi: CUP, 2015). pp4-7, Also refer to the books already mentioned by Partha Chatterjee for a nuanced understanding for colonial middle-class sensibilities. For further reading, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press,2000), Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle-Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal 1848-1885* (Delhi: OUP, 2005). These are some foundational texts on understanding the colonial middle-class.

debates during the colonial era.<sup>7</sup> Apart from these objective indicators, what made for the distinctive formulation of the class was achieved through cultural entrepreneurship. Middle-class culture entails constant and complex negotiations between the traditional and the modern, between the modalities of the local and the global, between the conservative and the permissive. All these processes are geared towards a self-reflexive avoidance of extremes represented by the rich and the poor, alternately, the ‘high’ and the ‘low’.

The initiation of new cultural politics in a transformed historical context allowed the middle-classes to articulate a new set of beliefs, values, and modes of politics. It was not traditional status alone that upper caste Hindus or Ashraf Muslim men deployed to create a difference between themselves and other social groups in colonial India. Rather, it was by transforming traditional cultural values and the basis of social hierarchy that a distinctive middle-class emerged. Hence being middle-class in India, as elsewhere, was a project of self-fashioning, for which they had to create a public sphere and build public opinion.<sup>8</sup> A public sphere may have been facilitated by the British in India, but it was ultimately created by the efforts of educated Indians. It was they, who invested in the press, worked as journalists, created civic and political associations, and published and debated their ideas either in the press or in the forums of their associations. Needless to say, despite a certain fundamental similarity, there were many middle-classes divided by language, caste, region, vocation and of course religion. These divisions were often arbitrary, variable and overlap horizontally and vertically. For the time being I would restrict the discussion on understanding the ‘self-fashioning’ of Hindu and Muslim middle-classes in colonial Bengal.

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<sup>7</sup> Renu Vinod, *Modernity in India: Issues, Perspectives and Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2024). See chapter 8 for a comprehensive historiographical account on the middle classes.

<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle-Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). Pp1-22

The 'self' is always fashioned against the 'other'. The way one fashions or portrays oneself vis-a-vis the other is a dynamic process based on who, in which context, is on the Other side. The Hindu Bengali *bhadralok* engaged in different discourses against different confronting voices – they could be the traditional orthodox elites in early 19th century, or the Christian missionaries, or it could be the upwardly mobile lower castes, or the repressive colonial masters and of course the Muslims. Their tactics sometimes involved downright opposition, sometimes they opted for grudging accommodation and there also must have been some happy acceptances as well! However one thing that plagued the Muslims more than the Hindus was regarding the nature of their origin in terms of ethnicity and language. The Hindu *bhadralok* had their stint with being historical descendants of the 'Aryans' and carrying the legacy of the 'Aryan' traditional dharma. But these discourses of race and language were perhaps more of a concern to the Muslim intelligentsia. They adopted different strategies to fashion their self, based on the contemporary socio-political urgencies, and this in turn defined their relationship with the Hindu Bengali middle-class. I would focus my attention on this issue which is particularly relevant for the thesis. However, one aspect was common for them both. For both, the process of modernization involved a heightened awareness of the self, self-analysis and auto-critique leading to social reforms. Both of these classes fashioned themselves in the light of colonial modernity; sometimes they accepted its presence; sometimes they tried to combat it. This dilemma was quite evident in the way both tried to shape their 'new woman', their education system and their versions of nationalist history. In their quest, they looked to their past to boost confidence for the present. Even though it might seem paradoxical, the process was 'progressive' in the sense of advocating a move towards a secular society. Yet, it could also be a call for reviving a more traditional faith-based life.<sup>9</sup> The formative phases of this process for the Hindus and the Muslims

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<sup>9</sup> Parimal Ghosh, *What Happened to the Bhadrakalok* (Delhi: Primus. 2016) Downloaded from

were not simultaneous, they took their time to set their own pace and this lag paved the way for inherent contradictions between their self-projection.

The possible reasons for this lag are well-known. With the new land reforms, the established Hindu and Muslim affluent families were replaced by a new class of Hindu speculators and moneylenders. The replacement of Persian with English as the official language in 1839 further exacerbated the 'bruised dignity' of the Ashraf Muslims. A section of luckier Ashrafs retained their estates in the rural areas and mufassils, some had giant holdings like the Nawabi dynasties of Murshidabad and Dacca.<sup>10</sup> But overall, the Muslims were late-comers to seize the opportunities to further professional growth under the colonial regime through their recruitment into liberal professions as compared to the Hindu upper-caste elites. From the late 19th century, history began to redress the balance. While more educational and employment opportunities were offered to them, the most important factor was the shift of agricultural wealth towards Muslim agriculturalists, especially to the middle-men and *jotedars*. By the late 19th century, the rise of prices in agricultural crops through favorable export trade and profits due to jute cultivation enabled the Muslim peasantry to have a stronger economic footing.<sup>11</sup> This brought them into a comparatively favorable position vis-a-vis the Hindu landlords. Rising prosperity of jute growing areas meant greater school-going population for the next generation and a subsequent entry into the professional classes. The absence of ideological barriers to social mobility in Islam helped the process. The Muslim elite could manipulate now to their advantages

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<https://libgen.is/book/index.php?md5=141A94E27F673D4FFCD4E239B8DD4D1D>. P97,

<sup>10</sup> K. Mcpherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta 1918-1935*, (Franz Steinar Verlag:Wiesbaden,1974,).see Chapter 1 "Muslims of Calcutta in 1918"

<sup>11</sup> Mohammad Shah, *In Search of an Identity: Bengali Muslims 1880-1940*, (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1996 ).Introduction and chapter 1

the social insecurities of the less privileged without giving up their exclusiveness.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, their insistence on exclusive Islamic identity was no doubt intensified in the late 19th century by the economic competition and political rivalry with the Hindu *bhadralok*. On the other hand, the inadequate economic opportunities combined with the hostilities from the Hindu extremists helped them to form a solidarity across the traditional Ashrafi elite and lesser elites in the Muslim community.

### **The Dominance of Ashraf Muslims in Bengal:**

Before delving into the details of the Bengali middle-class Muslims, it is important to note that in Calcutta, they were always a minority, in terms of their socio-economic and political standing compared to the Ashrafi non-Bengali elites. In fact, the Ashraf Muslims maintained a strong distance from the Bengali Muslims. As they were already in decline due to the Permanent Settlement, the Resumption Proceedings and replacement of Persian by English (1839), complaints about *ingilab-i-jamana* (bad turn of circumstances) and of *ashraf-gardi* (the upsetting of respectable classes) became well known expressions of dissatisfaction among them.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in their attempts to formulate a sizable Muslim community in the academic, professional and political fields, the Ashraf hegemony was hardly challenged.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Ashrafization was almost an inevitable process for the Muslims from the lower orders including the Bengali educated middle-class. After the census of 1872, the Muslim aristocracy had a tough time to accept that

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<sup>12</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed ed., *Understanding the Bengal Muslims: Interpretative Essays* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001). see "Introduction" by the editor.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammad Shah, *In Search of an Identity: Bengali Muslims 1880-1940*, p18

<sup>14</sup> The non-Bengali Muslim business families such as the Iranians, Dadabhais, Karimbhais, Adamjis, Sahabjis, utilized the cry of Islam in danger. The Khwajas and Suhrawardys had political monopoly for nearly three decades. The Calcutta Corporation was under them and they tried to keep their hold in Calcutta and the rest of Bengal. However, this led to protests from the Bengali Muslims. Several complaints were also made against the Nawab of Dacca. It was alleged, that in the name of Muslim League, the Dacca Nawab had been enslaving the Bengali Muslims to the Calcutta based non-Bengalis, who had come from Ispahan and Sindh.—by Keneth Mcpherson in his book *The Muslim Microcosm*. See chapter 1. .

the majority of their co-religionists were indigenous converts. They published a number of tracts to claim foreign elite descent, which were convoluted, crude and ahistorical attempts. Even then, the census of 1901 showed exceptional rise in number of elite titles among the Muslims and a sharp decline in the number of occupational groups.

Despite this homogenizing tendency, the leadership of the Muslim community in Calcutta existed at different levels. The newer generation of Ashraf who had their family ties with the mufassils, imbibed western education and bred a different ethos. They carefully cultivated a way of life which was not in open contradiction with the traditional elite and yet followed a modernizing lifestyle. The founding of the Mohammedan Literary Association (1863) by Nawab Abdul Latif and the Central National Mohammedan Association (1877) by Syed Amir Ali for greater participation of the Muslims in the national life was part of this process. It should be remembered that they all were non-Bengali Muslims; they were firmly loyalist, opposed to the Indian National Congress and had no connection with the masses. For the plebian Muslims in Calcutta, their lives revolved around their functional groups in their respective living quarters, the local mosques and the ulama. The Wahabi and Faraizi movements in the countryside hardly got any response from the city elites.

A very interesting report has been mentioned by Mcpherson about a government enquiry in Calcutta in 1868 regarding the direction of Muslim sentiment in matters of education and employment. A number of Muslim government servants, loyalist pensioners, teachers, students, ulama and merchants were asked about what they felt about their community. The reports suggested that none of them yet yielded any sense of belonging with India-wide Muslim

community. They regarded Urdu as a *bazar* language, their preference was more for Persian, English, and to some extent, for Bengali. Trade and commerce was the most preferred vocation, and government services were most envied. However, the mufassil Ashrafs were more traditionalists in their answers. While the sense of lag was evident, the sense of global *ummah* was yet to develop. This needed a stronger institutional push—the report of Hunter Commission, the official adoption of policies to reserve employment opportunities for the Muslims as well as seats at local level politics, introduction of separate electorate and finally the first Partition of Bengal in 1905 proved to be fatefully important factors leading towards newer forms of self-fashioning of the emergent Muslim intelligentsia. A growing Muslim solidarity across horizontal (rural-urban) and vertical (upper class- lower class; ashraf-commoners) divisions based on an increasing anti-Hindu feeling culminated into strong communal divides manifested through the domain of political representation, education and jobs.<sup>15</sup> The sense of deprivation, the grievances and their resentments that found expression in the Muslim journals of those times—reveals to us an impatience that developed in the 1920s and 1930s. There was the impatience of the latecomer trying to catch up with those who had begun the race before them. To those ahead, this appeared to be ‘unseemly haste.’<sup>16</sup>

### **Projection of Self: The Bengali Muslims**

The coming of the Bengali Muslim middle-class was a result of several interlinked processes. While the traditional rural Muslim elites were consolidating into a *jotedar* class, their sons were admitted to the non-traditional schools in the city. Despite retaining strong connections with the

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<sup>15</sup> Mohammad Shah, *In Search of an Identity: Bengali Muslims 1880-1940*, p.20

<sup>16</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920–1947*, (Delhi: OUP,2014). p121

*ulama*, they were also approached by western educated leaders in times of political necessity to obtain electoral support.<sup>17</sup> Improved communication, modern education, growth of press, colonial reforms and Islamization drives gradually eroded the isolation of villages and a rapport was sought by the *mullahs* for a common Islamic identity.<sup>18</sup> By the second decade of the twentieth century, the social context of the *bhadralok* was ready in the Muslim community. It encompassed individuals primarily from intermediate ranks such as landowners, administrative, educational, and judicial service-holders, and businessmen. It also included some members from the lower strata of the *ajlaf* and some remnants of the pre-modern elite.<sup>19</sup>

The Bengali Muslim intelligentsia had to face thorny issues of belonging not only with the Hindu intelligentsia but first, with their own co-religionists. The questions of ethnicity and language had determining roles in their self-fashioning. This can best be documented through the way they represented themselves in their own public sphere. Hence, there was an awareness that things had to change; there was a thought process involved in this desire to change, and an attempt to build up a public opinion through the print media.

### ***Drive to acquire an 'authentic' Islamic identity: Internal purification***

The attempts to project themselves as true Ashraf were always there. Ashrafization meant double bonus: social status as well as an authentic Islamic identity. By the late nineteenth century, there were more than a dozen Bengali Muslim journals, nearly all of them bore Arabic and Persian names. The personal names went Islamized too. Hindu surnames such as, Chand, Pal or Dutta were dropped for the converts and the *Anjumans* made sure that newborn Muslims were given

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<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Shah, , *In Search of an Identity: Bengali Muslims 1880-1940*, p21

<sup>18</sup> R. Ahmed ed. *Understanding the Bengal Muslims: Interpretative Essays*, "Introduction".

<sup>19</sup> P Ghosh, *What Happened to the Bhadrakok*, p97

Perso-Arabic names.<sup>20</sup> Some of the contestations regarding the purity of religion and traditions manifested through quotidian life practices: for example, the use of the Gandhi *topi* by Muslims, or prefixing a Muslim name with ‘Sree’ was deemed ‘against Islamic religious principles’. Needless to say, symbolic things like the song ‘*Vande Mataram*’ were to be rejected as an infringement of Muslim identity.<sup>21</sup> Drives for such internal purification went on even in the 1920s and the 1930s. Ismail Hussain Siraji, the famous author and an ideologue of Bengali Muslim cultural revival, noted the ‘influence of *Hinduani*’ (that is, Hindu-like behaviour) in the Muslim community: ‘like taking vows in front of Hindu deities, or the habit of using charms and swearing in the name of [Hindu deities] Kali, Durga, the deity at Kamaksha, and so on’. An authority no less than Maniruzzaman Islamabadi (famous poet and Muslim ideologue) held the view that in the form of reverence for the *pirs*, the Hindu custom of idol worship had crept in among the Muslim devotees.<sup>22</sup> Moulavi Sheikh Abdul Jabbar’s *Islam-Chitra O Samaj* or Siraji’s *Adab Kayda Siksha* noted how, with the decline of the community, the older social grace and etiquette were disappearing.

### ***Drive to acquire an ‘authentic’ Islamic identity: Pan-Islamic tendencies***

If one strand of consolidation of self was centered on the internal purification, the other strand was projected westwards, by way of nurturing a pan-Islamic identity. The Bengali Muslims had always been fascinated by the Middle East since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The ballads of Greco-Turkish Islamic leaders were preached regularly among the rural Muslims by local religious leaders.<sup>23</sup> The Wahabi and Faraizi *mullah* drove the gaze of the Muslim peasants beyond the boundaries of

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<sup>20</sup> R. Ahmed ed., *The Bengal Muslims*, chapter 4 “A Crisis of Identity: Bengali or Muslim”, pp106-133

<sup>21</sup> S Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920–1947* p116

<sup>22</sup> S Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920–1947*. p117

<sup>23</sup> R. Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims:1871-1906 A Quest for Identity* (New Delhi: OUP), 1981. , p.108-109

British India. The Bengali Muslim press welcomed any sign of progress and improvement within Ottoman Empire, no matter in what sphere. As distant as it might seem, for example, in 1903, *the Islam Pracharak* covered a press report on the unprecedented profit declared by the Osmania bank and the annual dividend of 6.5% paid to share-holders and interpreted it as a mark of Ottoman Empire's progress.<sup>24</sup> The moments of crisis such as the Balkan War (1912-13) and the dismantling of the Khilafat (1920) also witnessed the highest points when the Muslims felt their utmost sense of belonging with the global Islamic community, both the Urdu and the Bengali press run by the Muslims flourished during these years.

The continuing fascination with a larger Islamic ethos with a pan-Islamic identity also highlighted the shortcomings in India or Bengal and spurred a desire to change. Perhaps the anxieties at home found some solace by taking refuge to triumphant stories of the Muslims outside India. Mustafa Nurul Islam noted:

A person who is himself unfortunate feels the pride in the possession of his relatives...the Muslims of India are now extremely unfortunate... partly due to inability and ignorance stemming from past mistakes and partly due to the impediments and pressure brought to bear upon by the more advanced conditions of neighboring community.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, a paranoia about Hindus, their domination and 'insidious mean-mindedness' dominated many reports in the Muslim journals. How eligible Muslim candidates were deprived of rightful employment through Hindu machination also coexisted with a sense of admiration for what were taken to be Hindu achievements.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim public opinion as reflected in the Bengal press, 1901-1930*. (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1973), p32

<sup>25</sup> Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim public opinion as reflected in the Bengal press, 1901-1930*, chapter 1, p35

<sup>26</sup> P Ghosh, *What Happened to the Bhadrakalok*, p106

### *The Predicament of Language: The Existing Scenario*

This brings to the next question of identity: the language problem. In the process of cultural redefinition, *Musalmani Bangla* became a contested symbolic issue. Persian words in Bengali vocabulary were numerous in the eighteenth century as the result of interaction between Persian and Bengali languages since the thirteenth century. A much larger percentage of Persian or Urdu words were used in the legends of Muslim saints and romances produced in the nineteenth century in the tradition of *punthi* (manuscript) literature, printed in crude printing presses in Calcutta, somewhat like the chapbooks in England.<sup>27</sup> This genre of *dobhashi* (mixed lingo) literature was scarcely taken notice of by the elites of Bengal, Hindu or Muslim. Arabic, as the language of the Koran, as a standardized lingua franca of Islam, could only be successful in the limited extent of creating a sense of ‘communitas’ but was not enough to unite all Muslims under one banner. Whatever the notional importance a sacred text with a symbolic language might have, if it is divorced from realities of life, it cannot form the basis of a community.<sup>28</sup>

Again, it was also true that Bengali as a language was sanskritized at the hands of the Hindu literati during early colonial years. Yet, for an upcoming Bengali Muslim middle-class, the literary culture of *punthi* and the shared idiom of *dobhasi* or *Musalmani Bangla* belonged irretrievably to a bygone era. The changes in literary sensibilities produced by colonial modernity sought a new language for expression, distinct from both the Sanskritized Bengali of the Hindus as well as the *dobhashi* or *Islami Bangla* of the *puthi* tradition. Urdu was never an option for majority of the Bengali Muslim publicists (even during the Khilafat Movement), they vociferously reinforced their differences with Muslim populations of north and northwestern

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<sup>27</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920–1947*. P.145

<sup>28</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed ed., *Understanding Bengal Muslims*, p10

India. It was now the time for the middle-class Muslim intelligentsia to redefine their cultural orientation which was hung between Bengaliness and Muslim-ness.<sup>29</sup> While the Bengali language was the common heritage of the entire Bengali nation, consisting of both Muslims and Hindus, the Muslims needed their own literature to build up the Islamic character of the younger generation. At this juncture, while on the one hand, there was a growing schism with the Hindu majoritarian cultural order, a section of Muslim intelligentsia also aspired for a literary sphere similar to the Hindu-Brahmo literary one. Time and again, Bengali Muslim publicists reiterated the need to emulate the 'Hindu awakening'. Bengali Muslim publicists embarked on a path that was remarkably open-ended, self-critical and invested with a rare form of versatility.<sup>30</sup> But this path was short-lived and entailed several challenges.

### ***Emergence of a Bengali-Muslim public sphere: Initial hurdles***

Upto now, I have discussed the context in which the Bengali Muslims had to develop their own independent public sphere. The next thing question that arises, whom was it created for, and who would be the contributors?

As already demonstrated, even at the turn of the twentieth century, the *punthi* literature dominated the literary scenes for the Bengali Muslims. Further, the first Muslim-run periodicals were also published and patronized by theologians, the *maulavis* and *maulanas* and devoid of creative genres and compositions on science and rational thought, many of the journals were deployed as mouthpieces of different Islamic religious sects.<sup>31</sup> Yet, despite being nurtured in the *madrasah/maktab* based Arabic-Persian and Urdu culture, the early intellectuals had realized that

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<sup>29</sup> P. Ghosh *What Happened to the Bhadrakol*, p106

<sup>30</sup> Samarpita Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2020). P192

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p200

to reach out to the people at large, they needed to publish in Bengali.<sup>32</sup> Also, interestingly, this puritanical approach did not altogether rule out the possibility of a Hindu-Muslim amity. In 1897, in *Hafez*, Sheikh Osman Ali had argued in favour of Muslim participation in the Indian National Congress. In *Al-Islam*, a clearly religious paper, in 1915, Sheikh Habibur Rahman would declare that promoting the united nationhood of Hindus and Muslims was a compulsory duty for all, while Maniruzzaman Islamabadi wrote that inciting Hindu-Muslim conflict was a sinful act.<sup>33</sup>

Upto 1918, only a handful of periodicals were run by non-theologians: Syed Emdad Ali's *Nabanur*, Mohammad Shahidullah's *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* and of course, Mohammad Nasiruddin's *Saogat* (1918).<sup>34</sup> *Saogat* from the beginning aimed to be different, more liberal than the others. But this was easier said than done. Apart from a crunch in capital, the *Saogat* editor identified several other obstacles that made periodical publishing much more a labor of love than a profitable commercial enterprise. It was difficult to find artists to design the cover and make illustrations and cartoons, skilled craftsmen were also rare who would prepare blocks for half-tone and colored prints. No Muslim youth were available in these professions, for fear of committing sin, and inviting the wrath of the *ulema*. Nasiruddin encountered a great difficulty to find a press suitable for quality print. Most Muslim-owned presses like the Islamiya Art Press on Kareya Road used to print inexpensive *punthi* literature using paper and printing of inferior quality. The bigger Hindu-owned presses were much more expensive and many did not possess Arabic types that were needed alongside Bengali ones. The Hindu manager of the Fine Art Printing Syndicate located in the Jorasanko area finally agreed to print *Saogat* only after

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<sup>32</sup> P Ghosh, *What Happened to the Bhadrakalok*, p98

<sup>33</sup> P Ghosh. *What Happened to the Bhadrakalok*, P99

<sup>34</sup> Samarpita Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* p p 205-208

Nasiruddin had convinced him that *Saogat* would be a modern and progressive journal. Apart from these, a perennial hurdle was the hostility from orthodox Muslims towards photographs of men and especially women as well as un-Islamic content in the periodical.

Even if the publishers and editors managed to bring out their journals, the chief impediment was absence of competent writers. The liberal journals had to turn to Hindu and Brahmo writers to fill the lacuna. Also, the number of Bengali Muslims who could appreciate these writings was very limited in the early twentieth century. Ordinary Hindu readers did not purchase these periodicals as they were managed by Muslims and their content was primarily Islamic. Further, most Muslim readers who chose to subscribe to periodicals, it was observed, had a preference for the established mainstream Hindu journals over the Muslim ones. Therefore, the task faced by the Bengali Muslim community was seen as a particularly uphill one, given that they had far less time to attain what the Hindus were seen to have accomplished over a century's time.

### ***Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Parishad: The Breakthrough in the 1920s***

Expressing strong reservations about the nature of the proceedings at literary conferences organized under the auspices of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, the Muslim intelligentsia complained that it was almost impossible for a Bengali Muslim to relate to the innate dispositions of the Hindu religion (*bhab*) and idolatry (*pouttalikata*) and to participate “without losing sense of his self”.<sup>35</sup> A parallel literary academy, the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Parishat was established in 1918, to initiate an autonomous (*svatantra*) literary agenda for Bengali Muslims as a necessary precondition for literary exchanges. In his presidential address at the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Parishat, Mohammad Shahidullah sorted out the languages

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<sup>35</sup> S. Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* p.191

according to their respective roles in the lives of Bengal's Muslims.<sup>36</sup> In his scheme, Arabic was the language of the scriptures (*dharma bhasha*), Persian, the language of Islamic civilization (*sabhya bhasha*), Urdu was the language of communication for Indian Muslims (*antarjanin bhasha*), English, the official language (*raj bhasha*) and finally, Bengali, which was the mother language (*matribhasha*) of a majority of Bengal's Muslims. It promoted a period of liberal intellectual spirit which was also followed by a section of Bengali Muslim periodicals around this time.

The literary monthly *Saogat*, started in 1918, had the longest life among Muslim literary journals; M. Nasiruddin the editor, became the nucleus of a group of liberal writers. More radical but ephemeral was *Naba Yug*, a daily which lasted only a year, 1920–1. It was patronized by A.K. Fazlul Huq and edited by the young communist, Muzaffar Ahmed, with his friend, Kazi Nazrul Islam. Then followed *Dhumketu* in 1922, which was edited by Kazi Nazrul Islam, who gave full-throated support to Hindu–Muslim unity and to the cause of ending India's political subjection. Meanwhile anti-imperialism had started broadening into socialism largely under the impact of Bolshevik Revolution. It appealed to Hindus and Muslims alike but the first socialist nucleus in Bengal was predominantly Muslim. The Muslim communitarian feeling now acquired a new dimension. Their transformation involved a rejection of mainstream politics based on the identities of 'nation' and 'community'—they tried to give shape to a new form of anti-imperialism by stepping out of the confines dominated by Hindu *bhadralak* and of perceptions of Muslim exclusivity. They also reflected the modernizing social aspirations of the Bengali

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<sup>36</sup> S. Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, p220

Muslim middle-classes by stressing the cultural politics of ‘self-improvement’ which included the goal of becoming equal to the Hindu middle-classes in terms of education, culture and socio-economic achievements. The socialist ideology was also found to be compatible with the notion of Islamic brotherhood and it was hoped that it would end poverty and illiteracy of the deprived Muslims. The weekly *Langal* was started in April 1925 and later merged with *Ganabane* in August 1926; the latter was edited by Muzaffar Ahmad, and the former by Nazrul Islam—both propagated socialism and combated communalism.<sup>37</sup>

Another radical trend in the Bengali Muslim thought was represented by the *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* (The Movement for Intellectual Freedom), which accepted only reason and creativity/*Srishtidharma* as the reliable guide to life. Kazi Abdul Wadud took the lead in founding the Muslim Sahitya Samaj (Dacca, 1926) along with this movement. This group brought out the journal *Shikha* for five years from 1927, to fight obscurantism and promote rational criticism of contemporary society. They also aimed for a combined life of Muslims and Hindus based on knowledge and activities (*Jnan O Karma*). Apart from *Shikha*, there were three other journals with which the new crusaders were involved: *Abhijan* (Campaign), *Tarun Patra* (Journal of the Youth) and *Jagaran* (Awakening)—all of which had short life. *Shikha* was published from 1927 to 1931, but towards the end, it lost its radical edge. Indeed, the short tenure of these journals was indicative of the hostile circumstances in which they functioned.<sup>38</sup>

It is noteworthy that these new writers did not call for reform because of any threat-perception about the Hindus, but because they believed their community needed to evolve in keeping with the times. What was critical was that these men knew, were fully conscious, that they were

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<sup>37</sup> Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1913–1929*. (New Delhi: Tulika Books), 2011. Pp65-78

<sup>38</sup> P Ghosh *What Happened to the Bhadrakalok*, p113

different, and were indeed challenging the society with their ideas.<sup>39</sup> Their broad thrust was to introduce or to rediscover the fundamental human element in Islam, and to reject the ritualistic and mechanical lifeless Islam which they thought was being practised. A major strategy adopted towards this was to try and view the Prophet not so much as a divine figure, but as an ideal human being.<sup>40</sup> In the late 1920s, Akram Khan published a series of essays in the monthly *Muhammadi*, questioning the position of Wadud and his friends. His point was that the call for reforming Islam was misplaced, because a deeper reading of the Koran reveals that many of the issues raised were already answered in the holy text. What should be carefully noted is that Akram Khan was not asking for a blind acceptance of Islam, but a reasoned one, in which there were aspects where he himself differed with the conventional practice of the faith. His charge against Wadud and others were—they did not know their Islam, that it was not so much Islam, as its wrong interpretations and false beliefs which were at the root of the problem.<sup>41</sup>

To sum up, existing communal animosities and day-today cultural fault-lines made the emergence of Muslim literary sphere as an ‘other’/ alternative literary sphere, its historical formation having to bear all the entanglements of political acrimonies and social detachments. The responses of Muslim Bengali intelligentsia to systematic yet informal cultural majoritarianism of Hindu Bengali upper-caste elites ranged from a stronger assertion of Islamic identity to liberal compromises. In short, the battle for unity across the communal divide was not yet lost in the 1920s. Indeed, it has been argued by Samarpita Mitra, that a strong passion for Bangla and a sense of shared literary heritage remained steadfastly associated with the Bengali

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<sup>39</sup> P Ghosh *What Happened to the Bhadrak*, p112

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* p116

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p123

Muslims' association of literary autonomy. This implies that the Muslims viewed autonomy as a necessary precondition for literary exchanges with the Hindus and that the literary sphere held out possibilities of harmony despite the growing intolerance of Muslims.<sup>42</sup>

***The ever-existing fault-lines:***

The language debate is just one of the many facets that unfolded in the mutual relationship between the middle-class Hindus and Muslims. The colonial method of enumeration, introduction of a public sphere, fierce competition in the job markets, rupture of rapports between the Muslim peasantry and Hindu landed gentry due to new systems in tenure holding, introduction of separate electorate, virulent Hindu revivalist politics of Arya Samaj and Go-Rakshini Samaj and so on, no doubt had paradigmatic roles in intensifying communal antagonism, yet there were many other deep rooted causes existing in the quotidian sphere which impacted their mutual relationship. I would briefly give a few instances only to understand the internal schisms usually invisible but deeply present.

Let us start from the formative years. In the academic sphere, the Bengali text books were full of stories of Muslim persecution during the medieval period in which the Muslims were treated as tyrants. The school-going Muslim students were taught to appreciate the Hindu religious festivities, read about Ram and Ravana, treat Sita and Draupadi as women of chastity, accept *swayamvar* as the best form of marriage and believe in Hindu mythologies. It was common for the Hindu teachers to refer to their Muslim students in pejorative terms such as, *mleccha*, *nere*, *yavana*. Often it was accused that the Hindu members of district boards, local boards and the

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<sup>42</sup> Samarpita Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, p191,

deputy inspectors did not pay enough attention to funding and scholarships for the Muslim students. On the other hand, often the Muslim students started their first readings at home in a traditional Islamic setting with didactic chapbooks. The message of these chapbooks was not necessarily anti-Hindu, but it helped to instill in children a sort of consciousness of a specific religious and historical tradition that was far from being inclusive.<sup>43</sup> Thus when a Muslim went to schools with other Hindu boys, he would find himself into a culturally inferior minority position. Mir Musharraf Hossain (Bengali writer, playwright and essayist), for example, was compelled to dress in *dhoti* and *chaddar* in Krishnagar High School and not only did he have to discard *pyjama* and the Muslim long coat, but his skull cap was burnt by his classmates.

To counter this, the Muslim press demanded that Muslims must have their own text books. The poet Ismail Hussain Siraji (1880–1931) wrote:

Our children usually study works of history by anti-Muslim authors, taught by anti-Muslim teachers. If one reads any one of these books one would see that great care has been taken to root out, erase and cut out all that was glorious in the Muslim period... From their childhood, impressionable children, far from entertaining national pride and respect, develop contempt and disrespect for their own people.<sup>44</sup>

Siraji felt, that assessment of the ‘Hindu period’ of Indian history, in works like the multi-volume *Prithibir Itihas* (A History of the World) by Durgadas Lahiri, were disproportionately weightier than their appraisals of medieval India. For Mohammad Shahidullah, school history textbooks were an important influence on the formation of Hindu majoritarian discourse.

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<sup>43</sup>Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920–1947*. pp134-138

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p146

‘Hinduized’ histories, he argued, imbibed a sense of superior, and dominant race among Hindu boys while a sense of inferiority gripped their Muslim counterparts.<sup>45</sup>

In reaction to this perception, new books from the Muslim point of view began to be written, and the British authorities encouraged this through the Textbook Committee. Moreover, in the 1920s, the recruitment policy began encouraging entry of Muslims into the Education Department of the Government of Bengal. Further, the Muslim intelligentsia demanded greater subsidies for the poorer students, exclusive hostels to be built and appointment of Muslim inspectors and sub inspectors in each district, *thana* and sub-*thana* regions. Muslims should also be appointed to the Syndicate of Calcutta University so that exams are not fixed on Islamic holidays. Similar cushions for the community were demanded in government jobs as well.

Similar to the text books, the representation of the Muslims in Bengali poetry, novels and plays was equally disdainful.<sup>46</sup> Bankimchandra Chatterjee was held guilty on many counts by the Muslim critics: his novels seemed to evoke passionate disgust against Muslims, who were portrayed as tyrants, oppressors, abductors of women and rapacious collector of taxes. Particularly the portrayal of Muslim women falling in love with Hindu men was resented vehemently. Sudipta Kaviraj has argued in context of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s final historical novels that a society’s history is profoundly shaped by what it ‘remembers’ rather than what actually happened in the past.<sup>47</sup> Among the playwrights, Dwijendra Lal Roy’s (1863–1913) popular ‘historical’ plays were specially singled out by Muslim critics: the portrayal of Shah Jahan and Nur Jahan or that of Muslim rulers in general in his plays on the fall of Mewar

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<sup>45</sup> S. Mitra. *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, p238

<sup>46</sup> Anuradha Roy, *Nationalism as a Poetic Discourse in Nineteenth Century Bengal* ( Kolkata: Papyrus), 2003.

<sup>47</sup> S. Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, p246

alienated Muslim sentiments. Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's *Padmini Upakhyan* (Rajput bravery), Hemchanda Bandyopadhyay's *Birbahu* (Muslim oppression and a call that Hindus must rise from slumber), Ramesh Chandra Dutt's *Madhabi Kankan* (uncontrollable female desire of Aurangzeb)—convinced the Hindus of Muslim oppression and how the British rule was a welcome gift bringing them out of medieval tyranny.<sup>48</sup>

I will soon demonstrate the possible causes for such portrayal of the Muslims in the discourse of popular fiction as well as in the history text books written by the Hindu elites. The Hindu authors were not always blindly anti-Muslims; they mostly failed to find the fallacies inherent in portraying the medieval as Dark Age due to their allegiance to the early colonial historiography. Also, a stress on Hindu nationalist vigour at the cost of medieval Muslim villains helped them to bypass British censorship.

Despite such justifications, such writings could not boast of having any contribution to Hindu-Muslim solidarity. The way Shivaji festival helped to gerrymander the frontiers of the nation with a sort of Hindu revivalist masculine vigour by obliterating the recent past of Maratha aggression in Bengal, was repeated in the way Western Asian Islamic heroes were valorized by the Bengali Muslims in spite of having no connection with them whatsoever. Hence, the way the liberal literary sphere in the 1920s seemed to offer prospective for alternative solidarities, would prove to be rather fragile. With frequent riots, faith in versatility of the literary sphere would rupture quickly and a sense of futility and despair would creep in.<sup>49</sup>

Further down the social scale, the obvious fact that sprang to the eye was the exploitative relationship, particularly in eastern Bengal, between the zamindars, of whom the overwhelming

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<sup>48</sup> Md. Shah and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya both pointed this out in details in their books

<sup>49</sup> S Mitra, *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture: Bengal at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*,

majority were Hindus, and farmers and tenants of whom the majority were Muslims.<sup>50</sup> In rural areas, the rent burden known as *abwab* was a major grievance, often mentioned in the contemporary newspapers. Apart from the *abwabs*, another common grievance was the methods of informal coercion applied by Hindu zamindars to prevent cow sacrifice. Some observers, aware of the strength of Hindu sentiments, recommended a compromise, and suggested the performance of the sacrifice ‘out of public sight’. But, as inter-communal relations worsened, the compromise did not work and conflict on this question was both the cause and the consequence of bitter conflicts.

### **Self-fashioning of the Hindu Bengali *Bhadralok***

The late 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a heterogeneous time pregnant with myriad possibilities. The Hindu and Muslim intelligentsia in Bengal not only imagined themselves in the new light, they also imagined their Quintessential Other and their place within the nation. Contemporary socio-cultural urgencies framed the way they contemplated this complex landscape of relationships. Mrinalini Sinha argues that that the emerging dynamics between colonial and nationalist politics in the 1880s and 1890s in India is best captured in terms of the logic of ‘colonial masculinity.’ It points towards the multiple axes along which power was exercised in colonial India: among or within the colonizers and the colonized, as well as, between colonizers and colonized. Neither the colonizers nor the colonized represented homogenous groups; there were not only important

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<sup>50</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal* p137

internal hierarchies of class, gender, and status within each group, but also alliances across various axes that in fact helped fashion the opposition between colonial and nationalist politics.<sup>51</sup>

The question of identity was arguably in the eye of the intellectual storm. The Bengali Hindu response ranged from the Derozian infatuation with western culture to the extreme cultural chauvinism of men such as Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, which proclaimed the 'scientific' basis of Hinduism.<sup>52</sup> Within this broad spectrum fell several more intellectual traditions, such as the Brahmoism of Raja Rammohun Roy and the more assertive Hinduism of Bankimchandra and Vivekananda. Their responses to the big issues of reform and revival were complex and ambivalent, which at the level of popular appropriation, lost much of their subtlety. It was at this level that, Hindu 'revivalism', as it is somewhat loosely described, gained ascendancy by the turn of the century. The Young Bengal movement attracted more censure than sympathy, and was always marginal in the *bhadralok* world; the Brahmo movement, beset by internal schisms since the 1860s, was increasingly the target of ridicule both in 'high' intellectual circles and in the pulp press. Brahmo values were parodied in popular novels, and the anglicized Bengali '*babu*' was the butt of much satire. As the rising tide of Hindu nationalism swept Bengal since the late nineteenth century, 'revivalism' rapidly outstripped 'reform' in its popular appeal. The anxiety about the loss of traditional values and the threat to the moral and social order it represented, was equally pervasive in the strengthening conservatism towards Muslims, women and the low-caste.

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<sup>51</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p1

<sup>52</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994). p136

### *Quest for national 'regeneration': Writing histories and cultivating physical culture*

I would limit my discussion to two main axis regarding this broad schema. First, I would discuss about the emergent historiographical tradition under the aegis of the educated Bengali Hindu elites, which serve as a window into how they envisioned themselves in their imagination of a national past. Secondly, building on these assumptions, I would explore how they tried to re-affirm these values in shaping a new sense of self so that they could comfortably fit into the new schema.

### *Search for a 'glorious' past: how the Bengali Hindus imagined their nation*

The concern for national 'regeneration' that informed much of the writing in this period prompted a search for a glorious national (Hindu) past. It was an agenda for self-representation, to claim a past for the nation that was not distorted by 'foreign interpreters'.<sup>53</sup> Whatever the differences between the 'progressives' and 'conservatives' among the new intellectuals in the nineteenth century, they were all convinced that the old society had to be reformed in order to make it adequate for coping with the modern world.

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<sup>53</sup> Partha .Chatterjee, "Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal" in David Arnold and David Hardiman ed. *Subaltern Studies: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*. volVIII, (Calcutta: OUP,1994). p2.Also, Chatterjee locates the shift in historiographical tradition by the Bengali elites who tried to write a national history. It began with Mrityunjay Tarkalankar's *Rajabali* which was written under colonial behest. It was thoroughly *Puranik* in its appeal. The writer's own position in relation to his narrative is fixed-it is the position of the praja, the ordinary subject, who is most often only the sufferer and sometimes the beneficiary of acts of government. This style would change completely within half a century. By the 1870s, the Bengali elites accepted European method of history writing but changed its content as it turned to be nationalist. On the one hand, the middle-class elites claimed that those who had wealth and property were unfit to wield the power they had traditionally enjoyed. On the other hand, they took the responsibility of speaking on behalf of those who were poor and oppressed. To be in the middle now meant to oppose the rulers and to lead the subjects.

The Orientalist myth of the 'golden age' of ancient Indian civilization appealed strongly to the early nineteenth century reformers like Rammohun Roy and Debendranath Tagore who appropriated it to introduce reform without rupturing the essential fabric of a greater Hindu community. Further, the Orientalist construction of the conquering Aryan settlers as the ancestors of the Hindus, furnished the Indian historiographers with an alternative ancestry. A good number of Hindu *bhadralok* began to speak of a tangible divide between pre-Muslim history on one hand and Indo-Islamic period on the other. The pronouncing of equality with the Europeans was also audible in other formulations. By extension of this logic, although the Hindu Aryans culturally equalled their colonial masters, continuous denial of opportunities by the rulers deflated their morale and hindered their progress. The rewriting of Indian history by Indians themselves in colonial Bengal can be understood as a means of giving coherence and shape to the present, within the Enlightenment discourse of progress.<sup>54</sup>.

The past heroism against the 'alien' rulers were recalled or invented to inspire the Hindu 'nation' of the day to fight its foreign overlords. Establishing a direct line of descent from Rana Pratap and Shivaji to modern Bengal, they allowed the Hindu *bhadralok* in Bengal to appropriate as its ancestors the lesser Rajput and Maratha chieftains who 'resisted' the Mughals. It was in this political vision that the social tension between various ethno-religious groups within the so called glorious Hindu Age was smoothened out and history became its greatest casualty. More frequently, the effort was to construct a tradition of patriotism and resistance in the 'national' past. Following Partha Chatterjee, the spirit of the writings around this time, can be summarized in this way:

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<sup>54</sup> Indira Chowdhury . *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: OUP,1998). p61

Ancient glory, present misery: the subject of this entire story is 'us'. The mighty heroes of ancient India were 'our' ancestors, and the feeble inhabitants of India today are 'ourselves'. That ancient Indians conquered other countries or traded across the seas or treated other people 'with contempt' is a matter of pride for 'us'. And it is 'our' shame that 'the descendants of Aryans' are today subordinated to others and are the objects of the latter's contempt. There is a certain scale of power along the different peoples of the world; earlier, the people of India were high on that scale, while today they were near the bottom.<sup>55</sup>

Thus for the nationalist, ancient India became the classical age which was to become the classical source of Indian modernity, while 'the Muslim period' became the night of medieval darkness. Contributing to that description would be all the prejudices of the European Enlightenment about Islam. Dominating the chapters from the twelfth century onwards in the new nationalist history of India will be a stereotypical figure of 'the Muslim', endowed with a 'national character': he will be fanatical, bigoted, warlike, dissolute and cruel and sexually licentious. The two terms most frequently used to describe Muslims within this discourse are *yavana* and *mleccha*.<sup>56</sup> Eventually, these two words would be used pejoratively also for their contemporary Muslim neighbors. While the concept of Muslim tyranny ran deep into *bhadralok*'s minds and some even expressed gratitude to the British for rescuing them from their hands, some also felt that British rule was a continuation of the state of subjugation, whereas some were undecided about the comparative merit of *Yavana* and British rules. Yet, xenophobia could only be directed against the Muslims and not against the British. This was a period when challenging the British hegemony politically was a far flung dream. They tried to endure their colonial status with the myth of 'un-British rule in India' keeping immense faith in the divinity and benevolence of British royalty. The triad of ancient Hindu glorious age followed by Muslim anarchy and British benevolence was central to the process of nation-making among the 19th

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<sup>55</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal", p28

<sup>56</sup> Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*. p54

century Hindu intelligentsia. Hinduness was made the basis of this newly invented nation that thrived on the idea of a glorious Hindu past.<sup>57</sup> By an inevitable logic, Muslims became outsiders to this nation, if not actual tyrants.

The end of the pre-colonial age of collective living created a sense of vacuum in human relationship which in turn urged for a different type of bonding. In this context, the nation becomes one imagined community which is permanent, indestructible and whose membership is certain. A nation is a community which even while covering an extensive territory is supposed to be very closely knit. Living inside it, must foster a sense of solidarity and belongingness. Such intensity of the nationalist sentiment becomes possible due to the fact that it centers not only around a country but more importantly around a community, the members of which are supposed to be kin-folk. The nation should be based on a singular concept of grand history, for the Bengali Hindus, they were: 'Hinduness and Aryanhood'.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the way the Bengali Muslims initially looked for Ashrafi status, scorned at Bengaliness and looked westwards for a stronger unitary bond, was repeated in the case of the Hindus, albeit with different contents.

Therefore this Hindu nationalism was a sort of ethnic nationalism. To the *bhadralok*, the Hindu-Muslim difference was more ethnic than social, cultural or religious. The *bhadralok* at least at this phase did not mind that the Muslims visited mosques and worshipped Allah instead of Siva. What the *bhadralok* emphasized was that the Hindus (along with the Buddhists and the Jains) were the original inhabitants of India and Muslims were a different race that came from outside and subjugated the country.

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<sup>57</sup> Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872-1905: Some Essays in interpretation*, (New Delhi:OUP, 1993), pp3-4.

<sup>58</sup> Anuradha Roy, *Nationalism as Poetic Discourse in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, pp2-3

Why in the process of nation building, such exclusion of the Muslims became inevitable is difficult to explain. It can, however, be claimed that the *bhadralok* did not encounter the Muslim middle-class intelligentsia sharing similar nationalist upswing at that time.<sup>59</sup> This is the lag that I mentioned right in the beginning of this chapter. Most of the Muslims they had contact with, belonged to a comparatively inferior social order and this class difference entailed a socio-cultural difference. Further, the *bhadralok* comprised of Hindu upper-caste had a strong sense of impurity regarding their contact with Muslims which was more intense than their arrogance towards Hindu lower-caste, because at least, the latter were not ‘*yavans*.’

Having said that, the nationalist *bhadralok* were not really subjected to racism, neither did they speak of ethnic cleansing. In fact, for many of them, accommodation of Muslims was desirable and possible. Examples of European experiences (such as Italian and German Unification) showed that a nation state could be ethnically, culturally and linguistically heterogeneous as long as it remained a vehicle of progress and modernization. Hence the 19th century intelligentsia showed diverse and often contradictory impulses towards the Muslims: there was xenophobia, there was ascription of foreign-ness without much hatred, there could be simple indifference for the Muslims amid glorification of Hindu millennium and also a positive urge for Hindu Muslim unity inspired by liberal nationalism. It can be summed up as the *bhadralok* having the idea of two nations at one time. One was a cultural nation based on the ‘*jatiya*’ or national identity of Hinduness and Aryanhood; while in the case of India, it was a political nation in which integration with the Muslims could be envisioned. Partha Chatterjee also demonstrates how other

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<sup>59</sup> Anuradha Roy, *Nationalism as Poetic Discourse in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, p34

possibilities for the imagining of 'nation-ness' existed around this time, possibilities that were suppressed or erased by the onward march of the dominant history of 'Indian nationalism'.<sup>60</sup>

*Dualistic Identities of the Bhadrakok: Emphasis on Physical Culture*

The complexities of bhadralok imagination of the self were the legitimate expression of an injured Hindu masculinity which had to come to terms simultaneously with political subordination and threats to cultural survival. Mrinalini Sinha describes this as an 'unnatural' or 'perverted' form of masculinity. The figures of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali babu' were produced by the shifts in the political economy of colonialism in the late nineteenth century. By this time, the Bengali elites found themselves squeezed out of the dynamic economic sector. They were also marginalized in local trade and commercial activities, for these were already in the hands of Marwaris, an immigrant native group from western India. Added to this, was the declining fortune of the significant rentier class of Bengali elites due to a combination of factors: increase in population, land fragmentation, and lack of agricultural improvements. Furthermore, new tenancy regulations as well as the peasant resistance, to some extent, successfully challenged the untrammelled power that landlords had exercised over the countryside under the terms of the Permanent Settlement. Indeed, the majority of the Bengali middle-class discovered their horizons severely contracted by 'chakri', or petty clerical work which underpinned the self-perception of effeminacy among the Bengali elites.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Claims on the Past: The Genealogy of Modern Historiography in Bengal", p2

<sup>61</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

The Bengali Hindu persona that emerges out of literature around this time was simultaneously courageous and timid; vigorous and passive, other-worldly and venal, cultured and imitative. This dualistic identity lay at the heart of *bhadralok* nationalism, furnishing its dynamics and its particular idioms. To challenge the ‘frailty’ or ‘effeminacy’, the *bhadralok* became preoccupied with physical culture to attain physical strength and vigour. The attempt to turn away from the colonial notion of ‘effeminacy’, however, yielded multiple icons of valour, feminine as well as masculine.<sup>62</sup>

They offered various explanations for Bengali effeminacy: the decline of native physical pursuits under the material security provided by British rule; the elites’ scorn for indigenous pastimes and obsession with everything English; the excessive concentration on studies leading to ‘brain fever’ and ‘feeble development of muscles’; the Bengali diet of rice; the hot and enervating climate; early parenthood, and so on.<sup>63</sup> It was believed that traditional forms of exercise—sword-play, *lathi-play* and wrestling – would exorcise the feeble and timid anglophile *babu* within and awaken the dormant strength and vigour of the Bengali nation<sup>64</sup> One of the earliest forms of nationalist mobilization in Bengal was thus the ‘*byayam samiti*’ or the physical culture club. Nabagopal ‘National’ Mitra’s gymnastics school, founded in 1866, served as a model for the numerous *akharas* (‘physical culture clubs’) and *tarun samitis* (‘youth clubs’).<sup>65</sup> Bengali social and religious reformer, Swami Vivekananda, was similarly a great proponent of cultivating a ‘manly’ physique; as he had reportedly remarked, ‘You will be nearer to God through football than through the Bhagwad Gita.’ Sarala Debi, a prominent woman among mostly male

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<sup>62</sup> Indira Chowdhury. *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*. p59

<sup>63</sup> M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century.*, p21

<sup>64</sup> M Sinha *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century.* p21

<sup>65</sup> J Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p163

nineteenth-century Bengali nationalist leaders, played an important part in the 1890s in arousing the Bengali youth to the pursuit of a militant and nationalistic culture. By the turn of the century, these organizations cultivating physical strength and vigour would be the base for terrorist organizations against the British.<sup>66</sup>

The self-image of *bhadralok* Bengalis as a cultured but decadent people also informed the organization of *palli samitis* ('village associations') during the Swadeshi period. Going back to the villages and making mass contacts were high on the nationalist agenda, not merely because the mobilization of the peasantry was seen as being important in itself, but also to instill in the *bhadralok* the virtues of earthiness, hardiness and manliness that they lacked, and which were believed to spring from an association with the soil.<sup>67</sup> Thus, 'rural romance' became the staple of Bengali nationalist literature from the late nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup>

### ***Gradual erosion of the old bhadralok: Towards full-fledged communal politics***

Joya Chatterji argues that in the nationalistic imagination of the Hindu elites, on one hand, the ideal Hindu character was portrayed as courageous and strong, willing to fight to the last for freedom, preferring death to the humiliation of conquest. But on the other hand, Hindus as a race (or community) were presented as passive, caring little for political power or freedom. This other-worldliness seemed to them as the inner grace of the Hindu religion which led to natural tolerance. But the gradual erosion of the old world of unquestioned *bhadralok* social dominance

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<sup>66</sup> M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*.p21

<sup>67</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, chapter 4, "The Construction of Bhadrakol Communal Identity: Culture and Communalism in Bengal", pp150-191

<sup>68</sup> Dipesh Chakraborty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Chapter 6 "Nation and Imagination".

and the growing anxiety about their political future in the new era of mass politics in late colonial period, re-shaped *bhadralok* politics in ways that made them altogether more inward-looking, more parochial, and more narrowly concerned with the defence of established privilege.

Chatterji demonstrates the shift through the tract *Bartaman Hindu-Mussalman Samasya* ('The Current Hindu-Muslim Problem') by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, the front ranking novelist.<sup>69</sup> First presented as a speech at the Hindu Sabha conference in 1926, *Bartaman Hindu-Mussalman Samasya* argues strongly that the nationalist vision of Hindu-Muslim unity is an idle and futile dream. Written in the aftermath of the Calcutta Riots of 1926, and clearly influenced by the failure of Non-Cooperation, Khilafat and the Das Pact, it boldly declares that Hindus and Muslims are not only different, but are fundamentally unequal, and that 'unity can only exist amongst equals'. Distancing himself completely from the composite nationalism that was Sabyasachi's (protagonist) creed in *Pather Dabi* (one of his most celebrated novel), in which religious difference was subsumed within the *desh* ('nation'), in *Bartaman Hindu-Mussalman Samasya* Saratchandra makes a passionate case for accepting that there are irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims. The crux of the difference between the two 'communities', he argues, is 'culture'. Here culture is loosely defined, as a quality of mind and heart that all Hindus naturally possess, but that Muslims lack, and have little hope of attaining.

It is their basic lack of 'culture' that, Saratchandra argues, accounts for the brutality, barbarism and fanaticism of Muslims. In this regard, moreover, there was little to choose between 'old Muslims' (medieval tyrants) and recent converts (Bengali peasants). The uncultured and barbaric essence of Islam, it suggests, is able to transcend not only the barriers of space, time and

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<sup>69</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp173-180

geography, but also to cross the local *ashraf-atrap* frontier. This transformation of understanding of and outlook towards the Muslims is fundamentally important in identifying the communal strides in the mainstream political junctures. In late nineteenth century the Muslim medieval rulers were described as tyrants, brutal, barbaric and rapacious. But they were of altogether a distant creed than the immediate neighbors—the latter were more docile and willing to be accepted within the developing nationalist resolution of the communal question. But by the 1930s, such a division was not relevant anymore. In this way, the symbol of 'culture', which emerged out of the *bhadralok's* historical perception of themselves as a class with a particular political destiny, now became a symbol of the communal identity of all Hindus. For the first time, 'Hindu' peasants and workers were (figuratively) extracted out of the mass of *chhotolok*, and incorporated into an extended Hindu 'community'. The bridge, for Saratchandra, was a redefined 'culture', which had little to do with acquired book learning and formal education. 'Culture' was now an ascriptive attribute. It was a quality that all Hindus, high or low, were born with: and one that Muslims could never attain, no matter how long or how hard they strove for it. The problem of class division in 'Hindu society' was thus resolved in an ingenious way: by attributing to *all* 'Hindus' the quality that had, in its perception, been a badge of the *bhadralok: bhadrata*, that is cultivatedness or gentility.<sup>70</sup> The old class distinction between the *bhadralok* and the *chhotolok* now re-emerged in the guise of a 'communal' difference, between *bhadra* Hindus and *abhadra* or *itar* Muslims. Nationalist awareness and patriotic feeling are born of a higher sensibility, a higher culture. All Hindus, being intrinsically cultured, are capable of being aroused to nationalist fervor. The 'quality' of nationalism lies within them, the problem is simply of awakening it. Muslims, in contrast, can never be awakened to nationalism because

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<sup>70</sup> This happened at least at the theoretical level, even though the *bhadralok* attitude and behaviour towards the lower-class and lower-caste Hindus in everyday life did not change much.

nationalism, as much as the higher sensibility from which it springs, is foreign to their essential nature.

The fashioning of this 'new' self left unresolved the tensions of traditional patterns of hierarchy across caste, community, class and gender. It can be argued that the cultural politics of this oppositional self-image was neither 'revivalist, nor 'reawakened' but a redefined modern Indian. The construction of this identity had both a discursive and a performative side. Both these aspects grappled with new forms of self-expression even as they struggled to retain older ways of representing the self.<sup>71</sup>

### **Borders Within: Perennial Schisms**

Self-contradiction and confusion were essential characteristics of the colonial middle-classes. What has remained constant despite their linguistic, ethnic and regional diversity was their intimate relationship with their respective religious and caste identities. They could hardly come out of the 'primordial' bonding, rather these bonds got strengthened and found newer connotations under the colonial regime of enumeration. There are obviously variations of degrees in which the intelligentsia of different regions negotiated with their traditional identities. Often it depended on their modes of origin, how far they had retained their contact with the plebian masses, how far the Brahminical puritanical norms existed in their indigenous social structure, and what kind of political economy dominated their region and so on. The Bihari and Oriya intelligentsia, for example, were more religious, traditionalist and caste-ridden in general

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<sup>71</sup> Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*, p45

than the Bengalis.<sup>72</sup> The Brahminical supremacy amidst the Tamil and Telegu educated class had been evident through their strict ritual adherence to pollution-purity at least in their houses.<sup>73</sup> However, from the discussions in earlier sections, apparently it becomes clear that the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia was comparatively liberal in these aspects than its counterparts in other parts of the country, at least on the superficial level. The emphasis on ‘Hindu-ness’ was essential for them to forge a national history (actually mythical) but they also strongly upheld their distinct regional identity which was more liberal and accommodative. On the other hand, it is true that the Bengali Muslims from the beginning faced no lesser challenges to prove their belonging and their rightful position in the contemporary national imagination. Further, no matter how accommodative and liberal it might seem, the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* always preferred to keep physical and psychological distance from the Muslims and the lower castes. Rabindranath Tagore mentioned a number of times how the Muslim peasants in his *cutchhery* had no carpet for their seating places while it was there for the Hindu farmers. He categorically stated, “There is no greater crime for humanity which makes a community untouchable simply because they adhere to different rituals.”<sup>74</sup> He acknowledged further that the Hindus and Muslims are not only different/*swatantra*, they are also opponents/*biruddha*.<sup>75</sup> Hence it should not come as a surprise that the Muslim leadership and the Muslim commoners did not trust the Hindu politicians. The gap between the rolled up carpets and carpeted seating arrangements should not be ignored—the fault-lines were as vast as the ocean—mere political cries for Hindu-Muslim brotherhood was nothing but utopian. Indeed, the Hindus and the Muslim neighbors have lived together

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<sup>72</sup> Hitendra Patel, *Communalism and Intellegentsia in Bihar 1870-1930*, (Delhi: Orient Blackswan,2011).

<sup>73</sup> C. J. Fuller and H. Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmins: The Making of Middle-Class Caste*, (Delhi: Orient Blackswan,2015).

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Tagore to Kalidas Nag, also printed in *Kalantar* entitled “Hindu Musalman”, <https://tagoreweb.in/Essays/kalantar-135/hindu-musalman-4081>

<sup>75</sup> <https://rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org>, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Found in the collection of articles by Tagore, called ‘Samuha’, Parishishtha 59.

separately for years. At one historical juncture, religious loyalties could cut across all forms of class and sectional consciousness, while on other occasions, ethnic, regional, class or linguistic identities might transcend religious bonds. Several possibilities were thus open for the convergence of popular identities with organized politics.

Being middle-class was an emancipatory project on one hand as the colonial regime technically offered the choices for upward mobility and cultural upliftment to all castes and creeds. On the other hand, the process also entailed a quest for renewed self-identity. Essential to this, was a strict entry-point for being allowed to be called the '*bhadrolok*'—the like-minded folk with whom the cultural quest for redefinition of the self could be shared. The Bengali Hindus could hardly incorporate the Muslims in their shared world-view. The arrival of Bengali middle-class Muslims in the public sphere and political area was a much later phenomenon, that too was riddled with several confusions regarding their Muslim-ness and Bengali-ness. Honestly, the Bengali middle-class Muslims and Bengali middle-class Hindus had a lot of cultural similarity: especially in their choices of attire, cuisine, and above all, language. But at the same time, their cultural codes were somewhat different too. And a discovery of similarities could easily lead to an exclamation on the part of a Hindu, "But you are so much like us!"<sup>76</sup>

Again, during the moments of communal violence, it has been pointed out that it was the upcountry Muslims (both lower and upper-class) who participated in the riots; the Bengali Muslims were in fact rather helpful to the Hindus. However, the ritual segregation and norms of pollution-purity were equally applicable to both the Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims. Whatever interactions the Hindus and Muslims had between each other, those were limited to the level of public life.

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<sup>76</sup> Parimal Ghosh, *What Happened to the Bhadrakolok*, p.93

To some extent, the Partition of Bengal in 1947 was a result of intensified communal violence. Also it in turn intensified the schisms in manifold ways. The memoirs of *Chhere Asa Gram* (The Village Left Behind) by middle-class Hindu refugees are revealing in this regard. While they successfully capture the sheer pathos due to the loss of homeland for the Hindu writers, they also, often unwittingly, portray the status of the Muslim neighbors in their lives. The Muslims are mentioned in these essays; indeed, their depiction is critical to the depiction of an idyll, but their 'traditions' are not part of the *bhadralok's* sacred or the beautiful. The home that the Hindu refugee had lost was meant to be more than his home alone. It was the home of the Bengali nationality, the village in which in the 1880s nationalist writers had found the heart of Bengal. But in their nostalgic remembrance, they reveal a fundamental problem in the history of modern Bengali nationality: the fact that this nationalist construction of 'home' was a Hindu home. For all of their talk of harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims, there is not a single sentence in the memories described in *Chhere Asha Gram* on how Islamic ideas of the sacred might have been of value to the Muslims in creating their own idea of a homeland or indeed how they might have helped create a sense of home for Bengalis as a whole.<sup>77</sup>

This brings us to another interlinked factor: what happened to the Muslims who stayed on in West Bengal after the Partition? Despite the lack of statistical data, it can be safely assumed that the bulk of Muslim elites migrated to East Pakistan during this time. Also, as a consequence of Partition, Dhaka became the major centre of Muslim politics of East Bengal. Calcutta, like the rest of India, had a Congress government. Many of the prominent Muslim leaders therefore left Calcutta for Dhaka to start their political career in Pakistan afresh. Moreover, Dhaka, as the new

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<sup>77</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition" in Mushirul Hasan ed. *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India*, (Delhi: OUP, 2000). pp318-337

capital of East Pakistan, had significant employment opportunities. Those who left the city in these years were not necessarily residents of Calcutta by birth. Some of them were originally from areas that were now parts of East Pakistan. But they had grown up in Calcutta, studied in its colleges and universities, and had then started their careers in the city. Their social lives were intrinsically linked to the city. For them to leave the city was as tragic as becoming refugees. On the other hand, since the Partition, many of the Islamic institutions and symbols were systematically erased from the city landscape. For example, the Partition severely affected the fate of the Calcutta Madrassah, a major institution for Islamic learning. All its moveable properties, including books and manuscripts in the Madrassah Library, were shifted to Dhaka. The Bengal Madrassah Education Board also shifted to Dhaka, leaving behind a number of high madrassahs and the Hooghly Islamic Intermediate College, without any central organisation for their control and coordination. Apart from two professors, the entire faculty of the Madrassah opted for service under the East Bengal government. The institute survived, but became a shadow of its past.<sup>78</sup> The subsequent chapters would discuss these aspects with more examples.

## **Conclusion:**

Let me end this chapter by introducing another dimension to the whole story. While the elite Muslim intelligentsia left for Pakistan, the not-so-fortunate ones became a visible minority in the city of Calcutta. Since the genesis of the city, they came from distant corners of India as occupational groups or as pensioners of royal exiled dynasties, they settled in enclaves around Park Circus, Razabazar, Zakaria Street, Metiabruz, Garden Reach, Chitpur etc. The post-colonial

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<sup>78</sup>Anwasha Sengupta "Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta's Muslims after Partition" in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Banerjee ed. *Calcutta: Stormy Decades* (New Delhi:Routledge,2018).p447

riots and shrinking life-choices led to a greater degree of ghettoization of their living spaces. Often in the elite Muslim neighborhoods, the Muslim elites jostled with Muslim migrant slum dwellers for greater protection and security. These neighborhoods are conveniently dubbed as 'crime-friendly' 'unsafe', 'unclean' and 'congested' by the majority citizens. They are the putative opposites of a gentrified urban neighborhood which must be sanitized, clean, orderly and peaceful and such a neighborhood can only be maintained by the educated *bhadralok* Hindus; who have the proper 'culture' to appreciate the civic amenities. At this point, the thesis narrows down its quest to understand the everyday dynamics of communal fault-lines at the level of neighborhoods. It tries to capture the fleeting glimpses of the stories shared by Hindu and Muslim urban middle-class dwellers of these mixed neighborhoods during the post-colonial years. It locates how they fashion themselves and their neighbors through the discourses of their rightful belongingness to their immediate living space as well as to the nation.

## II

### **ENVISIONING THE CITY AND ITS COMMUNITIES: CALCUTTA THROUGH ITS MULTI-LAYERED HIERARCHIES**

Calcutta, like any other city, has been a city riddled with inner boundaries and multiple clusters. These boundaries are cartographical, sociological and psychological. Despite repeated efforts to order the city by the government, the neighborhoods evoked a paradoxically simultaneous existence of an awareness of mutual boundaries along with a lack of geographical precision. This leads to multiple, complex, and fluctuating relationships that exist between individuals, spaces, and structures involved in the social and spatial construction of place. This chapter attempts to trace these schisms in Calcutta since her early years and understand how different planning schemes redrew its cartographies and renewed the divisions, how impactful was the ‘stormy decades’ of the 1940s and the ‘50s on the body of the city and how Independence and Partition brought revolutionary shifts in its character. In the process, the chapter touches upon how the people responded to the changes of decolonization in terms of re-orientation of Hindu-Muslim relationship in the initial years and how institutional arrangements were based on legal and constitutional mechanisms to respond to ethnic and cultural diversities. Therefore the chapter explores the communal relationship in Calcutta by understanding the city with its many partitions. It shows that the notion of neighborhoods in the city had been intrinsically hierarchical since early colonial years. Such ideas got reshuffled and refurbished with the influx of refugees along with communal riots and displacement of the minorities in post-colonial years. The notion of ‘city in decline’ achieved permanence across the centuries and each time, the hierarchies of race, class, occupation, caste or religion were evoked to adjust the shifting of blame for the supposed doom.

## **Imperial Urbanism in Calcutta: Visible Separation in Racial Terms**

The city originated from the East India Company's initial attraction for the site as a commercial center and soon it became the focus of future imperial expansion. The area initially consisted of three villages—Sutanuti in the north, Kolikata in the center, and Gobindapur in the south. They were owned by the Sabarna Roy Chowdhury family since the Mughal period. In 1698, the Company paid a Mughal prince, Farrukshiyar, a sum of 16,000 rupees to obtain a grant of permission to buy these three villages. The Company then purchased them from the local Sabarna Roy Chowdhury landlords—by paying them 1,300 rupees.<sup>1</sup> Soon after buying the three villages, the East India Company officials set about transforming them into a full-fledged town. In the earlier years, they concentrated on the two villages Sutanuti and Kolikata, in the north and center respectively, for their plan of urbanization.

As was the norm with early European settlements, Fort William became the nucleus of the settlement when the British first acquired Calcutta.<sup>2</sup> The fort was situated on the bank of the river. Here, boats laden with firewood and jungle produce landed their cargos for the settlement. They, then, set up offices for their commercial and administrative operations, and encouraged European traders to settle in these areas of Sutanuti and Kolikata.

The maps and accounts available from the turn of the eighteenth century show that at the time of the arrival of the British, there were only two arterial roads that covered these villages and nearby areas. One ran from the north in Chitpur to the south in Kalighat through the jungles of

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<sup>1</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Modernization* (New Delhi: OUP, 2016).pp 19-20

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed history on the origin and growth of the city, there is now a host of academic literature. See, Pradip Sinha *Calcutta in Urban History (Calcutta : Firma KLM, 1978)*. P. T Nair *A History of Calcutta's Streets* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1987). S.N Mukherjee *Calcutta: Essays in Urban History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1993). Sukanta Chowdhury.ed *Calcutta: The Living City* vol 1 and 2 (New Delhi: OUP, 1990).

the neighboring village of Chowrangee. It was described as the ‘Pilgrim Road’ by contemporary British settlers, because of the Hindu devotees who used it to reach the Kali Temple in the south. The other was a parallel road on the east (later known as the Circular Road), which moved down towards the south-west. Over the next fifty years—from 1706 to 1756—both the town and its streets grew at a rapid pace.

One of the first major thoroughfares of the city was Lal Bazaar or Bow Bazaar Street. The well-off natives and Company merchants built their garden houses along this road as the settlement grew and prospered. Another road ran past the Company’s warehouses and provided access to a hospital and burial ground. By the early eighteenth century, most of those living in the small, English settlement were in the immediate area north of the fort and ‘the Park’. A native bazaar settlement or ‘Great Bazaar’ was located half a mile north of the fort and was also known as the Burra Bazar. A road led from the English settlement to this bazaar and was later renamed Clive Street. However, as early as 1707, the chief agents of the East India Company issued an order forbidding the erection of irregular buildings in the *zamindari*. There must have been some racial segregation as Hamilton describes the ‘English being near the River’s Side, and the Natives within Land’. By the 1750s, the town had grown outside the fort but the English settlement remained clustered around the fort. The commercial, administrative, residential, and military complex it had become had grown out of the needs for the Englishmen’s hygiene, defence, and exclusiveness.<sup>3</sup> But the boundaries were clouded because, some of the Indian merchants owned property in the White Town that they rented to the Europeans. The boundaries may also have been blurred because of encroaching indigenous huts or views of indigenous settlements. There

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<sup>3</sup> Keya Dasgupta, *Mapping Calcutta: The Collection of Maps at the Visual Archives of the CSSSC*, September 2009, p2; also see Siddhartha Sen. *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata : From a Colonial to a Post-Marxist City*. (Amsterdam:Amsterdam University Press, 2017). chapter 2

was also a 'Gray Town' where the Portuguese, Greeks, and Armenians lived and acted as a buffer between Black and White Towns.

The spatial restructuring of Calcutta after the British victory at Plassey in 1757 was a critical turning point in its imperial urbanism as it ushered in the beginning of social and political control through planning endeavors. The British rulers were now firmly saddled in this town, and began to redesign it according to their administrative and political priorities. One of the first plans was to shift their Fort William from the Kolikata part of the town (where it was set up in 1698) to further south, in the Gobindapur village.<sup>4</sup> The Maidan provided an enormous vista, offering an aesthetically pleasing perspective for the impressive buildings erected in Chowrangee and along the Esplanade.

When the East India Company decided to develop the southern village of Gobindapur as a township of sorts by installing their military base (the second Fort William) in the western part, on the banks of the Hooghly River, and providing residential quarters for the European inhabitants in the eastern part, it initiated a large-scale displacement of the villagers of Gobindapur. The East India Company gave cash compensation to the Bengali well-to-do families who owned *pucca* or brick-built houses in the village, and encouraged them to move northwards and buy lands and settle in the Sutanuti area. This led to the development of settlements on either side of the old Chitpur Road and the creation of new streets and lanes, winding out from behind the main road, where these newly displaced Bengali families built their houses. It was this area in the north that came to be known as the Black Town in the parlance of the British colonial authorities as well as European travellers. Some of the poor residents of Gobindapur were shifted to the slums near Chowrangee which was a growing settlement for English traders. These slums

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<sup>4</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, p2-23

were named after the English owners—like Duncan’s Bustee, Colvin’s Bustee. The slum-dwellers either worked as domestic helpers in these European households, or as artisans to cater to their regular needs.

In June 1798, Lord Wellesley decided upon a new residence. The government house was in tune with the ideology of the British Raj to create a permanent gulf of contempt and fear between the ruler and the ruled. Now everyone could observe the conspicuous and visible physical separation between the master and his bonded men. This was an example of English colonialism relying on architectural symbolism to provide the visual confirmation of imperial solidity, stability, and even majesty. The construction of the Government house led to more stratification within the city. Broad vistas were created around the prominent buildings and monuments along the Esplanade in an intentional effort to display wealth and power. All structures in its vicinity, ranging from official buildings to private houses, complemented the design of the government house. By 1810, the European sections of Calcutta had taken on the appearance of a classical and imperial city. Wellesley appointed a Town Improvement Committee in 1803, consisting of 30 leading citizens of Calcutta to execute his plans. Wellesley’s committee tried to bring about symmetry and control in the city by proposing regulations on native-owned buildings, the carving of rectilinear broad avenues through the native parts of the town, improved sanitation, and beautification of the city.

From the beginning, almost every reports on the city and memoirs of the eye witnesses talk about the dirt, filth and diseases in the city. To claim a distance from these, garden houses were erected in Calcutta by both the British and the wealthy natives. They were often associated with debauchery, pleasure, and conspicuous consumption. It is necessary to add, however, that this

spatial segregation of the population according to racial, social, and cultural differences did not prevent the elite of all these communities from interacting with each other through business meetings or entertainments. We thus hear of senior English administrators and their wives attending ‘nautches’ (performances by Indian dancing girls) and dinner parties at the palatial mansions of the Bengali aristocrats in the Black Town. Similarly in the White Town, when the British built Chowranghee Theatre fell into bankruptcy, it was a Bengali aristocrat from the Black Town, Dwarkanath Tagore, who came to its rescue by buying it in August 1835 for a sum of 30,000 rupees.<sup>5</sup>

The laying down of new roads under the Lottery Committee again resulted in the dislocation of a large number of people—this time, the slum-dwellers. In the Chowrangee area, for instance, the construction of new roads led to the second displacement of the inhabitants living there. These were the people who had earlier been ousted from their past habitat in the villages of Gobindapur to make way for the building of Fort William, and had resettled in slums owned by Englishmen in the late eighteenth century. This model of slum clearance was to be followed in other parts of the town also over the next decades of urbanization.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the displaced bustee dwellers could not afford to return to the upgraded urban land because of its increased value, forcing them back to living in other bustees. Not surprisingly, the landlords of the bustees rather than the tenants were compensated. The colonial government did not accept any moral responsibility for the hardship of the bustee dwellers caused by its

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<sup>5</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, p31, also see Swati Chattopadhyay: *Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of "White Town" in Colonial Calcutta*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Jun., 2000, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Jun., 2000), pp. 154-179

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p26

improvement schemes. The native population always bore the burden of improvement in the White Town because of the disproportionate taxing mechanisms. The house tax, first levied in 1794, was one of the principal sources of municipal improvements. Natives with less capital who had invested in property in the northern areas of the town bore the major share of the taxes. At the same time, the European companies refused to be taxed and paid a paltry municipal tax. Yet, the White Town was always the first beneficiaries of any urban services. The lower orders in the city—the artisans, labourers and menials—who were the early settlers of the black town, were gradually marginalized and driven out of the precincts of the city as the urban development gained in momentum. With this, the popular cultural forms were marginalized too by the new urbane values of the Calcutta *bhadrolok* and their better technology. A distinct discourse of ‘obscenity’ was formulated by the elite towards certain cultural expression of the lower orders (*kheur, sang, kobi-gan*). Sometimes these expressions also acted as gestures of protest against the ethereal world built up by the Sanskrit-educated Babu<sup>7</sup>. The elite culture in Calcutta developed under the western influences and in an environment of loyalty to colonial rule. As explained in the first chapter, there always remained a strict binary between the *bhadralok* with the popular orders. Uprooted from their rural environment, the plebeians arrived in the metropolis where they did not have any recognizable and acceptable position. They moved from one part to the other due to rapid developmental work in the city. These urban nomads led a precarious existence, living in the shacks, eliminated from their traditional occupation, eking out a living as a domestic help or a casual street vendor. The urban elite called them ‘*Chhotolok*’ (opposite of the *bhadralok*)/‘*Itarjan*’ (vulgar mass)/*gnaiya* (the rural bumpkin).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, “Bogey of the Bawdy: Changing Concept of 'Obscenity' in 19th Century Bengali Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jul. 18, 1987, Vol. 22, No. 29 (Jul. 18, 1987), pp. 1197-1206

<sup>8</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Bogey of the Bawdy*, p.1200

## **The Age of Improvement: Expansion and Agglomeration in the City**

Indeed the city never stopped growing. Extensive changes were made to the boundaries of the town and its suburbs in 1889. The Suburban Municipality was divided into four sections, namely the North Suburban Municipality of Kashipur-Chitpore, the East Suburban Municipality of Maniktala, the Suburban Municipality of Garden Reach, and the Southern Municipality of Tollygunge. In order to form the last two municipalities, land from the 24 Parganas was annexed. The city was divided into 25 wards at this point and occupied an area of 48 square kilometers. The Municipal Act of 1923 annexed the municipalities of Kashipur-Chitpore, Maniktala and Garden Reach into the city. Later, Garden Reach was separated.

In 1911, the Government of Bengal created the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) to improve conditions in Calcutta. It was created as an independent entity, headed by a British Indian Civil Service official – Cecil Henry Bompas.<sup>9</sup> Its objectives were to open up congested areas, construct or alter roads, provide ventilation through open spaces, construct new buildings, acquire land for urban development, and rehabilitate displaced communities. The immediate cause was a pandemic that spread from the interior of China after 1894 to the ports of Asia and Africa, killing an estimated seven million people by 1914. A civil engineer named E.P. Richards was given the task to create the working constitution of the CIT. He drew extensively from various town planning projects in Europe and America for his report on Calcutta, which he finished and published in 1914. Richards was much influenced by Georges-Eugène Haussmann's

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<sup>9</sup> Partho Datta, "Calcutta on the Threshold of the 1940s" in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and T. Sarkar eds *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades* (New York: Routledge, 2018). pp18-41, for More details see, Partho Datta, *Planning the City: Urbanisation and Reform in Calcutta 1800-1940.* (New Delhi: Tulika Books.2012)

planning of Paris (France), and sought to apply his methods of circulation and ventilation while structuring a road-building plan for Calcutta to tackle the growing problems of overcrowding, congestion and filth in the city. In his 1914 report, Richards put great emphasis on low income housing and suburban development as a necessity in urban government, favoring the method of ‘slum repair’ or ‘slum mending’ already in use in British cities. New roads and neighborhoods were being planned, channels for draining were being dug, new structures were coming up and existing buildings refurbished. Despite resistance and skepticism, and some reversals, the task of imposing a rational urban order on the city continued. It profoundly affected politics and society in Calcutta. In 1927 C.H. Bompas, in a talk to the Society of Arts in London, mentioned that half a square mile of property had been demolished and not less than 50,000 people had been displaced in Calcutta since the Trust began work. This is an astonishing figure which indicates the scale of the work, its impact, and the hidden violence of improvement. If there was any response to this displacement by the people most affected, i.e., dwellers in bustees and the laboring poor, it was simply ignored.<sup>10</sup> The Trust explained the demolitions as efforts to open land to sunlight and improve ventilation. However such demolitions actually cleared land for a growing market. It was auctioned to the developers who built suburbs and flats (apartments) that segregated the city along lines of caste, religion, and class.<sup>11</sup>

However the imperial town planning was often challenged by popular subversion. Their hegemonic plan to create strictly bordered arterial thoroughfares was sabotaged at every stage by the local inhabitants who fragmented them into lanes and by-lanes criss-crossing these

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<sup>10</sup> Partho Dutta, “Calcutta on the Threshold of the 1940s”, p20

<sup>11</sup> Nabaparna Ghosh, *A Hygienic City-Nation : Space, Community, and Everyday Life in Colonial Calcutta*. (Cambridge:CUP), 2020, p11

thoroughfares—called *golis* in Bengali. They named these lanes after their own local heroes and heroines. Thus, even today, we find in north Calcutta a lane called Panchi Dhobani Goli (named after a *dhobani* or a washerwoman who lived in that locality and served its residents in the nineteenth century), and another lane called Gulu Ostagar Lane (celebrating a tailor who was her contemporary). Thus, roads laid down officially by the municipal authorities were fractured by the local people, who carved out from them their own lanes and alleys. Parallel to this popular incursion from the lower orders in road planning in the northern parts of the town, there was an equally important involvement of a new generation of Bengali upper and middle classes in the planning of roads in the southern parts of the town where they settled down in the late 1890s. They consisted of civil servants and barristers trained in England, as well as teachers, lawyers, medical practitioners, and engineers who had graduated from the educational institutions in Calcutta.

The assertion of their demands coincided with the election of the Liberal Party statesman W.E. Gladstone as prime minister in England, the metropolitan center of the colonial regime. His party was willing to grant a few concessions to these English-educated native subjects of his government, in tune with the principles of a bourgeois democratic liberal system to which he was wedded. As a result, the colonial authorities in Calcutta enacted a legislation in 1898, which allowed a large number of members of the Bengali upper middle class to gain entry into the higher echelons of the Calcutta Corporation. Advocates and educationists like Surendranath Banerjee, Bhupendranath Bose, and Ashutosh Mukherjee became commissioners of the Corporation. It was through their efforts that the civic facilities of the Black Town began to improve to some extent from the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, p30

Thus the notion of ‘improvement’ was greatly encouraged by the native wealthy sections. The response of the propertied to the issue of acquisition and compensation for land was vociferous, as was the response of the business classes, professionals, elected members of the Corporation and Legislature and nationalists of various hues to other aspects of the work of the CIT. The articulate response of the upper classes indicated their social power and laid bare the class structure of the city. The Marwari Association welcomed the large-scale clearing of the slums to the north of Burra Bazar because it felt that expanding business was taking over residential land. The Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, another influential body, represented the sizeable Hindu Bengali traders of Hatkhola, Kumartuli, Burra Bazar, Beliaghata, Ultadanga and Chitpur. As owners and managers, they ran a large number of printing presses, oil mills, bakeries, flour mills, and rice mills, and also owned small iron foundries, iron and steel works, leather and tanning works. In 1911, during the debates on the CIT bill in the legislature, their articulate Secretary, Sita Nath Ray, a prominent merchant, spoke up for this group:

Living as we do in the midst of congested and most insanitary and unhealthy areas which are the nurseries of all epidemic disease, it is our earnest desire that prompt measures should be taken to remove all the insanitary areas, to remove congestion, and to provide streets and wide roads in the northern portion of the town.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the *bhadraloks* carefully crafted a Hindu science of hygiene, thereby emerging as urban sanitarians, a posture that reinforced their dominant role in Calcutta. *Bhadraloks* placed the blame of disease and dirtiness on non-Hindu and lower caste city-dwellers, demanding the segregation of their neighborhoods and shaping a language of hygiene that set Hindu practices as normative in the city.<sup>14</sup> They also tried to protect their property by calling it ‘*debattor*’ (belonging to the deity) and rendered them as inalienable. Investing property with religious

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<sup>13</sup> Partho Dutta, “Calcutta on the Threshold of the 1940s”. p27

<sup>14</sup> Ghosh, *A Hygienic City-Nation*, p6

meanings, property owners transformed their dialogues with the state into negotiations between traditional customs and modern city planning.<sup>15</sup> The Trust, therefore, was careful not to trespass on possibly volatile areas such as those involving communal sentiment. E.P. Richards' plan (1914) for proposed changes in the city carried the following reassurance:

At the present moment in Calcutta, a large section of the public appear to need re-assuring that town-planning requirements will be strictly subordinated to their religious feelings; and that no temple, *thakur bari*, or mosque will be interfered with or removed, except with the free acquiescence and agreement of those concerned.<sup>16</sup>

### **Calcutta in the Roaring Forties: Cataclysmic Schisms in the Cityscape**

By the 1930s, the stamp of the CIT was all over the city, even in areas it did not tackle directly. The commercial establishments, government offices and residential areas were emerging as distinct spaces. The investment in design, lay-out and street furniture by the Trust—parks, playgrounds, trees, footpaths, setbacks, railings, street lamps etc., exuded an aesthetic appeal. Calcutta became famous for its restaurants, theatres and departmental stores. Unlike the exclusive clubs of the city which catered to the white ruling class only, these places were open and indicated the emergence of a new, consuming public. The upper-classes did well from the work of the CIT. Some of the propertied sections in Calcutta had their ancestral houses demolished, but were compensated. Many made the move from mixed neighborhoods in the north to inhabit newly developed and more exclusive enclaves in the south. As a result, the old stereotype of 'Black' and 'White' towns was displaced by a new one—'South' Calcutta in sharp class contrast to the 'North.' As always, the working classes and the laboring poor were at the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, chapter 2

<sup>16</sup> Partho Dutta, *Calcutta on the Threshold of the 1940s'* p.32

receiving end and had to confront displacement, as new public spaces in the form of streets and parks made their appearance in Calcutta.

However these planning endeavors did not eradicate urban congestion and slum settlements. In fact it never could. It was found in the 1941 Census that congestion in some areas in the north had in fact increased. Improvements in north Calcutta thus fell into a familiar pattern where road-building by demolishing insanitary property only managed to squeeze the population into adjacent areas. If the goal of planning was to decongest the city, then the work of the CIT was having the opposite effect. Willy-nilly, therefore, the 'organic' character of Calcutta survived: bustees, lanes, squalor and traditional neighborhoods. They formed a mix with *pucca* buildings, boulevards, sanitized spaces and planned areas. This was the state of the city when war was declared in 1939. In the 1940s, the city saw the effects of a World War, the severest famine in the history of the subcontinent, the worst communal violence that looked like a civil war, massive anti-colonial and left movements, labour strikes, Independence and Partition, mass refugee influx and migration of its own religious minority—in short, urban disorganization on a vast scale, accompanied by multitude of deaths, and the birth of a new nation state and a new democracy.<sup>17</sup>

The spotlight of war was nowhere in India as bright as it was in Bengal. Calcutta was transformed into a military cantonment with blackouts and curfews amidst a chaotic urban spectacle of military trucks, foreign soldiers, trenches, paper window dressings, bomb shelters

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<sup>17</sup> Sekhar Banerjee and T. Sarkar eds. *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Introduction

and a growing panic about everyday basic provisions. In every aspect, it became a city of contrasts and contradiction leading to opening of many sites of contestation.

First, as World War II broke out, the city experienced the first Japanese bombing on 21 December 1942, resulting in two people being killed and fifteen injured.<sup>18</sup> This led to widespread panic and large-scale exodus from the city. Total exodus figures stood at 3,50,000 by government estimates. And all these became further apparent a year later, when the Japanese bombed the Khidirpur dock on a massive scale on 5 December 1943, killing at least 335 dock labourers, whose bodies lay unidentified and un-enumerated, and were later disposed off without any individual record. The treatment of the corpses exposed the prejudice, indifference and dehumanization that underpinned the colonial administration's attitudes to the poor.

These moments of crisis resulted in enhanced forms of social discrimination as the behavioral difference between the upper class *bhadralok* (urban literate elite) and the migrant *chotolok* (streetwise displaced non-elite) became a recurrent marker of upper class anxiety. For them, it was a normal urban scene to watch the beggars or the *bhikaris* (dispossessed agrarian community mostly landless agricultural labourers or fishermen), representing the *chotolok* to litter the city streets. The government remained over-protective of Calcutta's 'priority classes' who kept up the city's vital war production. Food supplies were assured to the officials and the organized industrial work forces, including the railway workers, officials, the army and other privileged groups. Urban networks of new interest groups, comprising those dependent on rationed and controlled goods, all of the labourers involved in the movement of resources of war, the middle-

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<sup>18</sup> Janam Mukherjee, "Japan Attacks" in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and T. Sarkar eds. *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, p93

class urban consumers, the voluntary relief organizations and business groups were drawn into the everyday struggles of the urban poor in different capacities. On the other hand, as the headquarters of the allied forces, Calcutta hosted a large number of well-paid American and British soldiers. This led to an unprecedented influx of money and consumer goods in the market.<sup>19</sup>

This apparent affluence was in striking contrast with the Great Famine that hit Bengal in 1943. While about thirty thousand Indian soldiers died during the war, the number of casualties in the Bengal Famine was between fifty and a hundred times this number.<sup>20</sup> It threw the most serious moral and ethical challenge to the city's middle classes, who faced large-scale influx of non-cultivating destitute migrants begging for food on the streets of their city. The famine had arisen out of the mix of wartime inflation, commercial and governmental myopia, and administrative chaos—devastating the province and creating social, political, and economic ruin that would haunt Bengal for generations to come. Indivar Kamtekar's essay depicts war-time Calcutta from a fresh angle. His starting premise is that states inaugurate wars, and then, to make them the business of the peoples over whom they govern. Modern wars therefore test states, not just on the battle front, but also on the home front. During wartime, a state's appetite for resources increases. War requires a state to make unusual demands on society and to extract greater resources than usual from it. The famine beginning in the rural areas early in 1943 could be viewed from this frame. By July 1943, starvation in the districts was on the increase, driving those who had become destitute to board trains for places where food might be available. Many of them came to

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<sup>19</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, "Crime in Calcutta: From Childhood in a Colonial Metropolis to Adulthood in a Globalised Megalopolis." in N. Jayaram ed. *Social Dynamics of the Urban: Studies from India*, (Shimla: IIAS, 2017).p109

<sup>20</sup> Indivar Kamtekar, "A Different War Dance: State and Class in India 1939-1945", *Past & Present*, Aug., 2002, No. 176 (Aug., 2002), p212

Calcutta from rural districts through a long march. In due course, everyone had to face the fact that a gruesome tragedy was occurring. After starvation, came the epidemics; malaria killed the most, followed by cholera, dysentery, diarrhea, various enteric fevers, and smallpox. More people were killed by disease than outright starvation. In sheer scale, the tragedy of the Bengal Famine bears comparison with any other of the Second World War, and dwarfs other incidents in India.

The real victims of the Bengal Famine were the rural poor. In a situation where franchise was based on property and education, they were not on the provincial voters lists. Although many people died in the streets in Calcutta, none actually belonged to the city. City dwellers were safe, covered by various food schemes: it was the rural poor who came to the city to die. For all their misery, they remained marginal. The Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, when about five thousand people were slaughtered, threatened the Bengali *bhadralok*, and a furor followed. But the 'children of the Bengal Renaissance' were unharmed by the Bengal Famine. If a beggar died on a door- step, it was no doubt a terrible thing; but it is an essential part of the upbringing of the Indian middle and upper classes to learn to ignore, at close quarters, the clamor of the destitute. The Great Bengal Famine was a colossal human tragedy but, cynically, no cause for political panic. Those who died in the Bengal Famine could not even be counted properly, because they counted for so little. Seeing starvation, some of the *bhadralok* felt concern, guilt and horror: on occasions, these propelled them into social work, radical politics and impassioned theatre. Nevertheless, what they felt was sympathy, not vulnerability. The distinction is crucial. In 1946,

they felt vulnerable, and the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946 led directly, it has often been argued, to the partition of Bengal.<sup>21</sup>

The character of relief during the crisis was also controversial as it bore communal polarization in its operational tactics. Several independent bodies such as Bengal Relief Committee, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS), Marwari Relief Society, Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj Relief Society, Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee, Stock Exchange Relief Committee, Gujarat Seva Samiti, Punjab Relief Committee, Calcutta Relief Committee and Bengal Women's Food Committee came up as support from the colonial government was indeed limited. All of them, except the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (the women's front of the Communist Party), were then grouped under the Relief Coordination Committee started at the end of September 1943 for coordinating the work of the non-official relief organizations in Calcutta and they sprung up in aid of the Hindu community. The Bengal Relief Committee was started by Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and encompassed many smaller relief organizations from Calcutta and the districts. Later, the Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee was also started by him because, as he claimed, many donors had expressed the desire that the Mahasabha alone should handle their money.<sup>22</sup> In no time, a section of this relief work got entangled in communal politics. In November 1943, V. D. Savarkar, the president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, issued a statement which was published in the daily *Mahratta*.<sup>23</sup> It kicked up a storm and started a string of allegations and counter allegations. Savarkar talked of an 'organized Muslim campaign' in the

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<sup>21</sup> Indivar Kamtekar, "A Different War Dance: State and Class in India 1939-1945". *Past & Present*, Aug., 2002, No. 176 (Aug., 2002), pp. 187-221

<sup>22</sup> Anwasha Roy, *Making Peace, Making Riots: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940-1947* (Cambridge:CUP), p85, see chapter 2 for more details

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p86

famine stricken parts of Bengal to convert hundreds of starving Hindu women and children to Islam. He accused the 'Muslim proselytizers' of not giving food to dying Hindu mothers and their children, and saving them from their agony only if they renounced their 'cherished Hindu faith' and accepted Islam before they died; he stated that hundreds of Hindu children were being bought 'as you buy vegetables' or picked up by the roadside and sent to conversion centers by these proselytizing agencies. The Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, in fact, emerged on the forefront of communal politics in relief work. Relief became a matter of inter party bickering. The Mahasabha never missed an opportunity to vilify the League Ministry. It accused Muslim relief workers of insisting on a change of religion before they provided help to the destitute. S. P. Mookerjee, who was the real face of the Bengal Relief Committee, declared pompously that 99 per cent of the contributions to the Bengal Relief Committee and the Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee had come from non-Muslims, clearly implying that Muslims were sending their relief money only for their co-religionists. This was also the time when the Mahasabha started expanding its base amongst 'lower' caste Hindus. Here, the class-caste distinction eventually coalesced in the wider interests of the 'Hindu' community, and relief provided an important window of opportunity for the Mahasabha to consolidate its base amongst the Scheduled Caste population of Bengal.

Abhijit Sarkar's article "Fed by Famine" examines the caste and class bias in private relief and provides the in-depth study of the multifaceted process whereby the Hindu Mahasabha used the famine for political purposes. The party portrayed Muslim food officials as 'saboteurs' in the food administration, alleged that the Muslim League government was 'creating' a new group of Muslim grain traders undermining the established Hindu traders, and publicized the

government's failure to avert the famine to prove the economic 'unviability' of creating Pakistan. This article also explores counter-narratives, for example, that Hindu political leaders were deliberately impeding the food supply in the hope that starvation would compel Bengali Muslims to surrender their demand for Pakistan. Finally, by dwelling on beef consumption by the army at the time of an acute shortage of dairy milk during the famine, the Mahasabha fanned communal tensions surrounding the orthodox Hindu taboo on cow slaughter.<sup>24</sup> Thus communal propaganda acquired a permanent breathing space in the fabric of the city for decades to come.

### **Towards Unbridgeable Cleavages: City Life on the eve of Partition**

In the scenario of death by hunger, when survival itself hung by a thread, community consciousness among the masses was aroused by the League and the Mahasabha, which then had far reaching ramifications for a hunger-stricken province. As all known anchors of social life vanished, a sense of community remained something that could provide sustenance and comfort. However, despite strong tides of polarization, the city was yet to erupt in full-fledged massacre. Siddhartha Guha Roy in his work on tram workers in Calcutta shared numerous anecdotes of fluid identities in these times of turmoil. In 1943, the CPI, with a view to helping the famine victims and also to contributing to the Strike Aid Fund of different industrial sectors, introduced a fund called the Lenin Day Fund. A large number of tram workers, with close links to the CPI, involved themselves in the programme to collect money from their fellow workers for the Lenin Day Fund. A tram worker at the Park Circus Depot on being approached by the collectors for donation, asked, 'Why should I pay? I am a member of the Hindu Mahasabha'. One of the

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<sup>24</sup> Abhijit Sarkar "Fed by Famine: The Hindu Mahasabha's Politics of Religion, Caste, and Relief in Response to the Great Bengal Famine", 1943–1944. *Modern Asian Studies*. 2020; pp022-2086. doi:10.1017/S0026749X19000192

collectors retorted, ‘You are a Hindu no doubt. But before that you are a laborer and that is your first and foremost identity. Communist Party is the party of the toiling people. Then why won’t you pay to your own party?’ The Hindu Mahasabha supporter was convinced and contributed one rupee to the Lenin Day Fund.<sup>25</sup>

Distrust and antipathy towards the alien government and the pent up anger generated by hunger and death eventually burst into an insurrectionary upsurge in November 1945, and then again in February 1946. It was triggered by the trial of the three INA prisoners at Red Fort in New Delhi, when the students and workers organized protest marches and openly confronted the British law enforcement machinery in open violent battles on the streets of Calcutta. The popular upsurge caught the established political parties off guard and they all rushed to support it, as the Congress, Muslim League and Communist flags were used side by side by the protesters. Celebration of Rashid Ali Day on February 12 was started by the Muslim League students, but was soon joined by others, thus showing remarkable Hindu- Muslim amity at the barricade lines. Francis Toker, the Commander-in-Charge of the Eastern Command Army during this time wrote in his memoir: ‘In November there had been riots, the worst that Calcutta had as yet experienced; they had been mainly anti-British in complexion, but their violence, though short-lived, had shocked all decent people.’<sup>26</sup>

On 11th February, the situation was so tense that Tucker could not reach his house and Headquarter in Tollygunge when he landed in Barrackpur from Delhi after attending some work. He was told in air that Dumdum had been cut off from Calcutta by the crowd and landing was

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<sup>25</sup> Sidhartha Guha Roy, “Protest and Politics: Story of Calcutta Tram Workers 1940-47”, in S Banerjee ed. *Calcutta: The Stormy Decade*, pp151-176

<sup>26</sup> Sir Francis Toker, *While Memory Serves*, First Published in 1950, Reproduced by Sani.H. Panhwar, <https://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.525048/page/n11/mode/2up> , p81

not possible there. Even the military traffic could not traverse to Tollygunge from Barrackpur.

He writes,

As a thief in the night with the dusk falling on the river and over the afflicted town, or as a Tudor prisoner bound for the Tower, I slipped down the Hooghly for Prinsep Ghat. My journey took nearly two hours. At Prinsep Ghat I landed and with an escort drove to Fort William, there to confer with the Area Commander about the city's eruptions; thereafter, escorted by an armored carrier, to my house at Tollygunge.<sup>27</sup>

Despite excesses, they were marked by remarkable communal solidarity and a sincere attempt to claim the public spaces of the city and governance. The disturbances and the violence that accompanied it were clearly anti-police, anti-European, and anti-government. The Congress and the Muslim League made an earnest effort to discontinue the agitations when these developed into violent mass movements of a revolutionary kind. They wanted to get back to the question of impending independence and the political shape of the nation state. As soon as they left the agitated streets and returned to the negotiating table, animosities about spoils of power returned and communal antagonism was stoked yet again.

### **The Great Calcutta Killings: Partition before Partition in the City**

Despite promising amity between rival political groups and opposing communal parties in February 1946, not an iota of this mutual harmony and love was felt from the morning of 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1946 when the city witnessed an unprecedented scale of communal violence. In the five days of frenzied madness—that has gone down in history as the ‘Great Calcutta Killings’—an estimated 4,000 people were killed and another 10,000 were injured. As the city turned into a site of fratricidal strife that spared no one—neither the *bhadralok* nor the underclass—the crisis

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p86

deeply affected the quotidian lives of the poor as well as the middle-class joint families and their gender relations.<sup>28</sup>

At this point, a few words about the August Killings and their background are important. The 1946 carnage had a precarious past. Riots in Calcutta by 1946 were a regular affair. But Suranjan Das's research suggests a definite shift in the nature of communal violence in Bengal between 1905 and 1947. While the riots of the first three decades of the twentieth century demonstrated complex coexistence of class and communal elements, the fusion of the communal with nationalist and class modes of consciousness in the 1940s culminated in relatively more organized and overtly communal riots. Also, while the participants in the earlier riots were mostly upcountry labourers taking out their anger against upper-class people, both European and Indian, the riots of later years gradually started involving middle-class men, not only non-Bengali but also Bengali.

A few words about the earlier riots in the city would be in order here. Calcutta saw riots of a seemingly communal nature since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Talla riots of 1897, triggered by the demolition of a hut that was claimed to be a mosque, was followed by more such riots on religious issues like Muharram or Bakr-Id, which mostly saw participation of upcountry working class men, who were sometimes supported by some wealthy upcountry Muslim merchants. While for some historians, what was actually important in these cases was the material miseries of workers, and religious demands were no more than a veiled class demand. But, Dipesh Chakrabarty argued from a culturist perspective that the cultural inheritance of the Indian

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<sup>28</sup> Nariaki Nakazato, "The Role of Colonial Administration, 'Riot Systems' and Local Networks during the Calcutta Disturbances of August 1946," in S Bandyopadhyay and T. Sarkar eds. *Calcutta: The Stormy Decade*, pp267-319

workers, i.e. their 'primordial' communitarian identities, loaded with divisive values, was behind these riots.<sup>29</sup>

Even if we do not engage with this debate regarding the early riots, it cannot be denied that with the passage of years, communal feelings rather than class grievances increasingly appeared to be the guiding force behind such conflicts and middle class participation in them became prominent too. Communalism crystallized after the end of the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat combined movement in 1922. The RSS was born in 1925. The Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha was founded in 1924 and several Hindu Sabhas started working in Bengal attracting the working-class to these middle-class initiatives. Thus there took place a convergence of middle-class and working-class participation in the riots since the 1920s. A big section of the middle-class was engaged in an ideological operation justifying Hindutva, which now drew heavily on the forces of nationalism and helped them to negotiate with the colonial government. Indeed Hindutva was becoming an alternative nationalism to the middle-class. And they tried to forge a Hindu unity by drawing the working-class to their politics. Thus, this ideology gradually permeated the laboring class too and a new and aggressive kind of Hindu nationalism emerged, using the propaganda of Hindu demographic decline and of the Hindu community under threat.

In his unpublished thesis, Shraman Guha reinforces Suranjan Das's thesis by showing how, from the 1920s, the Hindu Sabha made its headway among the railway workers of Kharagpur and the Arya Samajists were trying to influence the scavengers of Calcutta. Though till the 1920s, the middle-class usually stayed out of open conflicts, things clearly changed in 1926. Dealing with

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<sup>29</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Das Gupta ( Introduction by Janaki Nair) *Some Aspects of the Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two Views*. (New Delhi: OUP, 2019).

the series of riots that shook Calcutta in that year, lying about midway between Talla riots and independence, Guha shows how on 15th July, the Rajrajeshwari procession of the yearn merchants of Sutapatti was attacked by a large crowd of Muslims as it entered Central Avenue and how the Marwari merchants of that area played a very active role in the riots. And it was not just some non-Bengali merchants. On 16th July, N. N. Sarkar, Barrister-at-law delivered a powerful speech condemning the authorities for banning the Rajrajeshwari procession scheduled for 1st June. This definitely indicated a new pattern of agitation by the Hindus. Communal strife was entering the mainstream of political and civic life in the city making it an important agenda for the Bengali Hindu middle-class. The links between upcountry labourers and Hindu middle-class were becoming strong, though till then, the latter tried to keep in the background and avoid being noticed during communal clashes. The Durga Puja celebrations too, became an agenda for forging Hindu unity in 1926. Thus the immersion procession of the *Barwari Puja* organized by a group of upcountry men in Maniktala which also involved Bengalis became a source of trouble. The upcountry men wanted to take out the procession past Dinu Meah Mosque, defying police orders. Through the Bengali *bhadralok* did not want to disobey the police orders in the beginning, ultimately Swami Biswananda (who worked among railway workers) and some influential Bengalis in that area stepped in, and brought about a consensus. C.E.S Fairweather, Deputy Commissioner, Port Police, observed, "The Leaders or promoters give orders secretly beforehand. While riots are going on, they pretend to move about in a detached manner and to defy mobs. They even pretend to help the police....this enables them to glean information as to probable courses of police actions and instruct their followers accordingly." Yet, till then, it was the upcountry men who dominated riot scenes. Indeed, Fairweather commented that this *Barwari*

*Puja* event was organized by the upcountry men with the expressed purpose of making a ‘catspaw’ of the Bengali community.<sup>30</sup>

This has to be read alongside the thesis of Suranjan Das, who shows that till the beginning of 1940s whatever might have been the immediate trigger for an outbreak—music before mosque or a firing from a Marwari house or an accidental killing of a Muslim boy—the collective violence, once its spread, came to be directed against symbols of class and colonial exploitation. By the 1940s, however, the communal outbursts relatively lost their initial class basis, became more organized, and were directly connected with developments in institutional politics and consequently, exclusively related to communal politics rather than class interests. Crowd violence no longer focused primarily on the richer and more influential sections of the two communities but was instead directed at any manifestation of the rival community, such as religious centers, clubs and schools. The riots also indicated certain degree of planning beforehand to carry out uniform method of aggression, arson and looting. The crowds no longer overwhelmingly consisted of subordinate social groups but became a mixture of the upper and lower social strata. For the first time, Bengali Hindus and Muslims joined their co-religionists of upcountry origin on a large scale in Great Calcutta Killing of 1946. Unlike the earlier pattern of lootings and other forms of violence by a large crowd, the riots of the 1940s witnessed the killing of individuals by small groups. The emphasis now was not on economic gain but on revenge and humiliation to the members of the rival community.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Report by Fairweather on Barwari Processions, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1926, G.B. Political File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India, cited by Shraman Guha, in his M.phil Thesis titled, *Emergence of Hindu Political Activity in Late Colonial Bengal: Explorations of Attempts to Symbolically Represent a ‘Hindu’ Unity*. Submitted to and awarded degree by Jadavpur University in 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Suranjan Das, “Towards an Understanding of Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Bengal”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Aug. 27, 1988, Vol. 23, No. 35 (Aug. 27, 1988), pp. 1804-1808; also “Communal Violence in

During August 1946, the urban space of Calcutta was transformed into a land of anguish, with a prevailing sense of insecurity, confusion and chaos characterising what was often called the *aporadhpuri* or the territory of crime. Despite precautionary measures, the thriving underworld or goondas continued to disturb the city's social life all through the twentieth century. It also became a part of the Bengali political life, with leaders of various parties (e.g. the Congress and the Muslim League) and factions within these parties, using gangs of goondas in turf wars to oust rivals. The goondas acquired a new importance in the wake of the Second World War, which marked a turning point in the history of crime in Calcutta. At the end of the War, in the mid-1940s, American and British soldiers who left the city, disposed of a large amount of weaponry and heavy armaments. These found their way into the arsenal of the goondas. In 1946, during the Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta, these weapons were widely used by the gangsters of both the communities.

Suranjan Das also talks about considerable heterogeneity in the background of the goondas and their linkage with institutional politics and the criminal world. Extensive regions in Northern and Central Calcutta (Upper Circular Road, Amherst Street, Narkeldanga, Beliaghata, Bowbazar, Muchipara) were particularly infamous due to the fields of operation of these goondas. The criminals largely belonged to the strata of urban poor and upcountry migrants. Yet a considerable section also hailed from upper-caste affluent families, some even had military connections. The traumatic events of 1946 drove many to the underworld. Gopal Mukherji of Malanga (alias Gopal Pantha) in central Calcutta raised a private army called Bharat Jatiya Bahini to protect the Hindus, which was trained in explosives and fire arms. The middle-class *bhadralok* like

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Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal: An Analytical Framework", *Social Scientist*, Jun. - Jul., 1990, Vol. 18, No. 6/7 (Jun. - Jul., 1990), pp. 21-37; and his monograph: *Communal Riots In Bengal 1905-1947* (OUP:OUP India), 1994

Dinabandhu Dutta, Santosh Pal, Bhanu Bose joined the 'army' to seek revenge of their sufferings and humiliations by the Muslims. However, after the period of aggression receded, often the 'heroes' were viewed with contempt and they had no other option except taking recourse to full-fledged involvement in the criminal world. Some of them retained deep antipathy towards the Muslims and became the fodder for the riots in coming decades. Here too, the Bengali and non-Bengali division between the victims and perpetrators was visible. The anti-socials like Bairam Munia and Bala Shaw, who were Bihari migrants, were extremely communal towards the Bengalis; Subodh De from Narkeldanga, on the other hand, terrorized the non-Bengali localities. One Ramjan Ali from Canal Road persecuted particularly the Bengali Hindus with the help of non-Bengali ruffians.<sup>32</sup>

Nariaki Nakazato talks about the role of neighborhoods in this connection. When the unprecedented rioting broke out in Calcutta, many citizens appear to have fallen back upon the familiar social ties of *para* to render mutual help of various kinds to one another. Similar to the militia made by Gopal Mukherji, other impromptu volunteer corps existed in different localities. For example, the railway workers who lived in Narkeldanga *bustee* set up a united Hindu volunteer corps to prevent outsiders from entering their neighborhood. In other places local people constructed barricades to defend their '*para*'. Barricading was particularly conspicuous in the Park Circus area, where 'a good number of gullies had been barricaded with iron gates and hand carts' by their Muslim inhabitants. On Ripon Street to the west of Park Circus, which was inhabited by a mixed population, Muslims built 'barricades with help of Anglo-Indians on information of impending attacks by Sikhs' on the evening of 17 August. In north Calcutta,

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<sup>32</sup> Suranjan Das, "The 'Goondas': Towards a Reconstruction of the Calcutta Underworld through Police Records", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct. 29, 1994, Vol. 29, No. 44 (Oct. 29, 1994), pp. 2877-2879+2881-2883

where a minority of Muslims lived in isolated small pockets, neighborhood solidarity occasionally worked as an effective safeguard to protect them against attacks from Hindu intruders. In spite of such cases of mutual protection and aid, it is difficult to conclude that solidarity and fraternity based on *para* social relations had much real effect as a countervailing force against the communal violence. The strong propaganda for religious solidarity seems to have already penetrated the social fabric of the *para*, turning it into an arena where territorial solidarity and religious loyalty did battle with one another. In short, *para* solidarity bore the clear stamp of ambiguity as far as the events of August 1946 are concerned. After experiencing one violent attack after another, based on their religious identities, the residents of a neighborhood found themselves reduced simply to Hindus or Muslims. The sense of communal identity completely overpowered all other forms of social existence that bound them in the process of everyday life. This might be termed the ‘leveling effects’ of violence. It was in this manner that the citizens of Calcutta were practically stripped of the social ties which constituted the foundation of civic life in this colonial metropolis.<sup>33</sup>

The Calcutta Disturbances had tremendous repercussions. Not only did they trigger a series of partition riots in East Bengal, Bihar, and other provinces, but they also made it almost impossible for both sides to come to a political compromise for the sake of preserving the unity of India. They generated a deep pessimism that even the euphoria of Independence was unable to heal, as this scar was created by an abysmal divide in the social psyche of a city. As to Calcutta itself, the quelling of the Disturbances by no means meant a return to normalcy for the city. Curfew was continuously imposed till December, troops were posted in the streets until late December and

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<sup>33</sup> Nariaki Nakazato, “The Role of Colonial Administration, ‘Riot Systems’ and Local Networks during the Calcutta Disturbances of August 1946,” in S Bandyopadhyay et al. eds. *Calcutta: Stormy Decade*, pp267-319

Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was clamped until mid-February 1947. In spite of Special Power Ordinances and stringent control of press, periodic waves of murderous violence persisted in the city, with the exception of a general lull during January and February 1947. Furthermore, there were still 14,000 persons in government refugee camps in Calcutta as late as July 1947, comprising 8000 refugees from Bihar and 1400 from Noakhali, together with 4700 Calcutta riot victims.<sup>34</sup> The peace initiatives taken by the common people, trade unions, voluntary organizations and the political parties to end communal violence and promote social harmony could only momentarily resist the riotous forces.

The mutual distrust that stemmed from the Calcutta Riots and Noakhali Riots led people to cluster into the 'safety' of their own communities, freezing identities into solid blocs. Thus, territorial separation began even before partition was announced.<sup>35</sup> Violence engulfed the western border of the sub-continent in a massive scale. Three days prior to transfer of power, in Lahore and Amritsar, the Hindu and Muslim muhallas were respectively burnt down. In Faridkot, the Sikhs had been murdering the Muslims in numbers with instruments like the French guillotine. Unlike Bengal, the large scale communal carnage in Western border led to almost complete exodus of both the communities culminating in what was almost like exchange of population. In Calcutta, the casualty had been 13 dead and 94 injured on three days before the day of Transfer of Power.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p270

<sup>35</sup> Anwasha Roy, *Making Peace Making Riots*, p21

<sup>36</sup> Inward telegram from UKHC India to Secretary of State, Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1947; British Archives

## **Decolonization: Confusions and Conflicts**

The transition of India from colonial subservience to independence on 15th August, 1947 brought severe challenges, anxieties, confusions and conflicts with it. Partition created dispersed, disordered cities across South Asia. Urgency was felt about how best to recognize, accommodate, tolerate, and manage subnational diversity and provide support and mechanisms for managing effects of Partition. Several institutional arrangements based on legal and constitutional mechanisms tried to respond to ethnic and cultural diversities and protect and nurture individual rights along with substantive provisions for minority rights. Also, arrival of freedom appeared to different people differently from their own diverse vantage point such as existing economic privileges, possession of cultural capital, religious belongings and caste identities. 'Partition cities' had multiple, changing structures. Some denizens emerged as winners in these battles over urban space. Others lost their footholds. Survival in them was a scramble, often defended with violence.<sup>37</sup> However, amidst confusion and chaos, a new nation-state apparently steeped in Nehruvian consensus was making its presence felt in the global platform. Calcutta, as a vintage imperial city, too struggled to find its place in this changed world. Existing social divisions and power equations were on the move too.

The whole atmosphere of jubilation and celebrations on 15<sup>th</sup> August had a significant amount of ambivalence and uncertainty in it, and this created anxiety in the minds of many. The day also indicated that the concept of freedom needed to be expanded, from its political manifestation to its social and economic expectations, from its narrower connotation of political sovereignty to its wider meaning of citizenship that entailed the equal right to enjoy prosperity and happiness. In

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<sup>37</sup> J. Chatterji, *Shadows at Noon: The South Asian Twentieth Century* (USA: Yale University Press, 2023). p337

reality, claiming citizenship and enjoying the fruits of such prosperity was limited to only a handful section.

Indeed, today it is clear that ‘Nehruvian Consensus’ was a myth. People in general suffered from a sense of despair and despondency since the early independent era. One reason was of course, the trauma brought by the East Bengal refugees and the burden felt by the host population on their account. The hypocrisy of the political leaders and the rapacity of the black marketeers since the Second World War were also disheartening. In fact, erosion of moral values all around had been prominent throughout the 1940s, primarily due to the War; and this was reinforced by Independence which meant, unlimited opportunities for self-aggrandizement for many, particularly those close to the ruling party.

The voice of the articulate upper caste Bengali Hindu intelligentsia as represented in the feature ‘Bibidha Prasanga’ of *Prabasi* Magazine can be used to understand the politics of preferences for social inclusion in these tumultuous years. They were constantly harping on unemployment crisis, economic recession and lack of communication or organic ties between the newly formed government and the citizens.<sup>38</sup> An article in *Masik Basumati* cautioned the new citizens that freedom was not an immovable property that one could acquire and enjoy. One would have to strive continually to make it deliver its promises. A local newspaper *Millat* noted in the same tune as the metropolitan intellectuals that fighting for freedom was one thing, constructing the architecture of freedom was yet another.<sup>39</sup> Even the journal *Sangathan*, launched just before independence to coordinate the activities of Gandhian social workers in Bengal did not have much illusion about independence, despite their association with the Congress. In the very first

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<sup>38</sup> *Prabasi*, Magh 1356, 4<sup>th</sup> volume, 49<sup>th</sup> part, 2<sup>nd</sup> khandā

<sup>39</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal 1947-52* (New York: Routledge, 2009). p12; see chapter 1 of this book for more examples

issue, Sachindranath Mitra, the editor, wrote, “The freedom we are getting is not our cherished freedom. This freedom can merely help us to establish *swaraj*, but it can be an obstacle too.”<sup>40</sup>

The first acts of decolonization in Calcutta were the removal of the statues of British colonizers and renaming of buildings and streets. For example, immediately after independence, Harrison Road was renamed Mahatma Gandhi Road, the upper part of Chowrangee Road was renamed Jawaharlal Nehru Road, and Lower Chitpur Road became Rabindra Sarani. Wellesley’s palace was called Raj Bhaban, meaning ‘house of the state’, as it became the state governor’s residence. This practice continued into the late 1960s. The principal ministries and various departments of the government of West Bengal were still housed in the Writers Building, which was renamed Mahakaran, which is the Bengali word for secretariat. Dalhousie Square was renamed Binoy-Badal-Dinesh Bagh to memorialize the three young revolutionaries who shot Lieutenant-Colonel Norman Skinner Simpson, the inspector general of prisons, in 1930. Ochterlony Monument became Shahid Minar, which means ‘monuments of the martyrs’ in Bengali. Harrington Street became Ho Chi Minh Sarani. Naming streets after communist world leaders became popular with the United Front government in the late 1960s. Dharmatala Street, for example, was renamed Lenin Sarani. A bronze statue of Lenin overlooking Lenin Sarani was mounted on a plinth in a small public garden formerly dedicated to Lord Curzon. The statue was a gift to the city from the USSR to mark Lenin’s birth centenary. Remaining vestiges of the British Empire in the forms of statues were removed from the Maidan and its vicinity and replaced with those of nationalist leaders.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Sangathan, No. 1, Sravana 1354, See Shahid Sachindranath Mitra O Anyo Ek Swadhinata*, compiled and edited by Anuradha Roy, published by Shahid Sachindranath Mitra Centenary Celebration Committee, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Siddhartha Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata : From a Colonial to a Post-Marxist City* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017)., see chapter 4 ‘Decolonizing Kolkata’, pp156-158

These methods of changing the nomenclature were nothing more than symbolic and tokenistic. However the biting realities of decolonization began to show its colors soon. It was explicit in food shortages and the spiraling inflation rate. A central government report in August 1949 showed that 75 per cent of its employees in Calcutta with an income under Rs 500 were in debt, as against 40 per cent in Delhi, and were spending more than half of their family budget on food.<sup>42</sup> The condition of West Bengal was ‘hopeless’ for Hindu the *bhadralok* as the state failed miserably to mitigate economic crisis, and march towards ‘progress’. The Enlightenmentesque faith in progress was thoroughly hampered due to ‘unethical’ leaders in power, who were dubbed as ‘power-hungry’. The Congress could retain its position in Bengal due to certain long standing voting consensus which temporarily made the Congressman’s propensity for corruption look unimportant. The writers of “Bibidha Prasanga” of *Prabasi* suggested that the new leaders like P.C Ghosh and his associates must visit to rural parts and try to foster links with people from hinterlands (*palli*). Expectations were hardly met with the members of Constituent Assembly except for nomination of Dr. Bidhan Roy, the ‘only luminary among the ordinaries’.<sup>43</sup> General assumption about the Congress leadership was disdainful. It was time and again repeated that with such leaders, the post-colonial future looked bleak, anxious and ominous.

While the *bhadralok* mindset reflected through *Prabasi* tended to be more orthodox and anti-Congress, there were other voices as well. *Sangathan*, the periodical established by Gandhian Humanists, continuously spoke for the relevance of Congress rule in the decolonized nation. It, time and again, criticized those who put up a sharp critique against the Congress ministries. The editorials repeatedly asked for stringent government measures to curb such ‘anti-state’ activities

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<sup>42</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947–52*, p20

<sup>43</sup> *Prasabsi*, Baisakh, 1354, part I, 47<sup>th</sup> Bhaag, 3<sup>rd</sup> volume, Bibidha Prasanga.

to keep up the national honour/ *rashtriya maryada*.<sup>44</sup> There could be nothing worse than calling out this hard-won independence as '*jhoota*' (lies); clearly referring to the slogan '*ye azadi jhoota hai*' raised by the communists who were in the forefront of political operations in those days . A true democracy might be liberal in accommodating differences but that did not mean that it would be 'shapeless'/*akaarheen* and sloth/*shithil*.<sup>45</sup> One Paresh Mitra even wrote, "What is the need to tell the 8<sup>th</sup> standard school students about Gandhi-Bose debate? Why should such things find its way through the school text books?"<sup>46</sup>

Anxieties were shared by the ruling party as well. In a press statement on 15 August, the West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, therefore, cautioned the people that there were still 'enemies' of our freedom, but today our 'enemies' were not outside but within us, and these were our ignorance, superstition, mistakes, and above all, violence and disorder born of communal hatred.<sup>47</sup> Similar messages were continuously put forward by the Prime Minister in the official meetings, press conferences, and public gatherings. He reminded the citizens on October 1947 to stop taking law in their hands, otherwise the result would be anarchy that had followed the fall of Mughal Empire. He tried to instill a sense of shame by harping on the possibility of retrogression if the demands for a Hindu Nationalist state were accepted. The demand of Hindu Raj would expose India to the global powers as a narrow-minded nation with strong leaders leaning towards fascism. Nehru pointed out, how pitiful it was that those who had opposed the two nation theory were now following the footsteps of its advocates. They were accepting the League's principle of violence, hatred and discord. Nehru was, of course, aware of the sharp fault lines arising out of Partition riots and refugee migration. Hence in his speeches, often a middle ground was sought.

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<sup>44</sup> *Sangathan*, Srabon O Bhadra, 1358, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Editorial

<sup>45</sup> Sri Bimalendu Dutta, "Ganatantrer Bipod", *Sangathan*, Magh O Falgun, 1358, p159

<sup>46</sup> Sri Paresh Maitra, "Bakswadhinatar Swarup", *Sangathan*, Jaishha O Ashar, 1359. Pp245-253

<sup>47</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia*, p13

He said that India being predominantly Hindu would naturally mean predominance of Hindu culture. But he strongly opposed the medievalist idea of a theocratic state.<sup>48</sup> Thus the real fight in India was not between Hinduism and Islam but between democracy and fascism. He said that the rise of fascism in Europe had made people accept the policy of brutality as an article of faith in many countries, but it could never be of any use in a democratic secular republic. He deplored that ‘Congressmen of today’ were frittering away their energy in pretty squabbles and were not joining constructive efforts.<sup>49</sup> Similarly Maulana Azad was quoted on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1947 in *The Statesman*,

“Tragic events in the recent past have darkened most minds. The clear and detached vision has become almost impossible. The average Muslim sees today only the sufferings of Muslims in East Punjab and Delhi but tends to forget the sufferings inflicted upon Sikhs and Hindus by his co-religionists.”

He called this ‘narrowness of sensitiveness’.<sup>50</sup> This ‘Narrowness of sensitiveness’ was acute among a section of the Hindu Bengali public opinion in Calcutta as well. Their sympathy was drawn neither to the ‘populace’, nor to the minorities, nor the refugees. The *Prabasi* editors felt strongly for the original inhabitants of West Bengal who had pledged their everything for the struggle for freedom and yet received nothing in return. For them, the ‘middle class intellectuals’ were the true ‘proletariat’ while the wealthy merchants, non-Bengali speaking intellectuals and opportunist politicians enjoyed the nectar of decolonization. Many felt that the refugees were destabilizing the existing educational and employment schemes and posed a great handicap for

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<sup>48</sup> DO 142/420, Hindustan Times, 13.10.47, British Archives

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. “India Stands for Democracy: Hope for Future lies in Secular State”, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1947, British Archives

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, “Azad’s Six Point Plan to Restore Peace”, Statesman, 30<sup>th</sup> Sept 1947

next generations. All funds and infrastructural modifications were geared to the cause of the refugee migrants, and West Bengal's middle class had been highly deprived and marginalized.<sup>51</sup>

In the previous chapter, I have used Joya Chatterji's research to show how the gradual erosion of the old world of unquestioned *bhadralok* social dominance and the growing anxiety about their political future in the new era of mass politics in the late colonial period made them more inward-looking, more parochial, and more narrowly concerned with the defence of established privilege. Similar traits were visible again in the early decades after independence. The articles in the *Prabasi* talked about a deep crisis of maintaining 'respectability'/*bhadrasthata* by the Hindu middle-class. Their meager earning was exhausted in providing elite education for their children and maintaining a social decorum/*Samajikata*. A Muslim tailor, a Bihari cobbler, a Hindustani Pan-seller or a Darwan nowadays earned more than the Babus.<sup>52</sup> Needless to say, they were the absolute 'Other' of the *bhadralok*; from the city's genesis they had been the perennial *chhotolok/itarjan*. The latter's financial prosperity could at best be envied by the elite, but they could never emulate them. The Bengali Babu was scared of establishing any independent business; he was typically sluggish and evasive; and disdained manual labour and working in the fields. They were only fitted for white-collar jobs which were becoming increasingly scarce and competitive. The Leftist groups who were famous for factory 'lock-outs' and rallies were the principal culprit for such unemployment situation. The refugees were responsible too as the state's economic resources were geared solely for their relief and rehabilitation.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Prabasi*, 1356, 49<sup>th</sup> part, , poush, 3<sup>rd</sup> sonkhya

<sup>52</sup> *Prabasi*, Bibidha Prasanga, 1360, Kartik, 53<sup>rd</sup> part, 2<sup>nd</sup> Khanda, 1<sup>st</sup> Sankhya

<sup>53</sup> *Prabasi*, Bibidha Prasanga, 1360, Chaitra, 53<sup>rd</sup> part, 2<sup>nd</sup> Khanda, 6<sup>th</sup> Sankhya

The struggle for settlement and security, crisis of accommodation and living space and mental reservations together with sense of contempt and disgust towards the ‘other’ form the underbelly of the jubilant narrative of independence. Right to the sovereign land in the newly acquired decolonized space remained a contested issue amidst the claimants. In an article in *Prabasi*, it was stated “Bengalees have foremost rights over Bengal. The Muslims entered Bengal six centuries before and increased in population in the last three centuries....Bengalees had to sacrifice half of its motherland to pay for their sins by accepting the infidel foreigner (*‘bideshi bidharmi’*) as their neighbors’.<sup>54</sup> The magazine even complained how all the major police posts in Calcutta were maintained by Muslim officers. The 90 percent property owners in Calcutta were Hindus but Hindus had no role in keeping their property safe.<sup>55</sup> However, interestingly, the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* still had certain reservations about joining the Hindu Mahasabha. They felt ‘due to the teachings of the last 125 years, Hindu mind can no more delve in orthodoxy. Hence one should have reservations regarding joining political parties in the name of Hindu culture.’<sup>56</sup>

### **New Claimants in the City: The Settlement of the Refugees**

The refugees from East Pakistan were going through tragic experiences of loss, confusion, anxiety and resentment due to several push factors from their homes and hearths.<sup>57</sup> The putative

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<sup>54</sup> *Prabasi*, 1354, 47<sup>th</sup> part, 1<sup>st</sup> khanda, 3<sup>rd</sup> sankhya, ashar

<sup>55</sup> *Prabasi*, Kalikatay Ashanti, 1354, 47<sup>th</sup> part, 1<sup>st</sup> khanda, 3<sup>rd</sup> sankhya, Ashar

<sup>56</sup> *Prabasi*, magh, 1356, 4<sup>th</sup> vol, 49<sup>th</sup> bhag, 2<sup>nd</sup> khanda

<sup>57</sup> Refugee studies in the context of 1947 Partition is rich and varied including issues on migration patterns, government responses and policy changes, refugee movements for living spaces of their choices, ecological impact of mass migration and variation of refugee experiences based on their social standings. This is not directly relevant

homeland across the border was riddled with unforeseen hardship and challenges for survival laced with extreme insecurities. On the other hand, the ‘newfoundland’ was supposed to be the safe haven for them, not just as a mere physical space of new addresses. The new home should also be a secure place to offer solace for their bruised psyche. The East Bengali Hindus’ discourse of Partition victimhood reflected their acute sense of insecurity with regard to life, livelihood, and honour as a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim-majority nation, as much as it reflected their entrenched anti-Muslim prejudice. Since the self-image of Hindus in East Bengal was founded on a racialized asymmetry with the Muslims conceptualized as the opposite and inferior of the Hindu, even the ‘progressives’ reacted negatively to becoming a “minority”, with its connotation of secondariness. The Muslims had a constant presence in their stories but only as the figure of the eternal peasant, hardworking, obliging, happy with his marginality, part of Hindu domestic imagery. No space was allowed to his rituals, his universe of beliefs nor did the middleclass Muslim ever figure.<sup>58</sup> No wonder the refugees expected a similar status quo in the power dynamics once they settled in Calcutta. This has significant ramifications in terms of erection of new boundaries within Calcutta.

Though it seems incredible in hindsight, the government of West Bengal had failed to anticipate any migration of minorities from Pakistan. In the initial years, official support was limited to requisitioning a few houses and abandoned military barracks in and around Calcutta, which the government then rented out to refugees. As many failed to pay rent, the practice was discontinued. However, taking their cue from the government, the refugees started occupying the various military barracks and huts in and around Calcutta, which had been lying empty since the

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here. I would limit the discussion solely to how the migration impacted the city-scape, communal tendencies and middle-classness.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Nilanjana Chatterjee, “Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence”, <https://swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/chatterjeeEastBengal-Refugee.pdf>, p20

Second World War. This largely middle-class squatting in various empty houses in Calcutta was the precursor to the *jabardakhal* (forced acquisition) movement that later became a distinctive feature of the refugee experience of West Bengal. The refugee movement was marked with retaining of older boundaries between and sometimes deepening of the crevasses. The camp refugees, mainly belonging to the Namasudra caste, were not made part of the struggle of the *bhadralok* upper caste settlers, nor did the major political parties including the left rallied behind them. By contrast, the refugees from urban and middle-class background could draw upon their social and cultural capital to successfully resist state diktat. Similarly, the influx also catalyzed the already existing cultural schism between *Ghotis* and *Bangals*: the cartography of the city was altering, property relationships were shifting as the refugees squatted on new places, often the pleasure resorts of the rich. They bent as well as broke rules, greased palms as often as they threw bombs, and appealed to sympathetic bureaucrats no less than they protested against apathetic ones. The new settlements were gradually turned into homes, neighborhoods grew up around them. Club houses, educational institutions, and small business ventures were set up systematically.

Large numbers of frustrated refugees began to “resettle” themselves by squatting on land they argued to be unoccupied and unused.<sup>59</sup> The words they used were “vacant,” and the Bengali equivalent “*khali*” as well as “*patit*” or abandoned, and “*jola jami*” which meant marshland. The impression these words conveyed was clearly that such lands were marginal and available for settlement--which was referred to as “colony”. In some cases this land belonged to the state, but for the most part the refugees squatted on privately owned property including that belonging to local West Bengali Muslims. Particularly in the areas around the city of Calcutta, many

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<sup>59</sup> Romola Sanyal, “Hindu Space: Urban Dislocations in Post-Partition Calcutta.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39, no. 1 (2014): 38–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24582857>.

refugee settlements were established on land “formerly inhabited by Muslim labourers and artisans” who were “replaced by displaced Hindus from East Pakistan”.<sup>60</sup> Many Muslims were dispossessed of their homes in the city leading to their “ghettoization” in a few neighborhoods.

Thus new hierarchies emerged from this settlement. Partition initiated a refugee generating process and unleashed chains of migration at the eastern border. Influxes were held responsible for the loss of colonial grandeur of Calcutta as the imperial city and turning her into a dirty urban space. The severe psychological and fiscal challenges faced by the migrants had a toll on their finer sensibilities and aesthetic concern. The use of the term *Bangal* as a pejorative (rustic, pauper and eyesore) was heightened and their continuous presence in the sociopolitical field could not be ignored. West Bengalis (*Ghotis*) associated the influx of thousands of East Bengali refugees with every malaise from overcrowding, squalor, social disintegration, moral degeneration and soaring crime rates to unemployment and the rising cost of living. With this, another schism broke out with the Muslim residents. The hegemonic narrative about “the Muslim,” systematically circulated in the press, pamphlets and commemorative literature and repeated in private in stories, anecdotes and rumor, both erased the Muslim’s docile presence in an idyllic Bengali past and demonized his antagonistic presence in a language of excess.

Thus the spatial demarcations of the colonial city were retained immediately after independence. The native upper classes – consisting of the capitalists and landowners, political leaders, upper-level government officials and professionals – occupied the spaces once reserved for the British. Class divisions replaced racial divisions in the city, a pattern that was similar in the rest of India. The urban elite that had emerged in the colonial period exercised their social and political dominance in postcolonial Indian cities by replacing the British in positions of state authority.

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<sup>60</sup> N K Bose, *Kolkata: Samaj O Sanksriti*, (Kolkata: Akshar Prakashani, 2022), p138

This was also true for Calcutta and can be seen as a major act of decolonization. Here, the wealthy property owners often became patrons and representatives of the ruling Congress Party, providing moral leadership to the urban neighborhoods. The wealthy and middle classes organized and supported an extensive network of neighborhood institutions that included schools, sports clubs, markets, tea shops, libraries, parks, and religious and charitable associations. The urban poor often entered into patron-client relationships with the wealthy that were mediated by charitable organizations and proto-unions. In the cases where the political activists organized the industrial working class, unions provided a link between the slum-dwelling workers and the middle-class intelligentsia.<sup>61</sup>

### **Whatever happened to the Ontological Other:**

Nirmal Kumar Basu has repeatedly pointed out that despite long histories of cohabitation, the migrant communities such as the Biharis, Oriyas, Gujaratis, Marathis or Punjabis in Calcutta hardly showed emotions of social cohesion. They still prefer to live within their hamlets and interaction is limited to only occupational sectors.<sup>62</sup> Kenneth McPherson feels that such lack of assimilation does not make Calcutta a melting pot, rather it is more comparable with a tossed salad.<sup>63</sup> No wonder this would apply to the Muslim neighborhoods as well. The Muslims belonging to multiple classes and social standing had resided here since 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>64</sup> By 1947,

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<sup>61</sup> Siddhartha Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata*, p158

<sup>62</sup> N K Basu, Kolkata: *Samaj O Sanskriti*, , p 26-30. He calls this 'Lonely Crowd'. p 99

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm :Calcutta 1918 to 1935* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlac, 1974). p17. This lack of assimilation is also an important contributing factor for flaring up of tensions between non-communicating groups.

<sup>64</sup> See Kenneth McPherson, M. K. A Siddiqui, N.K Basu, Mahadev P Basu for elaborate anthropological profiles of the Muslims in Calcutta

certain parts of Calcutta had already been predominantly Muslim, notably Park Circus and Kareya which were favoured by the Muslim literati, while places like Bowbazar and Ekbalpur were where poor Muslims lived. The Great Calcutta Killing, the Noakhali Riots, and the Bihar Riots of 1946 along with the ongoing communal carnage in Punjab and Delhi made the Indian Muslims jittery about their staying back as a minority. As with their Hindu counterparts, different Muslims responded to Partition in different manners. Many factors determined what they decided to do: including what assets they possessed, how easily they could take them if they decamped, what skills they had and whether these talents were sufficiently in demand to earn them a living in the east; what contacts they had across the border and how their prospects might compare as refugees.

While many of the Muslims migrated out of fear of riots, there were some official transfers on the eve of Partition as the top ranking officers were given a chance to decide their venues of posting after independence. Following them, entourages of peons and clerks migrated to East Bengal, which even created a temporary crisis at the bottom echelon of West Bengal's administration. In some cases, Muslims who had estates in West Bengal were able to make deals with propertied Hindus from the east by which they exchanged their plots and holdings with each other. A majority of the migrants were middle aged, and possessed physical ability to indulge in manual labour. Migrants with similar kind of mobility capital had unidirectional trajectories. Also, the idea of an Islamic nation about to be born had fired the imagination of many educated Muslim youth. Some were ardent League supporters; some, though not politically very active, were inspired by religiosity; there were yet others who went to Pakistan to live in a state governed according to the principles of Islamic socialism—a unique package of purity, religiosity and socialism whose idea encouraged a section of Bengali Muslims to opt for

Pakistan. However the most striking phenomenon regarding the migration is the sharp decline in the number of Muslims in towns and cities. Their proportion fell by more than half in Calcutta, in urban Nadia by three quarters and in urban Jalpaiguri by more than 90%. Similar fate awaited for the cities of UP, Bihar and in Delhi.<sup>65</sup>

The experience of poor urban Muslims were extremely difficult. While they fled from riots, they sought refuge in the clusters of their co-religionists within the city or in the suburbs. Those who could not leave and took shelter in government camps, were the worst hit of the lot, as there, they received step-motherly treatment. Those who stayed back, tended to be weak, and poor, hardly with any skill and money to start a new life in a different country. They were gradually marginalized as a vulnerable minority. Their cultural symbols and resources were gradually erased from the cityscape, as they became 'ghettoized' in specific *muhallas* of the city. While the East Bengali refugees are valorized, its internally displaced minority is conveniently forgotten as their story does not fit into the dominant narrative of a secularist nation. However, numbers in themselves did not turn the Muslims in a minority community overnight. Becoming a minority was about a feeling of vulnerability. Loss of privileges, combined with dim material prospects, led to disappointment and anger. This was reinforced by the communal atmosphere that prevailed in the country.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Mushirul Hasan discussed the process of 'skimming off' from the professional classes, a process that continued until the early 1960s. As a result, there were hardly any Muslims left in the Defence services, in police, in universities, law courts and in the vast Central Secretariat in Delhi. Likewise, the urban artisan and entrepreneurial class in the east and south of Delhi was reduced by riot and migration. In Delhi itself, the *karkhanadars*, petty traders and shopkeepers suffered heavily at the hands of dispossessed refugees who came from West Pakistan; see *Adjustment and Accommodation: Indian Muslims after Partition*; *Social Scientist*, Aug. - Sep., 1990, Vol. 18, No. 8/9 (Aug. - Sep., 1990), pp. 48-65

<sup>66</sup> Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition : Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See the chapter 4 "Staying On". Pp159-208

This had precarious impact on the fate of returnee Muslims who once left to find greener pastures in East Pakistan but ultimately came back due to adverse circumstances. Existence for the returnee is like a parallel universe: the triumph of returning is followed by trauma as displacement and replacement are concurrent within the motherland. With Hindu communalism and militancy finding a *raison d'etre* in the massive influx of refugees from west Punjab and east Bengal, there was a greater and more vigorous insistence on Muslims to prove that they were not Fifth Columnists and that their sympathies did not favour the secessionists in Kashmir or the Razakaars.<sup>67</sup> The literate Muslims perhaps had been aware of Congress Working Committee's resolution on minorities—it said while the state would try its best to give protection to the minorities; it would never tolerate any disloyal elements within its territory and would willfully arrange all facilities if one wished to go out. In response to this crude requirement of either 'assimilate' or 'leave', even the more influential Muslims felt it necessary to publicly renounce old allegiances. Just as the Muslim elites had done, poorer Muslims also tried to demonstrate that they were ready to assimilate into the new order and to accept a subordinate status within it. They gave up their entrenched rights to perform the perennially controversial ritual of cow-sacrifice in public. Perhaps because the issue of cow-killing was so highly charged, so public and so bound up with issues of power and history, this was the one visible and hugely symbolic gesture Muslims could make to broadcast the fact that they understood their predicament and accepted the new reality of their minority status. In 1947 and again in 1948, on many occasions when trouble was expected at Bakr-Id, the police found to their surprise that Muslims had chosen, of their own accord, with or without some behind-the-scenes 'persuasion', not to perform *go-korbani* or cow-sacrifice. And once they had backed down, once a traditional

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<sup>67</sup> Hasan, *Adjustment and Accommodation*, p52

right to sacred space or public ritual had been lost or undermined, there was no chance that it would ever be given back. A new ‘precedent’ had been ‘established’, to be used against them in any future tussle. The narratives of ‘cultural assimilation’ in the creation of a secular independent India tend to gloss over these rather harsher dynamics of intimidation and surrender, which are ugly but recurring themes in the same story.<sup>68</sup>

The previous chapter already mentioned how many of the Islamic institutions and symbols were systematically erased from the city landscape. Thus, Partition left the Calcutta Muslims, especially the Muslim intelligentsia, bereft of their heritage: old names, institutions and intellectual resources. Further, since 1946, every communal clash resulted in the desecration or forced occupation of mosques, graveyards and waqf properties. The squatter colonies on fringe areas like Behala, Tollugunge, Kasba, Garia and Satoshpur were often appropriated on waqf lands. In this connection, Joya Chatterji narrates an interesting story. From searching through the police files in the 1950s, she found frequent mentions of a Muslim graveyard and news of contestations from Hindu refugees regarding its use at Selimpur, Dhakuria in South Kolkata. As the records fell silent after mid-1950s, she decided to visit the place herself. She thought that it would be quite easy to locate. But this did not happen as the local neighbors who had been the descendants of the refugees denied that the graveyard ever existed. Finally she found it with a help of a Muslim Rickshaw-puller. All that now remained of the burial ground was a small corner, perhaps a sixth of the cemetery’s original size, to the north of the road and adjacent to the shrine. Some elaborately carved tombstones still stood on what remained of the graveyard with decaying relics of once imposing graves of the big men who had owned the land. A few

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<sup>68</sup> Apart from J. Chatterji, see: Anwasha Sengupta “Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta’s Muslims after Partition” in S. Banerjee ed Calcutta, pp 434-458; Rituparna Dutta, “The Unhomed’s Homecoming: Migration, Memory and Muslim Identity in Post-Partition Bengal” in Anindita Ghoshal, ed., *Revisiting Partition: Contestations, Narratives and Memory* (New Delhi: Primus, 2022). pp 288-317

Muslim families still lived there, also to the north of the track, but in extremely reduced circumstances. She writes:

When I got there, it was clear that the refugees of the surrounding area had ‘swallowed up’ a Muslim settlement, leaving only a part of its graveyard behind. Only the custodian of the graves, and his extended household, still live there, in the deepest poverty I have ever seen. Their grief was so palpable that it is imprinted on me still. No one smiled, not even the children. Something in the old custodian’s eyes looked broken. Having gone nowhere, they had lost everything their dignity, their peace, their place in the city, and the communities among which they had lived.<sup>69</sup>

The graveyard was a place where the Sunni Muslims paid ritual offerings to their ancestors. Now it was transformed into a football ground. It was like an insult to the custodians which they felt as a wound— opened afresh every evening as the boys came out for a kickabout.

Calcutta’s landscape is dotted with Selimpurs. Most Muslim burial grounds in the city bear similar marks of retreat and defeat. Part of the burial ground for Muslim paupers at Park Circus, which had no boundary wall and no masonry graves, was being used as a football ground in 1997, despite complaints to the Corporation on whose ground it stood. The burial ground at Gobra, founded in 1896 by Zillur Rahman on waqf land, told a similar story. Originally it covered some twenty bigha (about six acres) in the heart of a Muslim-dominated locality and close to a mosque on Ashgar Mistri Lane. After the 1964 riots, three fourth of it was occupied by the refugees. Appeals to the Corporation for permission to erect a boundary wall were unsuccessful.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>J Chatterji, *Shadows at Noon*; For a more elaborate account see :”Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in West Bengal 1947–1967 in *Partitions Legacies* , (New York: SUNY Press, 2019),pp358-400 by the same author.

<sup>70</sup> ”Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in West Bengal 1947–1967” in *Partitions Legacies*, p. 383

### ***“Kolkata Achhe Kolkatatei”*: Paradox of Permanence**

The years following 1947 should be viewed in the context of ‘heterogeneous times of modernity’ where divergent visions of freedom led to different imaginings of the enemy and resulted in contested strategies of political mobilization to encounter them. This was the time when the Indians got back ownership of their country and of their future, and were in a position to start a proper discourse on how this future was to be built. Instead of viewing it as an event in itself, one can find that the arrival of freedom initiated responses at majorly three levels: the first is the transformation of territorial imaginaries as a result of independence and Partition; the second is that of the street side locality, the space inhabited by people in their daily lives before and after independence; and the last is the historicizing of a spatial past, a continuum of a rethought past ‘provoked’ by new national identities.<sup>71</sup>

Different political discourses sprang up from these events in Calcutta. The West Bengal Congress continuously tried to base its own claim on the premise that Bengal patriotically allowed herself to be partitioned for the freedom of the country. On the other hand, the Jan Sangh, Hindu Mahasabha and CPI together clamored for a linguistic unification of Bengal to the Bengali speaking areas in Bihar.<sup>72</sup> British surveillance report pointed to the emerging leftist power against the Congress. The ex-colonizers were indeed worried of a communist take-over of power, as in their experience, Bengal had the ‘peculiar and dangerous nuisance value’ which was ready to be exploited by the communists. A report by a British Officer mentions:

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<sup>71</sup> Jim Masselos, “Decolonized Space: The Reconfiguring of National and Public Space in India”, in E. Bogaerts and Remco Raben ed. *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian societies, 1930s-1970s*, Brill, 2012, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h2zm.11>

<sup>72</sup> DO 35/3182, Provincial Matters, August 1949, British Archives

Discontent over food supplies recently culminated in large scale public demonstration in Calcutta which led to violent clashes with the police. The demonstration were organized by a group of extreme left parties for their own political purpose but the mass sentiment they were able to arouse is evidence of the strength of feeling over food supplies and prices. These demonstrations show how easily the persistently lawless elements in Calcutta can be exploited to embarrass the Congress. The main object of left Unity was to embarrass the police by forcing them to use violence. In this, they were helped by the irresponsible Calcutta press.<sup>73</sup>

Since the initial days of colonial occupation, Calcutta had been portrayed as an overcrowded place of poverty and despair, of desperation and decline. Through its nineteenth-century affluence and the energy of a vigorous proto-nationalist and anti-colonial movement, it became known as a city of palaces and political movements. But a darker reputation was insistent: from Kipling's depiction of a crowded city blanketed by a "dense wet heat" and the cries of "yelling jackals" to Rajiv Gandhi's labeling of Calcutta as a "dying city," bereft of industry, activity, and hope, a number of Calcutta-watchers remarked on its urban dysfunctionality.<sup>74</sup>

The population explosion due to the influx of the refugees and internal migration led to acute crisis of living places. The 1964 war with Pakistan and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 also resulted in numerous refugees coming to the city. In fact, Kolkata had to accommodate two million refugees within a quarter century after independence. A small part of this influx was housed in government transit camps, but the overwhelming majority settled in squatters' colonies along the eastern fringes of the city; from Kalyani and Barrackpur in the north through Dumdum, Jadavpur, Tollygunge and Behala down to Sonarpur in the south, and then in the 1960s on the west bank of the Hooghly as well, from Magra in the north to Uluberia in the south. As a result,

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<sup>73</sup> Reported in DO 35/3182 on 5<sup>th</sup> august 1949.

<sup>74</sup> Pablo S Bose, *Urban Development in India: Global Indians in the making of Kolkata* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015). p75

what was previously a rural hinterland was transformed within two decades into an urban sprawl integrally linked to the core of the city.<sup>75</sup>

The housing problem was repeatedly pointed out in every survey reports since 1948. The slums were filthy, congested, without ventilation. Most of them lacked basic civic facilities.<sup>76</sup> In 1953, the bustee population was 600,000 and growing. In a report in 1965 it was found out that one in four lived in a slum in Calcutta.<sup>77</sup> By the mid-1950s, Kolkata had earned its infamous reputation as the ‘cholera capital of the world’ because of more than a thousand cholera deaths a year. The continuous neglect of the bustee population from colonial times eventually led to the outbreak of a severe cholera epidemic in the city in 1958. The situation became so critical that it demanded immediate attention, and the West Bengal government invited the World Health Organization (WHO) to remedy the situation.<sup>78</sup> Saddled as it was with a massive refugee population, Calcutta was perhaps the first city to be hit by a creeping industrial stagnation, shortages and rising food grain prices, lack of housing and the seemingly intractable problem of educated unemployment. Within ten years of independence, when the dominant tone of political rhetoric in India was still that of enthusiasm for planning, industrial modernization and Nehruvian socialism, the voice of disenchantment was already beginning to be heard in the eastern metropolis.<sup>79</sup>

The Calcutta Improvement Trust meanwhile carried on the developmental activities to preserve the city’s splendor. It built beautiful parks, widened narrow roads, created boulevards. Yet again,

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<sup>75</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: OUP, 1997). P186

<sup>76</sup> N K Basu, *Kolkata: Samaj O Sanskriti* .p42

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p74

<sup>78</sup> Siddhartha Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata*. p166,

<sup>79</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*. p188

it built barrack-like structure devoid of aesthetic essences to accommodate more people in pocket friendly rent. While the officials boasted of providing excellent civil facilities, they also lamented on existence of ‘slum like mentality’ of the residents who could not value urban privileges. On the other hand, the general public dubbed Calcutta Corporation as ‘*Chorporation*’/ hub of thieves due to allegations of corruption against it and thereby nurturing mistrust on national government from the very beginning. Despite all these efforts, the British official circles continued to view Calcutta as ‘world’s greatest Urban Disaster’. Geophrey Moorehouse ended his book ‘Calcutta’ with an apocalyptic vision of plague, destruction and slaughter.<sup>80</sup>

Calcutta is thus an interesting historical site, which provides social historians an opportunity of tracing the successive phases of urbanization under both colonial auspices and the post-Independence regime.<sup>81</sup> The city evokes permanent yet rotational internal partitions in its body. The boundaries between the once racially segregated towns get re-enacted in terms of occupational and caste groupings, sometimes in terms of *bhadralok/chhotolok* binaries and more prominently in terms of Hindu-Muslim clusters overlapping every other forms of discrimination. In the early years of decolonization, the Muslim minority was systematically ghettoized and the figure of the ‘refugee’ appeared as the complete ‘other’ of being home; being secured. Riots were prevalent in the city since 1946, which became more institutionalized in 1950 and 1964. Each event of communal outbreak led to re-ordering of physical space within the cityscape which gerrymandered the psychological boundaries between the communities. Thus issues of homeland and religion become crucial in articulating everyday forms of identity for both Hindus

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<sup>80</sup> F. S Miles, West Bengal: is there any Hope? March 1972 FCO 160/138, British Archives

<sup>81</sup> Annual Reports on Operations of the CIT, 1953-1967, National Library, Kolkata

and Muslims in the transitory phase. This theme would be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter through the decades of 1950s and 1960s, by showcasing several instances of systematic marginalisation of the minorities along with stories of communal violence.

### III

#### RIOTS AND RESETTLEMENT: AN INQUIRY INTO THE 1950 AND 1964 CARNAGE

I still remember the tearful, sing-song sound of the boy's voice as he told us that his mother hadn't let him drink any water that morning, because she'd heard that they had poured poison into Tala tank, that the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned. I remember how we listened to him and made him repeat what he had said. And somewhere in the rubble exhumed along with that memory there lies another, much smaller detail: I remember we did not ask him any questions – not who 'they' were, nor why 'they' had poisoned their own water. We did not need to ask any questions; we knew the answers the moment he had said it: it was a reality that existed only in the saying, so when you heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not – it only mattered that it had been said at all.

-----*The Shadow Lines, Amitav Ghosh*<sup>1</sup>

In the context of Post-1947 deterioration of communal relationship both in East Bengal and West Bengal, the present chapter begins with the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, of past and present, of inside and outside and of inclusion and exclusion. This is done through identifying varied examples of how the Muslim minority was perceived in the official circles of West Bengal, which in turn, solidified a discourse of permanent blockages in formation of organic normalcy between the communities. Apart from a discussion on the routinized form of soft violence, considerable discussions will also be made on the communal riots in the first quarter of 1950 and its legacies, and then on the riots of 1964. The narrative in this chapter deals with happenings in both parts of Bengal side by side, because, otherwise, it would not have made sense. Both the origin and development of the

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<sup>1</sup> This Sahitya Akademi winner novel excellently portrays several themes of this chapter such as Partition riots, refugee movements, growth of refugee colonies, memory, nostalgia, displacement and the 1964 riots. This particular quotation refers to the narrator's experience during the '64 Riots. He heard this rumour of Muslims poisoning the Tala Tank on his way to school. The school on that day ended early, and on their way back, they were attacked by a mob near Park Circus. The novel also graphically mentions its impact in Dacca in which the narrator's close relative died. In fact, creative literature is a rich source of understanding human relations during moments of vulnerabilities. But this chapter strictly uses the archival records to reconstruct the riots.

riots of 1950 and 1964 were causally connected with incidents taking shape in East Bengal. Several horrific and gory details of Hindu evacuation across the borders initiated retaliatory measures on the Muslim minority in and around Calcutta and led to a vicious cycle until strong army and police repression could quell the violence. A number of inter-Dominion Conferences held at Calcutta, Delhi, Dacca and Karachi since 1948 decided to discourage mass migrations, ensure 'happiness and well-being of minorities' and facilitate return of evacuees to their ancestral home. Both governments looked for reports of violations of inter-Dominion agreements but neither of them was ready to accept the allegations seriously. When it came down to their country, all the stories of oppression and anarchy were 'exaggerated' and 'concocted' out of vested interest to flare up communal tension. While the disturbances altered social fabric of the city for decades to come, systemic suspicion about the minority in the official circles strengthened and legitimized internal schisms between Hindu and Muslim citizens. Despite having limited representation in the electoral results, the Hindu Nationalist organizations with their aggressive propaganda also had a visible presence in this period.

### **Routinized Threat and Violence after 1947: A Glimpse of the Conditions of the Bengali Hindus in East Bengal**

The circumstances on the Western Border of India had been tense, volatile and extremely violent since the days around Transfer of Power.<sup>2</sup> The official figures show that between 15<sup>th</sup> August and 7<sup>th</sup> September 1947, 323000 Muslims and 838000 non-Muslims had crossed over principal frontier posts in East and West Punjab. In Delhi on Sept 13, 1947, there were 162000 non-Muslim refugees in the city of which only 12000 were in the refugee camps. On the same date,

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<sup>2</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> Sept, 1947, Inward telegram from UK High Commission (hereafter UKHC) India to the Secretary of State, CRO Files, DO 142/420, British Archives.

there were 90000 Muslim refugees in six camps and 14000 more had been cleared from Delhi in last two days. The Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out how a quarter of Delhi population was now filled with refugees. During those days of bloodbath, Nehru tried to urge his countrymen to maintain peace and treat the Partition as an event of aberration in this whole discourse. He said that the Partition ran contrary to India's whole history, which 'was a story of assimilation of differing races and culture.' On 9<sup>th</sup> September Nehru was quoted: "We are dealing with situation analogous to war".<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly the Indian leaders viewed the massive violence as something emerging out of the unexpected course of things, something as abrupt and as unpredictable as War! The confusion was also reported in *Pravda*, the Russian newspaper:

Fighting in Delhi has left the city in complete confusion. Unburied corpses lie in the streets, shots are heard constantly and there are many fires. Tolls of life run into four figures. Thousands of Moslems are fleeing in panic, but many are slaughtered on the way.<sup>4</sup>

This was just a glimpse of what was happening in regions such as Ambala, Karnal, Gurgaon, United Provinces, and Bombay and so on. However during these days, West Bengal was comparatively peaceful. The Hindu-Muslim peace brigades were met with enthusiastic response from the people. Except for a brief period of violence in early September 1947, no major communal outbreak was noticed in Calcutta.

In spite of relative absence of full-fledged communal orgy in 1947-1949 on the Eastern front, peace always rested on thin balance. The English daily *Jai Hind* on 10.3.48 reported that the Muslims in Bengal were far better off than their western counterparts. Mass exodus was still not in the scene. But it also strongly appealed for sympathy for the Hindu migrants:

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<sup>4</sup> "Bloody Events of India" - report by Zhukov in *Pravda*: 15h September 1947; ibid

The whole of India is bound to come to the rescue of East Bengal Hindus but the people and Government of West Bengal must take the lead. Sri Amritlal Chatterjee, disciple of Gandhiji stationed in Noakhali talked about boycott of Hindu shops and economic standstill for mass exodus. He suggested liquidation of all communal organizations, setting up of minority welfare committee and goodwill missions to achieve peace.<sup>5</sup>

The same daily on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1948 reported: “The air of East Bengal has in fact become too poisonous for the Hindus to breathe.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly *Dainik Basumati* commented on the same day:

Jessore has become completely anarchic/*Mager Muluk*—illegal detention of minorities, abduction of women, seizing of licensed guns.....unabated torture by the Bihari Muslims had made Jessore inhospitable for the people from the minority community.<sup>7</sup>

*Anandabazar Patrika* added more cynicism around this time:

One must acknowledge shamefully that Hindus have lesser independence and dignity in Pakistani regime than they even used to have in the British period....Indian government must take up more organized and centralized approach to deal with such crisis. Either it must declare that all the Hindus should leave East Pakistan or it must be stated clearly that they don't need to leave at all (and necessary arrangements would follow).<sup>8</sup>

A section of Hindus felt violence was temporary. Hence some of them left their homes as temporary measures and shifted to Nadia. However soon they heard the news of acquisition and demolition of their property by certain Muslims and also that building materials were used to build their houses on the erstwhile structures. The Hindus wrote in the complaint:

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<sup>5</sup> “Stranded Minorities in East Bengal”, *Jai Hind*, 11.3.48 in Jhumur Sengupta, ed., *Aftermath of the 1947 Partition: Select Documents*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: WBSA, 2022)., p5

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p 6

<sup>7</sup> “Jashohar-e Mager Muluk”, *Dainik Basumati*, *Ibid*. p8

<sup>8</sup> “Purbabange Hindu”, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (hereafter ABP); *Ibid*, p12

It is needless to add that this sad incident has nipped all hopes in the bud and our contemplated going back has been rendered impossible.<sup>9</sup>

Rumor had a lingering role. In Kumarkhali in East Pakistan, some Muslim evacuees from Bengal came back in large numbers and tried to settle in the houses of the minority community. They spread stories of oppression in Indian dominion and this agitated the local Muslims leading in its turn to panic among the Hindu neighbors. On 16<sup>th</sup> March 1948, *ABP* reported how the Muslims in Narayanpur, Lakshmipur, Paharkandi, Pirijkandi and other places created disturbances by titillating announcements and provocative slogans. Reports also arrived on how holy Hindu relics like the *Salgramсила* or musical instruments needed for *kirtan* (Hindu devotional music) had been damaged.

Harassment continued in transit as well. Though the standstill agreement between India and Pakistan covering the free movement of gold, silver and other valuables continued to be in force, reports of unauthorized seizures of these articles from the railway passengers in East Bengal were continuously being received in Calcutta. Multiple reports arrived on how the Hindu girls were molested by Muslim *goondas* and *Ansars* (security forces maintained by East Pakistan in parallel to official police force and the army) and their gold jewelry were taken away with help of police.<sup>10</sup> News of these incidents were circulated in the official quarters, voluntary organizations like *Bangiya Jatiya Rakshi Dal* and *The Servants of Bengal Society* took note of them and pursued the matter with the higher authority.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while discussing communal

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<sup>9</sup> "Complaint of Hindu villagers of Ruppur in Pabna to Officer in Charge of Ishardi PS," Home Political, B December 1948, *Complaints from Minorities*, WBSA.

<sup>10</sup> "Molestation of Hindu girl at Poradah Station", *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup>Complaints included how the Hindu girls as well as the married women had been kidnapped by Muslims 'as a matter of national pride' and how they were forced to accept Islam. Another complaint

dynamics in Calcutta in the decades of late 1940s and 1950s, omitting references from Eastern Bengal is impossible. It seems that the political border between two Bengals was still in the making. East Pakistani districts like Dacca, Narayanganj, Khulna and Jessore with their cities and villages seemed to be psychologically rather proximate defying physical distances.

### **Routinized Threat and Violence after 1947: The Condition of the Muslims in West Bengal**

Not just the beleaguered Hindus, sizable number of Muslims regularly crossed the border in search of livelihood. These immigrant Muslims were a major source of problem and suspicion for the government. A government servant from Bengal wrote to Sardar Patel, the Deputy Premier in August 1949:

I am sure these Muslims will create trouble in due course and be a political nuisance. This influx should be stopped and passport system should be introduced between West Bengal and East Pakistan. If steps are not taken in time, there is bound to be trouble. ...I personally went to Sealdah and found many Muslims waiting at the station...they said they have come being helpless to find a living in Calcutta as they have nothing doing in Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>

It was found out that sometimes they came as seasonal labour, and sometimes as agricultural workers in and around Nadia. They sought rapport with the existing Muslims; and through this network, other co-villagers of these labourers followed them in hope of getting similar help. Different economic urgencies facilitated different kinds of migrations. For Calcutta, they mostly arrived as workers of the port area.<sup>13</sup> As far as Calcutta and industrial areas were concerned, instructions were given to the rationing officer to be extra careful when any Muslim would apply for a ration card. If he had any link with East Pakistan his application was liable to be refused. In

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said how Hindu students of a girls' school were compelled to address the teachers as *Booya* and had to use the term *Adaab* instead of *namashkar*, Home Political, no 5743-P, WBSA

<sup>12</sup> Home Political, 351/1949; 5<sup>th</sup> August 1949, also printed in *Aftermath of the 1947 Partition*; p58

<sup>13</sup> In fact sea-faring East Bengali Muslims had a long past of being dock-workers in Calcutta since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. They were known as *Laskar*.

the official rule books, it was made clear that the Pakistani Muslims were absolutely unwelcome. Though Pakistani Hindus too were alien, they had a 'separate footing' and needed shelter on 'humanitarian grounds'<sup>14</sup>

Suspicion and harassment were common to the Muslims who stayed back as well. The daily *Morning News* from Dhaka on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1948 reported how one M. Martin, a 'Nationalist Muslim' who was 'vigorously opposed to Muslim League' was arrested on suspicion of anti-Indian activities, and how the Muslim *bustees* in Calcutta were mercilessly raided by the police. This press note was issued by the headmaster of Momin School who wrote:

Since the Partition of Bengal the miseries of Calcutta Muslims have been multiplying daily. Both publicly and privately they were being harassed in all possible ways. In the trams, buses, and railways they are insulted and abused. They get shabby treatment everywhere and in every office particularly. The Muslims living in bustees are being made victims by both the police and the zamindars who are serving them with ejection notices.<sup>15</sup>

Another incident shows how fault lines reached extremes between the communities. An enquiry letter arrived from East Pakistan to Calcutta regarding an allegation of assault on a Muslim man. It was alleged that the Muslim man wearing *Lungi* got down from a train at Sealdah on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1948, with two Muslim girls (supposedly his relatives). The Hindu public present there, without making any enquiry, took it for granted that the girls were Hindus and were being kidnapped by the Muslim. He was immediately assaulted by the crowd until he was rescued by 'some volunteers'. The police on duty were 'silent onlookers' while the incident was going on. Interestingly, the official version of West Bengal police in reply to the complaint was quite different. It identified the 'volunteers' to be some members of Hindu Mahasabha who organized

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<sup>14</sup> *Note on Exodus of Muslims from East Pakistan to West Bengal*, 10.10.1949, printed in *Aftermath of the 1947 Partition*; p61

<sup>15</sup> Report published in *Morning News*, 30<sup>th</sup> June. It was followed up by the Government claiming allegations to be false and exaggerated. CR B Dec 1948 (197-199); WBSA

a relief camp at Sealdah. Apparently one girl volunteer found out that the women with the Muslim were originally Hindu and needed ‘protection.’ Soon, she began to assault him. But the police intervened timely and they were produced at the local police station. It was revealed that the women were adults, and indeed they were Muslims. While narrating the story for clarification, the West Bengal police wrote that indeed, it was curious as to how ‘good words’ had been spoken in East Bengal’s version about the volunteers who were actually the culprits. In fact, the Superintendent of Sealdah Railway Police Station ended his letter claiming that several instances had taken place when police had received injury offering protection to the minorities while prosecuting Hindu Mahasabha volunteers.<sup>16</sup>

However impartial official position was not universal. This was evident from another report containing ‘secret instructions regarding employment of Muslims’ on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1948. It stated:

Government is of the opinion that a special watch to be maintained on the Muslims who still believe in the Two Nation Theory and League Leadership. Communalism in Muslims create suspicion in the majorities (Hindus), it retards communal harmony and in turn allows growth of communalism among the Non-Muslims.

The common-sensical version of shifting the responsibility for maintaining peace and accommodation on the shoulders of the minority community was evident here. Lists of ‘fanatical’ Muslim League leaders were prepared for all districts and each was divided into three classes: persons of all India importance, provincial leaders and local leaders along with their whereabouts, holdings in office and potentials for mischief. Further, it was decided that a list should be prepared of government servants whose loyalty to the country is suspected in view of their antecedents of past acquaintances and associations. It must be ensured that such

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<sup>16</sup> “Beating of One Muslim: Complaint by East Bengal Government”, Home Political, C.R B. March 1949, 89-91, WBSA

government servants should not be allowed to hold key positions, nor entrusted with confidential or secret work.<sup>17</sup>

Such systemic violence against the minorities did not lead to conspicuous outbursts in Bengal yet. But one can easily find hundreds of reports mentioning all forms of overt and covert violence on the minorities stranded on the wrong side of the border. We have mostly used archival materials to understand this. But one may also use other kinds of materials. For example, the frustration of the Gandhian social workers in their efforts to ensure communal harmony stares us in the face in their journal *Sangathan*. This journal, by the way, was founded and edited by Sachindranath Mitra, till he, in early September 1947, succumbed from injuries received, while trying to stop communal riots near Nakhoda Mosque. A couple of months later, another Gandhian, Bijoylal Chattopadhyay, sent a grim report from a village named Petodanga, near the border. It opens with the sentence, “I am walking on the edge of a sword.” And, he, thus, describes the situation:

In every heart, burns the fire of hatred. I haven't heard a word of sympathy from even a single Hindu for the Muslims who were shot dead by the police. A brother, rejoicing in a brother's death! The mask of Congress covers their face, but in their heart, they have deep suspicion of Muslims.

So the partition of the country could not mitigate communal bitterness, rather shored it up. The internal partition reached a deadly climax with the onset of communal frenzy in the early 1950, comparable to the violence unleashed near Western border of India.

### **Riots of 1950: ‘The Second Calcutta Killings’**

The riot of 1950 fractured the urban social space of Calcutta beyond repair. The issue was entangled with the larger framework of the rehabilitation policy of the West Bengal government,

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<sup>17</sup> Confidential, A-7/53, WBSA

saddled with an unending stream of refugees from across the border. In this section, I would discuss the events briefly under a number of sub-sections to get a glimpse of how riot-violence enhances human misery and jeopardizes political balance in a massive scale. The archival documents and newspaper clippings can run into volumes. Here, I would use them selectively only to showcase the major trends.

*The beginning of the Riot in East Bengal:*

As early as on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1950, a telegram was sent to Atlee, the Premier of England from the UK High Commission in Calcutta about the violence unleashed in East Bengal. It said that East Bengal had ‘unleashed unpatrolled terrorism’, Hindu villages in Khulna, Barisal and Rajshahi were burnt down, and 50000 Hindus had been homeless. Many had been killed; women had been raped in front of their family. There had been many cases of forcible conversion, abduction of women; there were also reports about snatching of babies from their mothers and throwing them to the river. The tone of the telegram seemed urgent and genuine, also imbued with a sort of helplessness at the sudden outburst of violence.<sup>18</sup>

But this was just the beginning. As per the reports available, violence broke out in Dacca on Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1950, after the *Jumma Namaz* (Friday prayer of the Muslims). On 12<sup>th</sup> February, a crowd of Hindu passengers was attacked at the Karimtolla airport near Dacca by an armed mob and a large number of boarding passengers, including women and children, were killed or seriously wounded. Soon a host of reports of massacres flooded in from other parts of East Bengal. Large-scale violence against the Hindus was reported from Bianibazar, Habibganj and Barlekh police stations of Sylhet district, Putia and Nachole in Rajshahi, Bhandaria and

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<sup>18</sup> Inward telegram from UKHC India to CRO, Do 35/2989, British Archives

Kalashkathi in Barisal, Bagerhat in Khulna, Comilla in Tripura and Feni in Noakhali. Of all, Barisal was the worst affected district.<sup>19</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika* reported on 9<sup>th</sup> February about the impending threats on Hindu lives and Hindu women:

Abduction of women, rape, murder, looting, torching of houses, forcible occupation of land and burglary are taking place in a planned manner... with implicit support from the government. It is undoubtedly clear that such incidents are motivated towards complete eviction of Hindus from Pakistan.”<sup>20</sup>

*Dainik Basumati*, on the same day, echoed these reports and stressed the psychological loss:

The once economically and culturally powerful Hindu families now spend their days in fear and are leaving their home. A Hindu family tried to cross by river. They were stopped by the *Ansars* and told, “You can leave but you must leave behind the assets of Pakistan (pointing to the women).”<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, *Pallibandhab*, a daily published from Rajshahi reported how the Muslims were constantly victimized in West Bengal, especially in Murshidabad. Their meat-shops had been looted, the Muslim students had been beaten up, and the Muslim women had been molested during the Holi festival. It accused the Indian newspapers to be blatantly partial to the Hindus in not publishing this news. However, the Indian press negated such allegations. Rather it dubbed the incidents at Murshidabad completely fabricated to be used as a strong pretext to evacuate Hindus from Rajshahi, so much so that a Deputy Magistrate in Pabna openly asked for conversion of Hindu residents to Islam.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> “ West Bengal Government Steps on Newspaper Reports”, 9.2.50, ABP , printed in *Aftermath of the 1947 Partition*; p118

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* p119

<sup>22</sup> Reports published in *ABP* on 9.2.50, *Basumati* on 4.2.50, printed in *Aftermath of the 1947 Partition*; pp118-121

From the second week of February, the press reports in Calcutta increasingly became more belligerent and inciting. As the stories of atrocities appeared in the Calcutta press along with the exaggerated statements of the Hindu Mahasabha leaders, emotions in West Bengal boiled over and full-scale anti-Muslim riots started here on 8<sup>th</sup> February, after a gap of nearly two years.<sup>23</sup> The scourge that engulfed Calcutta and Howrah from the beginning of 1950 was one of the most potent of these. Detailed reports of the riots in Calcutta and the suburbs are difficult to come by, with the government gagging press reportage with prohibitory orders ‘not to publish records of events which are likely to excite people and submit them to Government for censorship.’ Only the official briefings were to be reported on a daily basis and no independent investigations were to be carried out.

*A Short Narrative Account of Calcutta Violence:*

What can be pieced together is that on 8th and 9th February 1950, processions with incriminating slogans were taken out in ‘certain areas, exciting people to violence.’ This prompted the government to promulgate Section 144 CrPC throughout Calcutta, banning all processions and meetings. A curfew was imposed in certain sensitive pockets and the military was summoned to patrol those areas. But that such measures were not adequate enough to quell the tension was evident from the subsequent government reports.<sup>24</sup> What followed in the official reports were tireless and somber documentation of stabbing, arson, murder and indiscriminate looting of property and widespread destruction. Dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed under Maniktala and

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<sup>23</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal: The Story of Dalit Refugees 1946-1961*, (Oxford:OUP, 2022) p.78

<sup>24</sup> Files DO 35/2989-DO35/2992 in the British Archives deal with the riot. In WBSA, CR files on March 1950 have detailed account on the topic.

Beliaghata police stations, the area bounded by Ultadanga Main Road on the north, Gas Street on the south, the railway bridge on the east and Upper Circular Road on the west, and under the Amherst Street police station, the area encompassing Keshub Sen Street on the north, Mirzapur Street on the south Upper Circular Road on the east, and Amherst Street on the west. The situation seemed to have improved by 11<sup>th</sup> February, and on 18<sup>th</sup> February the curfew was lifted from all areas in Calcutta. But peace was short lived. Reports of stray violence in and around the city never ceased to come.

The 1950 riots had dual theatres. While streets of Calcutta and Howrah were in flames in parallel with extensive regions in East Bengal, it acted as a super active catalyst for mass migration: to and fro from East Pakistan to West Bengal and vice versa. While the Hindus had a majorly one-way flow from East to the West Bengal, the Muslim exodus from West Bengal was not complete. Soon many came back. Arrangements had been made for temporary accommodations of large number of Muslims in southern and central Calcutta. There was already a break-out of cholera and smallpox epidemic and the health situation was likely to deteriorate as a result of food shortage and lack of sanitation.<sup>25</sup>

Communal disturbances of 1950 not only flared up migration, it also made transit more traumatic. Reports of organized attacks on trains bound for Calcutta and harassment of the refugees by East Bengal officials and semi-official agencies led to agitated response in West Bengal. Down Dacca Mail and Down Assam Mail had been regular targets of mobs. The luckier refugees who managed to reach Calcutta had harrowing experiences to share. Often they lost their family members on the way, sometimes the women passengers were raped, some were beaten to death. The trains were stopped repeatedly between stations for indiscriminate looting

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<sup>25</sup> Inward Telegram from UKHC India to CRO, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1950, DO39/2989, British Archives

and harassment on the pretext of customs duty. On 11.2.50, the Down Assam Mail train came without a single passenger, all of them had been forcibly detained at Darshana and were assaulted by the *Ansars*. On 26th February, the Down Dacca mail train came to Sealdah about 10 hours late with four carriages completely empty and containing profuse blood marks, broken conch-shell bangles, iron bangles, and a number of suitcases and beddings without their owners. The train had been attacked at Rajbari and Surajnagar, and a large number of persons were reported to have been killed and injured. This naturally excited those who came to Sealdah to meet their relatives. It was difficult to keep the platforms clear of these people. Tear gas and occasional *lathi* charge had to be used for controlling the crowd. This was, in fact, a recurring theme in the archival documents. Since the Muslims too, in large numbers, wanted to leave the city, Sealdah station became an engaging theatre of activity. Agitated Hindu mobs gathered there, and resisted Muslims from boarding trains or arriving from Pakistan. The miscreants often broke Muslim shops around the area. Harrison Road and Upper Circular Road witnessed mob violence and police activities on regular basis.<sup>26</sup>

The press had considerable role to play in these eruptions. By 12<sup>th</sup> February, the Indian and Pakistani newspapers were forbidden to share titillating stories of communal violence. On 24<sup>th</sup> February, Prime Minister Nehru stated that the comments of Pakistan press were ‘grossly exaggerated’, often ‘fantastic to their untruth and their appeals to passion and bigotry’. Months passed, and persistent anti-India and anti-Hindu campaign was carried on in the press and the radio, often calling the minority *kafirs* (infidels) or fifth columnists or danger to the state. All these made acquiring actual figure of evacuation more murky. At this time, Nehru had a welcoming policy to the East Bengal refugees. He stated: “The door should be open to them to

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<sup>26</sup> Report by Commissioner of Police , Calcutta 28<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1950, *ibid*

travel from one part of Bengal to another. That would relieve the tension, lessen the panic and give them a little more security.”<sup>27</sup>

In this connection, Nehru also reminded the nation that India and Pakistan might have become two separate countries but a large number of people lived in each country that had intimate associations and relationship with the people in the other country, and if they were in trouble they looked to this relationship of friendship. However, a large number of minorities, if not all, had lost all sense of security and were living in fear and apprehension leading to vicious cycle of communal breakouts.<sup>28</sup> The government was aware of its long term implication. Regarding India’s relationship with Pakistan, Nehru said, “It is too serious a matter affecting our kith and kin and generations and may be the whole future of India. It is a terrible responsibility.”<sup>29</sup> Another factor which received little attention at the moment on either side of the frontier was the existence of agent provocateurs who found existing situation entirely favorable for spreading the gospel of chaos and terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

### *Impact on the Muslims: Long-Term Violence*

Various conflicting figures (between 25000-50000) appear regarding the intra-city migration of the displaced Muslims during the riot. There were remarkably few casualties, as the Muslims offered no resistance, and evacuated their houses long before they were burnt. While the morale

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<sup>27</sup> Over all it can be gauged that figures of evacuation from train and air were as follows: From East Bengal to West Bengal: Between 12th Feb- 21st Feb: by air: 3500, and by train 16000. From West Bengal to East Bengal: by air 2100, by train 3000. , DO39/2989,British Archives

<sup>28</sup>24<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1950, Quoted in Inward Telegram from UKHC, India to CRO, London, ibid

<sup>29</sup> Inward telegram from UKHC India to CRO London, 18th March

<sup>30</sup> Manchester Guardian, 4th march 1950, DO39/2989,British Archives

of the Muslims throughout Calcutta had reached a very low ebb, there were yet no signs of massive evacuation through rail or road to East Pakistan. Evacuation by air was still running low, at the rate of 300 per day, and was of course, confined to those, who could afford this. The Muslims population of greater Calcutta had already been concentrated into large pockets in the city or into large refugee camps in the suburbs. The Bihari Muslims, though some had left; many had greater courage and decided to stay. The large Muslim pocket in Khidirpur was in 'good heart', as it felt, its line of retreat was not completely cut off. The trouble led to evacuation of accomplished Muslims, but restoration of law and order could prevent exodus on a large scale.<sup>31</sup>

In early March 1950, enquiries about 'killings and assaults' of Muslims were being made for Ballygunge, Barasat, and Sealdah station by the Pakistan government. It was found out, how the Muslim residents had been ruthlessly beaten, and their belongings were looted. Women were left only with *sarees*, and their inner-wears were taken away.<sup>32</sup> Protests also poured in against indiscriminate killings in Park Circus, Narkeldanga Khidirpur and Maniktala.<sup>33</sup> In these areas, bombs were hurled to the local Muslim houses repeatedly, and no arrest was made despite several requests from the victims. However the official statement denied most of these charges. It clarified that many Hindus had been arrested for their misdeeds. It was equally false to say that there had been many cases of stray stabbing and assault on Muslims. So far, evacuation was concerned, majority of the Muslims were still there. From Watgunge to Khidirpur, there had been no evacuation at all. Finally, the Commissioner of Police ended his letter with stern words:

It is obvious that the east Bengal government have a number of writers of romantic fiction in their employ for drafting these telegrams. Such lies will never make out good case for them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Report from Fortnightly Extract: Week ending on 6th April, Calcutta, DO39/2989, British Archives

<sup>32</sup> CR B March 1950, 252-282, WBSA

<sup>33</sup> CR B March 1950, 290-295, WBSA

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

There had been an organized Muslim hunt from Howrah to Chinsurah along GT road. As per official estimate, around 100 were killed in Howrah. According to a report by a fire brigade officer, on 27<sup>th</sup> March, the Adamjee Jute Mill of Belur owned by the Muslim firm Adamjee Haji Dawood and Co. was surrounded by Hindus and Sikhs. All 200 Muslim workers were killed.<sup>35</sup>

Gradually, however, the Muslims had begun to return to Maniktala area. The Asavi Match Company in Maniktala which employed 4000 Muslims and 1000 Hindus had to close down during the trouble. The Hindu employers did their best to help the Muslims, and had been petitioning the government to bring the Muslims back, since without them the factory could not reopen.<sup>36</sup> Despite these gestures, Muslims in the city hardly felt secure after these riots. Even, Muslims from unaffected regions continued to move to the refugee camps, especially in Park Circus. This is attributed to fear of renewal of trouble on approaching Hindu festival of Holi. Thus, the situation in Bengal remained tense and full of potential danger. It was more so because the emotional stories of the Hindu refugees were regularly stirred up. It was widely felt, not only among the uninformed general public but also in the responsible circles, that India had a moral responsibility to prevent persecution of minorities in East Bengal:

The situation is undoubtedly serious. There is a possibility that if further massacre should take place in either country, the mobs might get out of control of the police and the military and a chain reaction of communal murders be set going, the consequence of which it would be difficult to exaggerate.<sup>37</sup>

Similar instances of loss of faith were reported across the country. Sinclair of Burma Shell reported that his company was having trouble at Digboi. In the factory, the total Muslim labourers numbered some 1700 out of a total labour force of 6000, which included many best

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<sup>35</sup> Inward Telegram from UKHC India 29th March, ibid

<sup>36</sup> Supplements to Fortnightly Report on the East- West Bengal Communal Situation, Do 35/2989, British Archives

<sup>37</sup> Inward telegram from UKHC from India 4th March, ibid

and key workers. They had been leaving at the rate of 30 per week, and asking to be transported to Pakistan by special train.<sup>38</sup>

### Reshaping of the City:

In case of the 1950 riots, the worst-affected were the pockets under Ward nos. 29, 30 and 31. From the census of 1941, which gives a police station-wise break up of communal composition, the Muslim majority localities of Calcutta can be identified, and this helps us to understand why specifically these areas fell prey to the frenzy. A distinct pattern emerges if one looks at the demographic contours of the affected areas. The Muslim-dominated pockets situated east of the Circular Road running practically for the entire length of Calcutta from north to south was targeted to be purged. The riot-affected areas witnessed a negative growth rate in the inter-census decade. Unfortunately, the census of 1951 in the case of Calcutta did not record the community-wise split-up of population in each police station.<sup>39</sup> However, the area with the maximum concentration of Muslim population in 1941, Beniapukur (71.41 per cent), located in the Park Circus area and remaining more or less unaffected in 1950, did not record any negative growth rate in terms of total population. In fact, there was a positive growth rate of +31.33 per cent.

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<sup>38</sup> Office of UKHC Delhi, 9th March, ibid

<sup>39</sup> One can question, why did the Census Commission not come up with such statistics? The question becomes all the more significant in light of the fact that a religion wise break up of police stations of all the other districts of West Bengal is readily available in the respective district census handbooks. Why does one not find such data sets in Volume VI, Part III titled Calcutta City or in Volume VI, Part IC where one finds the tables pertaining to West Bengal? Was the government trying to shield some crucial facts by not publishing such statistics? No explanation was offered and the questions remain unanswered. In the absence of police station split-up of the communal composition, to specifically pin-point and prove the scaling down of the Muslim growth rate would be difficult. But, if the available data is correlated, one can conclude that the negative growth rate in the overall population of the Muslim majority wards that were affected in 1950, at a time when the city registered an overall population growth of +20.6 per cent, is an indicator of the deep-seated sense of insecurity pervading the minority mind. See, Subhasri Ghosh, "1950 Riots and Fractured Social Space"; *Source*: academia.edu.

With a paltry 14.42 per cent of the total population of Beniapukur being returned as displaced as per the 1951 census, one cannot account for this population growth by the return of the migrant population. It can be assumed that the growth was directly proportional to a redistribution of minority population of Calcutta. Being hemmed in by wards which traditionally housed Muslims and which were targeted in 1950, Beniapukur became a safe haven for the minority population who, evicted in the early months of 1950, found it safe to huddle with their co-religionists. The localities of the lower class poor Muslims, who eked out a hand to mouth living, were specifically targeted by the rioters. They struggled for space in Park Circus, which earlier had majorly affluent residents. 1950 riots jumbled up this setup by obliterating the boundaries between the rich and the poor. The latter fled from their dinghy shanties, which were burnt down, to take shelter amongst their relatively affluent brethren. The state administration, too, acknowledged, 'There has been a concentration of evacuees in certain areas, particularly in Park Circus.'<sup>40</sup>

There was thus reconfiguration of the living pattern of the minority population within the city, following the conflagration. An additional important local factor was that the Hindu landlords in these partially developed but increasingly valuable areas used this opportunity of instigating the eviction of the minorities to enjoy undisturbed possession of the land under the Tikka Tenancy Act of 1949. Thus the official police view regarding the riot was that, though the troubles were communal in origin, they were aggravated and protracted by hooliganism and goondaism masquerading as communalism.<sup>41</sup> Another trend that becomes evident from the census data is that in some of these Muslim majority pockets, the vacuum was filled by the Hindu immigrants.

As the Census Commissioner notes: 'During the riots most of the bustees were deserted. . . .

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<sup>40</sup> Census 1951, Volume 6 Part 3, pp xiv-xvi.

<sup>41</sup> Subhasri Ghosh, "1950 Riots and Fractured Social Space"; Source: academia.edu.

Between December 1950 and March 1951 almost all these deserted areas were rehabilitated and filled up by large settlements of displaced Hindus from East Bengal.<sup>42</sup> N.K. Bose, surveying the social scene of Calcutta in the 1960s noted that the refugees had settled in large numbers mostly in the northern and northeastern wards, many of which were formally inhabited by Muslim labourers and artisans. The latter had been largely replaced by displaced Hindus from East Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

The minority's Social and cultural rights over the cityscape were diminishing in many other ways. The previous chapter already showed how the Muslim graveyards and *waqf* property were often transformed into residential neighborhoods by the Hindus. Such transformation was a constant and gradual process. But the riots led to more violent and radical restructuring of the living spaces. According to a report created by the Muslim Rehabilitation and Welfare Association (1950), the Chief Secretaries' Conference between two Bengals on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1950 brought up a concern about deplorable conditions of existing mosques in and around Calcutta after the recent violence.<sup>44</sup> A large number of them had been occupied by the Hindu refugees, whom even the police could not resist. It was decided to take up joint inspection of mosques by the representatives of East Pakistan and West Bengal and deploy adequate measures. Inspection revealed major lack of maintenance and lack of cleanliness in the worn out mosques. Beneath the sheath, it actually reflected loss of privilege and shrinking living place of the minorities in the riot-torn city. Some of the walls in the mosque at 112, Maniktala Road, had cow-dungs pasted on them, the washer-men used it for drying clothes in the roof, and many Hindu refugees lived around it. The mosque at 19, Bagmari Road had been occupied by one

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<sup>42</sup> Census 1951, pxvi.

<sup>43</sup> N. K Bose, *Calcutta 1964: A Social Survey*, (Bombay:Lalvani Publishing House, 1968), p14

<sup>44</sup> Joint Inspection Note on Mosque in and around Calcutta, CR 1908/50, B Dec 1955 1-52. WBSA.

cardboard making factory and ‘*Mahila Shilpa Kendra.*’ Most of the mosques in the extensive regions of Maniktala, Upper Circular Road, Mohanbagan Lane, Old Ballygunge Road, Gariahat, Behala, and Baranagar were broken, windows and doors were removed, and some were even razed to ground. Some of these at 19, Gariahat Road, Kankurgachi Bridge, Rani Sankar Lane, Nagerbazar and near R. G. Kar Hospital had been thoroughly occupied by Hindu refugees. The inner walls of the Lake Mosque inside Rabindra Sarobar had been inscribed with ‘filthy language’ which re-emerged even after applying white coats. The one at Wellington Street had a notice on it: Sale for Restaurant. Meanwhile the mosque at Russa Road had been transformed into a café. The area around the mosque at 21, Munsipara Road used to have a sizable Muslim population. The report could not find any single Muslim living in the area now. The mosque had been turned into a cattle-shed. The very well-known Jama mosque at Alambazar had been looted of its expensive marbles. A mosque at Chondalpara in Chandannagar had been captured by a *Sadhu* who even fixed his *Trisula* on its ground. The Arif Mosque at Shyambazar was now under the control of Hindu Mahasabha while some mosques in Howrah had been instilled with Hindu idols. The report mentioned:

Prevention of sanctity of places of worship is a sacred duty upon the government concerned and if places of worship of minority community are desecrated and misused by members of majority, it is bound to create resentment as well as panic...<sup>45</sup>

Hence adequate measures of restoration should be taken to restore the confidence of Muslims. It was more than ‘improper usage of sacred spaces’, it amounted to the question of legitimate claim for freedom of worship. Calcutta Police maintained records up to May 1951 and tried to restore a

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<sup>45</sup> Mentioned in the Report by Muslim Rehabilitation and Welfare Association, 1950, WBSA. Ibid.

few mosques with assistance from CIT. No effort was found to rebuild those which were burnt and destroyed in the 1950 riots.

*The Usual Blame Game and the Hindu Right:*

For months to come after the violence in February, both Indian and Pakistani governments were busy to establish the perfect chronology of riots to justify and legitimize their roles respectively. Indian government highlighted police brutality in Khulna in December 1950, which initiated mass migration of Bengali Hindus from the neighboring districts. The Pakistan government, however, never considered the police activities in Khulna as communal at all. They justified it as a routinized affair of hunting down the communists in the village, which got misrepresented among the Hindus. This was more so because the Hindu minority had already been agitated by instigation of Hindu Mahasabha and RSS leaders. The fiery speeches of Mahasabha leaders, at the conference in December 1949 in Calcutta, had set the theatre for violence ready. Thus, troubles first began in Calcutta in early 1950, and only as retaliatory measures, it broke out in Dacca and other areas in East Pakistan.

One may ask, what actually caused the riots, and who were the actual culprits? From the Indian government's end, various agencies were blamed. In his budget speech on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, Prafulla Chandra Sen, the Minister of Agriculture who functioned as the then chief minister Bidhan Chandra Roy's Deputy, put the onus on the restless spirit of the migrants, asserting that the 'vast refugee population floating despairingly mostly in the urban areas provide the delicate fuse of explosion.' The Premier Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy was eloquent

about the role of the communal situation in East Bengal and the incendiary role of organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, being directly responsible.<sup>46</sup> While the Mahasabha General Secretary Ashutosh Lahiry spewed venom on the minorities in his speeches, the party, following the backlash it faced after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, decided to withdraw from active politics and concentrate primarily on philanthropy. But covertly, it carried on its agenda of anti-Muslim mobilization. The Mahasabha Conference on 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> December 1949 asked for establishment of *Akhand Hindustan* and a democratic state based on the culture and tradition of the land. It called for consolidation of all sections of people into an organic whole and prescribed military training for all. These proposals were widely greeted by the audience present through loud cheers, especially when V. D. Savarkar, the legendary founder, came to the dais.

Tumultuous ovation greeted the 68 year old Hindu Mahasabha leader, when he stood before the mike, characteristically resting his palms on the bend of his umbrella, and wearing his brimless black cap. As he went on making his points, he was applauded lustily from all corners of the decorated huge *pandals* packed to the extreme galleries.<sup>47</sup>

He reminded the crowd that independence of India was a victory of Hindudom. Over 85% of the total population was Hindu. Its governor general was a Hindu, its Prime Minister was a Hindu and Deputy PM was a Hindu too. The flag that was flying in the country today was India's own flag, so it was a Hindu flag. It had *Asoka Chakra* which was the *dharma chakra* and it was *dharma* of the Hindu race. But one thing one should remember that behind the *Asoka Chakra*, there was the *Sudarshan Chakra* (lethal weapon in the hand of Lord Krishna, a popular Hindu God). If there was aggression against the Hindus, the *Sudarshan Chakra* would be taken out; otherwise the Hindus stood by the ideals of '*Viswa Kalyan*' (wellbeing of global humanity).

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<sup>46</sup> Supplements to Fortnightly Report on the East- West Bengal Communal Situation, DO 35/2989, British Archives

<sup>47</sup> Mahasabha conference ended on 26th December 1949. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* covered the event extensively and published the resolutions on December 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> 1949,

N.B Khare, another leader, said in his speech that Mahasabha targeted to raise a fund of Rupees one crore for the refugees. It must also enroll one lakh employees. It should uplift the Scheduled Castes and attempt 'nationalization' of about 35 million Muslims left in India so that they might be converted into loyal citizens.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, the R.S.S. chief M.S. Golwalkar visited Calcutta on 15 and 16 February 1950, and distributed inflammatory leaflets and handbills urging 'Blood for Blood.' He also held a closed door meeting at Digambar Jain Hall in Burrabazar. The Bengal chapter of the Hindu Mahasabha held another meeting on 2nd March at Bowbazar Street, where after a four-hour prolonged debate, not only was the 'appalling situation in East Bengal' condemned in the harshest words, but also a resolution was adopted where the wholesale transfer of Hindu population from East Bengal was demanded. To this end, a Council of Action was set up consisting of Mahasabha leaders, namely Ashutosh Lahiry, Narendra Nath Das and Sudhir Kumar Mitra. An ultimatum was issued to Nehru to take heed of their resolution by 7<sup>th</sup> March, failing which, the Mahasabha would create a situation where the central government would be forced to take appropriate action. Meanwhile, one widely read Calcutta newspaper polled for opinions whether India should invade Pakistan. 87% of the readers said yes to the proposal.<sup>49</sup>

There had been considerable mention of one 'Commission for Protection of Minorities' in Calcutta which was supposedly forming and training a civilian Hindu militia. Their strength was unknown but they were recruiting at a high speed. Reliable sources indicated that they had been provided with arms with government support. It was rumored that India was planning an

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<sup>48</sup> All India Hindu Mahasabha Conference, covered by Amrita Bazar on December 25 and 26<sup>th</sup> 1949

<sup>49</sup> Inward Telegram from UKHC India to CRO, 1st April 1950, name of the paper is not revealed. DO 35/2990, British Archives

uprising by Hindu militia in Khulna and Jessore.<sup>50</sup> It was found out that its founder J. Mitter, about 55 year old man, was a 'clever and evil barrister with dubious personal morals.' He Lived in Karnani Mansion in Lower Circular Road. He was formerly a resident of Khulna and arrived in Calcutta in 1948. In June 1949, his Council published a pamphlet called '*Now or Never*' ,which suggested creation of a separate territory for the Hindu minorities in East Bengal. The refugees joined his private army and collected funds. Mitter had been so desperate that On 2<sup>nd</sup> February, he sent wild telegrams to Atlee, Truman, as well to the UN Secretariat and Russian foreign minister asking for immediate action. His volunteers were known as 'Army of Liberation' who were the Hindu refugees. They had a sort of training camp in Beliaghata (where the first communal incident occurred in early February). The volunteers were 2000 in number trained by Ex-Army Gurkhas. Several recruitment posters were found in Calcutta around this time. The organization was funded by sympathetic individuals and groups such as the Bar Association.<sup>51</sup>

These years were marked by a number of such private initiatives targeting the Muslims as enemies of the new nation, and aiming at empowerment of the Hindus. Such efforts were important when the old and well-established organizations of Hindu nationalist groups such as the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha were laying low following Gandhi's assassination. *Shaktibadi Mahamandal* set up by Satyananda Saraswati is one such example. It had both organizational and ideological aspects. Besides, founding an *ashram*, he published a book titled *Shaktibadi Samaj*, in 1951 where he sought to refurbish the ideological arsenal of Hindutva. Its major tenets were *satya, prem, abhay and shanti* but the core tenet was *tejah*, without which others would be

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<sup>50</sup> P. S. McCullagh, Major, Asst. Military Adviser writes on 16th march 1950, DO 35/2990, British Archives

<sup>51</sup> Report by UKHC New Delhi on J.P Mitter, 25th march 1950, DO 35/2990, British Archives

ineffective. He also pitted Shaktibad against Asurbad, by which he meant devilish doctrine of Islam. He also talked about *Durbalbad* i.e. the Muslim appeasement of Gandhi and Nehru. We do not know how extensive the reach of the movement was. But we find a lot of materials on it from Home Political files at the state archives of West Bengal. Shaktibad evidently led to protest from Muslims and even the government of Pakistan.<sup>52</sup>

Thus a strong wind of Hindu Nationalist ideas and anti-Muslim emotions ran high in Calcutta in all these years. There had also been posters in north Calcutta pasted in the walls asking all the Hindu Bengalis to get rid of the following things: beards (Muslims), *tikkis* (Biharis), bangles (Sikhs) and white faces (Europeans). In fact, the overcrowded the refugee camps and their insistence on not leaving Bengal led to a resurrection of Bengal's claim to have Bengali speaking areas of Bihar added to its borders.<sup>53</sup>

#### Aftermath of the Riot:

After the February riots, Nehru proposed to form a fact finding team with Pakistan, and offered a joint tour to the riot affected areas. But Liaquat Ali Khan, the Pakistani Prime Minister, refused the idea. According to him, the fact finding commission would be a 'fault finding one', and the joint tour would also be futile as was in Punjab in 1947. Nehru was criticized in the parliament for his estimate of migration of Bengali Hindu refugees being very low. According to the opposition, his general approach to the problem seemed to be too moderate, and amounted to appeasement of Pakistan. Attacks were also made on his foreign policy of 'neutrality' which was

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<sup>52</sup> Check Appendix I for more information on it.

<sup>53</sup> Report from Fortnightly Extract: Week ending on 6th April, Calcutta, DO 35/2990, British Archives

said to have left India with no friends. However, soon both the governments realised that an agreement was within sight for a joint declaration which would cover the following agenda:

- Discovery and punishment of persons guilty in murder and loot
- Recovery of looted property and abducted women (wonder how they are clubbed together!)
- Rehabilitation of evacuees
- Protection for minorities
- Discouragement of Rumor and inflammatory propaganda in press.<sup>54</sup>

Finally as an aftermath of 1950 riots, the minority boards in the districts were revitalized and a decisive Pact was signed between India and Pakistan to counter strong communal activities. The Delhi Pact signed in April 1950 can be summed up in the following section:

Section A of the pact promises to give full citizenship rights to the minorities, emphasizes that allegiance of the minority should be to the state in which they are citizens and should seek redress from it for their grievances.

Section B provides for freedom of movement of migrants at the eastern border. Committees consisting of three minority representatives and of a government representative are to be set up in East Bengal, and West Bengal, Assam and Tripura to look after the property of migrants who had not returned but want to retain ownership of their property.

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<sup>54</sup> Memorandum: Communal disturbances in Bengal, *ibid*

Section C mentions restoration of normalcy, prevention of disorder; ensure punishment and recovery of looted property, recovery of abducted women, prevention of spread of rumor and propaganda.

Another important measure was the formation of a Commission of Enquiry and a Minority Commission to implement and look after the clauses. An official blueprint was also prepared as a guide book to combat communal riots when necessary. Nehru was hopeful about the working of these measures in the near future and also in the long run. He was aware that riots were not merely a law and order issue, it entailed a chain of human misery at great social costs:

We have passed through trying times which test men's souls.... Apart from people in West Bengal, East Bengal, Assam, apart from the vast armies of refugees who have gone through (these) ordeals, all of us, wherever we might be, have shared this suffering and torment of soul and out of this torment has come passion and the intense action that passion brings forth. We seemed to have lost our moorings and struggled blindly for a blind future....On occasions of triumph and failure, of joy and sorrow, we have grown to each other. Even when our Great master, the Father of the Nation, was with us, we slipped occasionally and failed him but we pulled ourselves again... The real thing that counts (about the agreement) is the spirit underlying it...If the spirit is absent then the agreement is a mere scrap of paper...I do not expect some magical change suddenly...I do expect a new and purer atmosphere to prevail which will gradually affect people's mind and remove those poisonous tendencies that betrayed them...(In case of Bengal) we have to get ourselves rid of frustration, lack of purpose and divert the bright intelligence and vitality in the direction of constructive effort. ...The matter was not merely a political one or an economic one but essentially a human problem in which human lives and human suffering were involved in a measure that was unthinkable. ... We shall not serve our people or the cause of humanity by encouraging private violence and inhuman behaviour.<sup>55</sup>

Boosting the morale of Bengali Hindus, Liaquat Ali Khan addressed his nation after signing of the Nehru Liaquat Pact. He said:

Confidence begets confidence. If the minorities repose full confidence in the majority, condition would change overnight....It is our sacred duty to fulfill the promise of Quaid-i-Azm...Islam has made it obligatory on every Muslim to protect the life, property and honour of the member of minority community.

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<sup>55</sup> Nehru's broadcast to the Nation on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1950, Do 35/2990, British Archives

He also reminded the Constituent Assembly that some might assume that Pakistan was an Islamic theocratic state with unequal rights and citizenship. But it must be clear that the concept of Islamic state rested on acceptance of freedom, equality and social justice to all and safeguarding the culture of minorities.<sup>56</sup>

Amidst this celebratory mood, the Hindu Mahasabha leader S.P Mookerjee protested against this pact and resigned from the cabinet. He continued to spew venom against it in the public sphere for months to come and gave the much needed impetus behind rise of his party. He was the moving spirit behind the refugee convention held in Calcutta on 11th June at which it was repeated that the pact was useless and that the refugees could not return to East Bengal. This convention decided to set up a committee to carry on intense agitation throughout India to rouse public feelings for the removal of the basic clauses of the Pact which gave rise to communal problems. It also rose to ask the government to adopt the report of Dr Mookerjee's expert committee. This report prepared by economists and non-politicians proposed various schemes which predominantly talked of exchanges of population.<sup>57</sup> The Press covered this diligently, and thus, the option of communal trouble-making based on the emotions of the refugees and nostalgia of '*desh*' along with shrinkage of living space was there always in front of the general public. It was a matter of choice whether to trust the secular Nehru-Liaquat Pact or the inflammatory propaganda of Mookerjee.

It is true that the pact did not change the scenario overnight. Flow of refugees in both directions took some time to recede. A report in *Times* mentioned, how, in Calcutta, where the damp and heat were unremitting and where some 1400 people died of cholera and more than 1000 of small

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<sup>56</sup> Inward Telegram from UKHC, New Delhi to CRO, DO 35/2990, British Archives

<sup>57</sup> Fortnightly Report Ending on 15th June 1950, DO 35/2991, British Archives

pox in April, refugees continued to arrive in large numbers.<sup>58</sup> As per the progress report for the quarter ending on 31.12.50 on implementation of the Delhi pact, it stated:

Meetings of boards were held regularly and wide publicity had been given to the content of Nehru Liaquat Pact. Public meetings were held, group gathering were addressed and individuals were contacted for creating confidence and bringing about goodwill between two communities. Morale of the people was sought to keep up by frequent visits by the honourable central ministers and minority commission.

In Calcutta, 1000 houses belonging to the Muslims were evacuated and 402 got restored. Success was much greater in Howrah. In some cases, criminal charges began against the Hindu refugees from East Bengal for ejection but did not yield good result. Sometimes this step was avoided in the fear of estrangement of feeling between communities. 'Gratuitous relief' was given sympathetically to the Muslim victims comprising cash, clothing, blankets and house building grants. The Secretary ended the report on a happy note:

Confidence has been restored. And the Muslims are moving freely and carrying their business and profession without any hindrance whatsoever. Both the Hindus and Muslims are working together with hope and trust.<sup>59</sup>

Hope and trust was not unheard of even in days of violence. A British officer and observer Horace Alexander reporting on the communal situation in East Bengal, described how vulnerable and unpredictable the whole situation was. Regarding the underlying causes, he was told about

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<sup>58</sup> "Refugee Movement in the Bengals: Some Backward Flow"- *Times*, Calcutta, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1950: A glance at refugee movement can show the scale of movement: 1284623 Hindus and 293408 Muslims migrated to India from East Bengal between April 9-July 25<sup>th</sup> 1950. In the same period 541251 Hindus and 449968 Muslims migrated to East Bengal from India. If taken from January, total number of 2142202 Hindus and 304255 Muslims came from East Bengal to India. In the same period, 606824 Hindus and 828746 Muslims went to Pakistan from India. This figure do not include the number of migrants who have moved on foot or country boat. Extract from India Office Record on August 9 1950, DO 35/2991, British Archives

<sup>59</sup> Progress Report for the quarter ending 31.12.50 on implementation of the Delhi pact, Home Political, CR B Nov 1953, 128-136, WBSA

the 'agent provocateurs' by the responsible citizens and officials. They were religious bigots attempting to destroy any good works done by Gandhiji, Gandhi-Suhrawardy pact and East Bengal's good record of the past two and a half years. In case of Dacca, this devilry seemed to originate from dissatisfied immigrants from Bihar. In Barisal, they could be poor villagers who for generations had been treated as pariahs and were filling up the cup of expiation for the sins of the past. But fundamentally there was no enmity between Hindus and Muslims in East Bengal. In a village near Dacca, Muslims drove the Hindus to the refugee camps, and later invited them back to the village, escorted them back safely. This entire act was spontaneous. Similarly a Muslim president of the Union Board gave shelter to the Hindus, resisted the attack of the mob, and was killed himself in the process. Horace Alexander writes:

The picture most deeply implanted on my mind is of a young Hindu widow who had lost both her husband and her son clinging to the arm of my young Muslim friend, pouring out for passion of grief and anguish. She seemed to know that he would help her and her faith was not misplaced.<sup>60</sup>

Hence the years after the riot of 1950 were a period of reshuffling of population, displacement of residences and establishment of fresh addresses. The religious festivities were moments of examining the strength of secular sovereign democracy. For example, in a report made by the British High Commission on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1950, it was stated that, two important religious festivals passed off peacefully. This was of some significance, since in the past; Muharram had frequently been an occasion of inter-communal disturbances. The occurrence of inter-communal riots during religious festivals seemed to be less frequent than before Partition. Meanwhile considerable sensation had been created with the resignation of Mr. Jogendranath Mandal from

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<sup>60</sup> Report by Horace Alexander on a visit to East Bengal: March 9th-15th 1950, Do 35/2989, British Archives

the Pakistan cabinet.<sup>61</sup> His resignation letter was published in Calcutta on 8th October and featured under headlines in the press. He said that the minorities in Pakistan had no future. Hindus were destined either to be converted or exterminated. He spoke of economic boycott of the Hindus through wholesale requisition of houses and non-payment of rent. He said, "After an anxious and prolonged struggle, I have come to the conclusion that Pakistan is no place for Hindus and their future is darkened by the ominous shadow of conversion and liquidation. Hindus cannot live with honour, and with a sense of security in respect of their lives property and religion. The condition is not only unsatisfactory but absolutely hopeless."<sup>62</sup> Thus, when Mandal left Pakistan, he was clearly representing two overlapping identities—the feeling of distinctiveness of his Dalit selfhood seemed not in contradiction with his location within a broader Hindu social and political space vis-a-vis the Muslims. This duality of identity and social consciousness, and their sense of frustration and insecurity in Pakistan represented the mindscape of the Dalit migrants after 1950. This year also witnessed an overwhelming number of poor Dalits (mostly Namasudras) rather than upper-caste and middle-class Hindus seeking refuge in West Bengal. Mandal's resignation and the poignant words served the Hindu Nationalist agenda to a great extent.

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<sup>61</sup> Jogendranath Mandal was a Dalit Namasudra leader of All India Scheduled Caste Federation who was the only non-Muslim minister in Suhrawardy government in Bengal before Partition. Following the 'Direct Action Day' in August 1946, the Muslim League in Bengal tried to forge deeper bonds with the SCs (Dalit-Muslim alliance) in their fight for Pakistan with active cooperation from Mandal. But Mandal vacillated in his stances, in 1947 he campaigned for anti-Partition drives, he even wanted Bengal to be a separate sovereign state. Finally Mandal himself decided to remain in Pakistan and accepted the position of Chairman of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. Mandal and his followers trusted the League and thought that the SCs would be better off in Pakistan than in Hindu dominated India under Congress rule and opted to stay back. Mandal himself went on to join Pakistan's central cabinet as the Labour and Law Minister.

<sup>62</sup> Report published in DO 35/2992, British Archives. Sekhar Banerjee and Anasua B. Ray Chaudhury think that the letter represented the dilemmas and frustrations of Dalit politics in post-Partition East Bengal and explains the reasons for their migration. See *Caste and Partition in Bengal*, p88

Delhi Pact possibly never had a chance of much success. Because, Nehru's basic assumption—that migration would stop if overt communal violence could somehow be contained—was wrong. The influx of migrants had been a matter of great trouble and liability for the Indian government. The minister of Rehabilitation was asked on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1951 about the total number of displaced person arriving in India from East and West Pakistan and the total amount spent on their relief and rehabilitation.<sup>63</sup> It was answered that the total number from West Pakistan was 50 lakh and from east was 49 lakh. For establishment of boards, evacuation, release and rehabilitation schemes, loans and capital outlay, a hefty sum of 8480.26 lakhs already had been spent. On the Pakistani side, a summary report from the country's census reveals how the demography changed thoroughly over there in these decades: Total numbers of Muslim refugees were counted to be nearly 70 lakh. Between 1941 and 1951, the Hindu population declined by 4.4 million and the Sikhs by 1.4million. East Bengal received 7 lakh refugees while the Hindu population dropped by 15 lakh. Punjab received 48 lakh Muslims while 20 lakh Hindus and 14 lakh Sikhs migrated.<sup>64</sup> Notwithstanding the migration data, the Nehru Liaquat Pact however managed to contain violence for some years to come. Some reports suggested that many uprooted Muslims came back to Calcutta and Hindus went back to East Pakistan. However, fresh waves of migration began in full swing in the 1960s. There had been a number of reports of mass migration of Muslims from Assam and Tripura to East Bengal, as well as, huge groups of Garo, Christians and Buddhists arriving in those hilly tracts, after being persecuted from East Bengal. Therefore, throughout the early years of 1960s, the North East was the engaging theatre of activity in terms of population movements and new settlements. In such circumstances, the fresh

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<sup>63</sup>“ Question by Sri Raj Kanwar to be answered on 14th February 1951 at Parliament of India to the minister of rehabilitation”, found in DO 35/2992, British Archives

<sup>64</sup>Telegram sent on 25th January 1950 from UKHC, Pakistan DO 35/2993, British Archives

trouble in Kashmir in December 1963 directly led to communal riots in January 1964 in both Bengals.

### **Riots of 1964: The Hazratbal Incident**

The theft of a sacred relic of Prophet Mohammad from Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar on December 26, 1963 evoked considerable tension not only in Kashmir but all over India and Pakistan. While the Indian government was on the eve of restoring the relic, massive violence was unleashed on East Pakistani Hindu Bengalis by the Muslims in early January.<sup>65</sup> So much so, that a fresh chain of migration began to West Bengal with harrowing stories of gruesome cruelty. In retaliation, riot erupted in Calcutta and in the border areas on 9th January 1964, and resulted in considerable number of casualty and property destruction. The frenzy finally subsided with the advent of army and long hours of curfew, which took a toll on normal city life. It was the usual story of chain reactions: starting in the early stages from religious fanaticism, never far below the surface, fermented by lurid accounts of happenings in Pakistan and India and then exploited by *goondas* and the hooligan elements.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhy and Anasua B. Ray Chaudhury ask why, of all places, Khulna reacted so violently to the Hazratbal incident. They hint towards the social demography of the district as a major reason. At the time of Partition, the Hindus of this district had a slight majority over the Muslims. And the SCs accounted for 71.2 per cent of the Hindu population of Khulna. Hence more demographic cleansing was necessary to set the communal balance right. But there was possibly another reason too behind this outbreak of violence. In late 1963, the Assam government expelled thousands of Muslims whom it described as 'illegal Pakistani immigrants.' These people brought discontent to East Pakistan, and when the Hazratbal incident occurred, the mullahs sprang into action to instigate violence against the minorities. What was significant, many of the victims of this violence directed their fingers of accusation at these migrants from Assam and Bihar, rather than their Bengali Muslim neighbors. See *Caste and Partition in Bengal*, p243

<sup>66</sup> British High commission Dacca, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1964 report, DO 196/342, British Archives

*A brief Narrative Account of the Riot:*

Violence from East Pakistan was first reported in the newspapers on 5th January, 1964 from Khulna, Daulatpur, Khalispur, Maheshwarpasha, and Senhati regions where the Muslims looted, and set fire to Hindu shops and residential areas. The report in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* simultaneously mentioned the stories of migration of Hindus who arrived in Calcutta by Down Barisal Express on 4th January with harrowing stories of repression of the minorities. Two of the passengers were even stabbed at the station. Ironically, the newspapers of the same day also reported the government's success in restoring the sacred relic in Kashmir, leading to spontaneous celebration by Hindus-Muslims-Sikhs alike, but this bit of news could not stop the impending violence.

By 7th January, in Khulna and adjoining rural areas, at least 21 Hindus had lost their lives, and more than a thousand had been injured. It was reported that a section of Muslims from India had visited East Pakistan and spread 'rumors' about 'deplorable conditions of Indian Muslims', how the Muslims were treated with humiliation and bullets and how the Islamic shrines were destroyed. The leftist organizations in Bengal demanded loosening of migration rules and stressed on rehabilitation. Soon, violence spread and engulfed Calcutta as a retaliatory measure. Tension began in the city early on 6<sup>th</sup> January, but few serious precautions were taken until January 9<sup>th</sup>. The army was called in the following day but they were used ineffectively. On 10<sup>th</sup> January, the situation was beginning to become more serious. Bangaon border region, Maheshtala, along with Calcutta's Rajabazar, Beliaghata, Entally, Jadavpur, and Sonarpur witnessed mob clashing with the police. The *Times* coverage on January 12<sup>th</sup> stated that, "The riots have produced tension and distress unparalleled since the pre-partition riots of 1947 and

1946.”<sup>67</sup> These areas were clamped with curfew and the-then Home Minister Gurjarilal Nanda requested the Calcuttans to restrain themselves. The Chief Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen conducted a press meet, and declared that the situation was under control, though fourteen people died in these incidents, and 35 more were injured. The Hindu Mahasabha called for a strike on 15th January, and once again suggested exchange of minority population, while the Jan Sangh claimed one third of East Pakistan’s land to rehabilitate the refugees.<sup>68</sup>

Another daily *Jugantar* reported on a court proceeding related to the zonings of mob violence during the riot: while the Hindus had been rioting at Sealdah, Creek Row and Harrison Road by looting shops and physically assaulting others, the Muslims were centered around Crown Cinema, Chandni Chawk, Taltola and called out slogans like ‘Pakistan Zindabad’. Taxis containing *goondas*/anti-socials, sometimes disguised as police, roamed around looking for unprotected places to bomb, burn and loot. Saint James Anglo Indian School near Sealdah was set on fire and it was badly affected.<sup>69</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> January, the CM declared that eight rooms in the Raj Bhavan’s ground floor were to be used as shelter camps. Already 73000 people in West Bengal received relief measures, and 50000 more took refuge in parks, schools and roadsides. The CM announced that the houses of the evacuee Muslims were in good condition and could be used safely. G. L. Nanda called up an all-party conference including members from all political parties, Calcutta Corporation, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to form three committees to ameliorate the riot condition: the peace committee, the vigilance committee and the aid and rehabilitation committee. In general, everyone agreed with this proposal, while the Communist Party demanded that no member from

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<sup>67</sup> “Hindu Moslem Riots in India and Pakistan”, DO 196/342, British Archives

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*

<sup>69</sup> Inward Telegram from Calcutta to Karachi, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1964, *ibid*

communal organizations should be a member of these committees.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile as the violence was taking dangerous turns, some leading opposition and trade union leaders decided to organize peace squads and met Chief Minister P. C. Sen promising to extend their service. Also, six Muslim leaders from West Bengal issued a statement condemning the oppression of the minority in East Pakistan and hoped that ‘the people and government’ there would immediately arrange to stop ‘this communal orgy’. They assured their co-religionists in East Pakistan that the Muslims in West Bengal were completely safe and secure. Publicly, they confirmed their faith in the constitutional democracy and expressed their admiration for the ‘Hindu brothers and sisters’ who had stood by them. They also thanked ‘the Union and West Bengal government for strong action taken against the offenders.’<sup>71</sup>

In the reports of 14th January, while the affected places of Calcutta under military control showed signs of improvement, violence erupted in five new areas: Muchipara, Jorasanko (three cases of arson and one incident of looting), Watgunge, Ekbalpur (cases of hurling bombs) and Garden Reach leading to eleven police station areas (one third of Calcutta) clamped with curfew. This was the height of unrest. Soon the situation turned for better. Although trouble spread to the docks and outer areas, order in Calcutta was completely restored by 17th January. The army enforced strict measures to control violence. A 22 hour long curfew was imposed in the worst spots. However, the Calcutta police was under widespread criticism for its inefficient tackling of rioting. It was quite clear that in the early stages, they were badly led and undisciplined. There were many reports of them, going for Muslims themselves, or looting the latter’s property, and even being shot by army while doing so. On 14th January, the Commissioner of Police Mr.

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<sup>70</sup> *Jugantar*, 14/1/64, p7

<sup>71</sup> *Jugantar*, Jan 11, 1964, p 4, the signatories: Sri Kazim Ali Mirza, Sri Zia-Ul-Haq, Sri Jehangir Kabir, Mohammad Saiyad Miyan, Karim Hussain, T M Zarif

Ghosh went on 'leave' and was succeeded by Mr. P K Sen, an officer with much experience of riot control in British times.<sup>72</sup> General J.N. Chaudhari, the Army Chief of the Staff visited the army-controlled places and insisted that the shoot to kill order must be obeyed in any case of attacks by Hindus on Muslims.<sup>73</sup>

Gradually the situation began to improve. The transport sector, the shops and trade and commerce had resumed again, but with the curfew hours, Calcutta lost its normalcy.<sup>74</sup> While total refuge-seekers had been 54055 Muslims in 29 camps, by 22nd January, 34956 Muslims had safely relocated to their houses.<sup>75</sup> In East Bengal as well, the situation began to be much better by late January. There were around 20 camps in Dacca which now got reduced to five. But due to crowded and insanitary conditions, cholera broke out in these camps. Overall the situation was an 'uneasy calm' and from time to time stray incidents of arson and looting from different regions were reported.<sup>76</sup> Like the earlier events of violence, India proposed a high level ministerial talk hoping for positive and constructive measures essential for the creation of favorable atmosphere to discuss Indo-Pakistan differences. India also offered to look for resolutions regarding the question of movements across the border between East Pakistan, Assam and Tripura. The meetings must take place in Calcutta or Dacca and not in Delhi or Rawalpindi which were 'distant land' from the places of trouble.

16<sup>th</sup> January was a historic day for Calcutta since a massive peace march was called by the government and certain intellectuals for all citizens. The rally was to be held under the leadership of the Chief Minister P. C. Sen, at 1 pm, from the base of the Monument to cover the riot-hit

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<sup>72</sup> Riots in Calcutta: Extracts from Calcutta Monthly Report, *ibid*

<sup>73</sup> Daily Telegraph, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1964, report by Rawle Knox, *ibid*

<sup>74</sup> Inward telegram from Calcutta to Delhi, CR office 15th January 1964,*ibid*

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>76</sup> British High Commission, Dacca 28th January 1964, mentioned in a letter by Robin Adair,*ibid*.

areas through S N Banerjee Road, Wellesley Street, Eliot Road, Lower Circular Road, Beniapukur Lane, Phulbagan, CIT Road, Moulali, Sealdah, Rajabazar, Keshab Sen Street, College Street, and was to disperse at College Square. The Mayor Chitta Chatterjee appealed to ‘all parties, women, students and writers to assemble’, while Mr. Manoranjan Roy (MLA and secretary of Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress) and Mr. Jatin Chakravarty (secretary of United Trade Union Congress) appealed to all the workers and employees to join the procession. Appeals had no doubt positive impact as more than forty thousand assembled at Maidan on time, while many were waiting to join the procession through its course with spontaneous slogans such as “No more riots, We want peace”, “Hindu Musalman *Bhai-Bhai*” and so on! Those who panicked due to the communal orgy of last few days and did not open their doors and windows, also welcomed the procession with smiles on their pale (*molin*) face. When the procession reached Janbazar and Wellesley Road, the Hindus stood by the Muslim residents and cried out slogans of solidarity which reminded of the spirited celebrations on the Independence Day.<sup>77</sup>

*Who bore the brunt of the violence?*

In West Bengal, till mid-January 1964, according to a government press note, 52 people (15 Hindus, 19 Muslims, rest unidentified) died in the riots and 36 people in police encounter (19 Hindus, 7 Muslims and rest anonymous). Out of 325 people injured in Calcutta riots, 209 had been Muslims, while 81 Hindus and 70 Muslims had been injured in police encounter. Taking up other regions, a total of 75 had died out of which most were Muslims. The Muslims in Calcutta undoubtedly were on the receiving end during these disturbances. According to information from

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<sup>77</sup> Indigram, Information service of India in London, January 17<sup>th</sup> 1964, *ibid*, Also all major newspapers covered the rally extensively

Pakistan Office, some 10000 shifted their homes from Hindu areas to the predominantly Muslim areas, where they felt safer.<sup>78</sup> This number increased to 50000 on January 12th. Also some more 50000 people were believed to have taken refuge across Pakistan Frontier.<sup>79</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> January, the Pakistani President General Ayub Khan sent the following note to the Indian President S. Radhakrishnan:

Some indication of the extent to which the Muslim community has been terrorized by this senseless acts of killing, looting and destruction may be had from the fact that yesterday alone 14000 Muslim refugees came from neighboring West Bengal into East Pakistan and the number has since been in rise. A mass of Muslim refugees spreading out into the various districts of East Pakistan with their tales of woe could precipitate a very serious law and order situation for the government. It is clear that the certain elements in the majority community in India have taken encouragement from the central government policy of evicting the Muslims in last two years from Assam and Tripura. The number of refugees who have registered themselves with East Pakistan authorities by the end of December already reached 95613 to which 20000 more terror-stricken Muslims had been added.<sup>80</sup>

The Bengali Hindus were at the receiving end on other side of the border. By 15<sup>th</sup> January, the latest assessment of death toll in East Pakistan was minimum 300 but could be up to 500. According to ‘neutral observers’ in Dacca, confirmed death toll could be more than 1000, which was reminiscent of the 1947 massacres.<sup>81</sup> Most of the deaths were due to fractured skulls, and majority of the injuries were with knives, *lathis* and cleavers. Women and children comprised the three fifth of total casualty. Dacca Medical College became a war hospital as casualties were brought in ambulance and lorries—one being piled so high that the last layers unloaded were dead anyway. Every available doctors and nurse came into service and some doctors flew from

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<sup>78</sup> Inward Telegram from Delhi to Calcutta by UKHC on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1964, *ibid*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> General Ayub’s Message to the Indian President, *ibid*

<sup>81</sup> “1000 Die in East Pakistan Radical Clashes”, report by Rawle Knox, *Daily Telegraph Special Correspondent, ibid*

West Pakistan.<sup>82</sup> These reports were reiterated by India to the Security Council of the United Nations.<sup>83</sup>

*The Usual Blame Game:*

The element of *Goondas* or agent provocateurs had a prominent role to play in this situation. An article in *Anandabazar Patrika* talked about social “peculiarities of this metropolis where seeds of violence lie unnoticed in the shaded lanes and by-lanes and often behind neon lights. The seeds sprout in different forms now as a violent political demonstration and also as a communal riot.”<sup>84</sup>

A report by the British High Commission stressed clearly on the communal character of the 1964 violence:

The riots have not been simply the work of some goondas..the Muslims undoubtedly had been the chief victims. The destruction had been so great that its being told that “these riots were going to solve the bustee problem”. In Dumdum, Khidirpur dock areas, Ekbalpur, peace had not arrived yet. Tollygunge had been quieted down because the Muslims from there moved to New Alipore where they were reasonably well protected. It is interesting that large number of arrest during earlier disturbances had Muslim names. Muslims certainly felt that the police are going for them instead of the Hindus.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, a British Officer D. H. Christie noted while on a tour to East Pakistan:

Demonstrations against the theft of holy relic started peacefully in Khulna, but in the evening, the goondas had taken advantage of the crowds. The attack on the Hindus had been part of the goonda's cleverness. The Muslims who gave shelter to the Hindus were themselves attacked and one Muslim lost his life while protecting a Hindu.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Inward Telegram from Dacca, UKHC to Karachi, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1964, ibid

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Permanent Representative from India addressed to the President of Security Council on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1964, ibid

<sup>84</sup> “Sanity and Realism,” *ABP*, editorial, 17/1/64, File 09, at Tarak Nath Das Research Centre, Jadavpur University

<sup>85</sup> Confidential Note by British High Commission, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1964, DO 196/342 British Archives

<sup>86</sup> Report by D.H Christie, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1964, ibid

While the memory of the riots was still very fresh, *Jugantar* came out with a revealing report entitled ‘Whose Hands Were Operational in the Riots?’ in which, it stated that the non-Bengali Muslims had provoked the Bengali Muslims to take up arms.<sup>87</sup> In February, the Working Committee of Bharatiya Jan Sangh in West Bengal directly accused the ‘pro-Pakistani’ Muslims for provoking the riots as huge Muslim mobs were noticed in areas like Garpar, Entally, Beniapukur, Park Circus, Metiabruz and Tiljala, raising slogans like ‘Pakistan Zindabad’.<sup>88</sup> The mosques were converted into arsenals, and in spite of having information, the police did not search those. The members of the Jan Sangh further alleged:

The West Bengal government tried to play down the part of Muslims who had played their roles in riots and their entire secular wrath was turned against the Hindus. Later when the riots subsided, the Raj Bhaban was converted into a Langar-Khana where the Muslim sufferers were feted and feasted in royal style, while the Hindu sufferers were left to shift for themselves.<sup>89</sup>

The BJS also demanded a ten mile wide belt along the border to get rid of all ‘disloyal’ elements and offered total exchange of religious minorities from both Bengal. Fear of Pakistan and of sabotage by Muslims was rampant even after the days of riot among the Calcuttans. According to ‘knowledgeable sources’, about two dozen people clad in military uniform with spade-like implements marched in Colootola-Chitpur area followed by 60-70 men dressed in ‘lungi’. It passed through the area of Teretti Bazar and stopped at Tipu Sultan Mosque at Dharmatala with slogans like “Hyderabad should be annexed to Pakistan” and “We demand an independent Pakistan in West Bengal”. This was reported by many eyewitnesses to the respective police stations, but there was a ‘deliberate omission on the part of the police to find any fault with the

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<sup>87</sup> *Jugantar* on 19.01.1964, p7

<sup>88</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, 6/2/1964, file 9, at Tarak Nath Das Research Centre

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

members of minority community.’<sup>90</sup> The retrospective reports in *Anandabazar Patrika* were no less provocative. It time and again stressed on, how the West Bengal government underplayed the aggressive role of the Muslims in the riots. It gave out personal stories of Hindu households facing onslaughts and braving inhuman cruelty in almost pictographic details. On 21st January, in the editorial section, it was stated that West Bengal was infested with undesirable citizens: the Pakistani Muslims must be eradicated; otherwise peace could never be permanent. A few months later, Professor Sankhaninad Guha and Arabinda Datta, on 25<sup>th</sup> May, commented that growth of communalism in Pakistan leading to Hindu migration together with an ‘ungovernable’ Muslim minority in India was responsible for all religious conflicts. Complete migration from East Bengal and a restriction on the ‘geometric’ rate of growth of population among the minority were necessary steps to be taken by the government.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, the Congress expressed its opinion regarding the riot as simply a Pakistani creation and criticized the mentality of blaming any particular religious group.<sup>92</sup>

Another confidential note by E.G. Norris who worked for the British High Commission, stated that though the press reports were praising West Bengal government and police action, it was only to restore everybody’s confidence. Mr. Nanda might have said that communal feeling played little part in the trouble, and most of the looting, arson and attack was committed by hooligans, indeed there was inevitably a good deal of ‘*goonda* activity’, but Norris empathetically noted that no “unprejudiced observer would deny the root of the trouble was clearly communal, nor that Muslims were overwhelmingly the sufferers.” Relief work was continued by the government but as usual, it was noticeable that most of the real work was done

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<sup>90</sup> “Get Ready for Zero Hour: Pak Agents Incite West Bengal Muslims”, *Hindustan Standard*, 9.3.64, ibid

<sup>91</sup> “Secularism and Reality”, *Hindustan Standard*, 24/5/64, ibid

<sup>92</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, 15/2/1964, ibid

by the voluntary organizations like the Red Cross while the Bengalis were ‘prolific in emotional exhortation.’<sup>93</sup>

### Long Term Violence:

Occasional violence claiming lives and dis-balancing the fine line of peace remained unabated in months to come. In March, 100 Muslim mill workers were attacked in Calcutta and a number of them were killed. They were on their way to work for the night shift when firecrackers were thrown at them. As they ran for safety, a gang armed with knives and other weapons attacked them. The Legislative Assembly stood in silence for two minutes. Ironically this day was also marked by a *hartal* or strike to protest against the ‘callous and indifferent attitude’ of both central and state government towards the safety of the minorities in East Pakistan. The *hartal* was organized by *Save Pakistani Minorities Committee*, which represented a group of Left wingers excluding the communists.<sup>94</sup>

The chain of riots led to a complete breakdown of minority security in East Bengal and a huge rush began for migration to Calcutta. On 15<sup>th</sup> February, Dinesh Singh, the Deputy Minister of External Affairs in India 1964, said that the Indian Office in Dacca had received two lakh applications from Hindus for immigration. Also there was a growing pressure on the Indian authorities to expel Pakistanis who were working in India or had drifted here and had not gone back home.<sup>95</sup> Another British official, Robin Adair, also talked about a sort of genocide in the villages around Dacca and Narayanganj during the riots, the reports of which were not brought to

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<sup>93</sup> Confidential Report by Norris, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1964, DO 196/343, British Archives

<sup>94</sup> “21 Muslims killed in Calcutta”, *Times*, March 17 1964, *ibid*

<sup>95</sup> DO 196/342, British Archives

light.<sup>96</sup> The refugee camps in Dacca would be closing soon enough too, not because increased security had been ensured to the minority, but due to inadequate food supply. At this point, the Indian government was not willing to let the Hindu migrants accumulate in Calcutta, where there would be a risk of spreading communal bitterness. They aimed to disperse them to other parts of India where land was available. The trains loaded with refugees thus went straight through Calcutta without stopping, the principal terminus being Raipur, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and other states.

In this connection there had been a debate in the Parliament on the motion of 'situation arising out of communal disturbances in East Pakistan resulting in heavy loss of life and property to the members of the minority community and their influx to India and the consequential disturbances in East Bengal.' The government front benches were noticeably empty in this discussion. However, the main points raised in the debate were:

All restrictions on entry into India for minorities should be abolished, as only three alternatives were open to them: death, forcible conversion or escape to India. The speakers dismissed under-reported number of casualties given by Pakistan due to riots in Dacca and Narayanganj. The disturbances in Calcutta, though shameful, bore no resemblance to those in East Pakistan. They were basically non-communal and had been put down with vigor by the Indian government. Most of the speakers denied presence of 'communal and reactionary forces' in Calcutta and blamed sheer hooliganism for the riots. All the speakers praised Mr. Nanda for his firmness in putting down the riots. Criticism against the government centered around the fact that they did not take the condition of Hindus in East Pakistan seriously, underestimated the threats to them,

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<sup>96</sup> Report on East Pakistan Riots by Robin Adair, British High Commission, Karachi, 13th February 1964. *ibid*

and not been vigorous enough to uphold opportunities to the Hindus who wished to move to India.<sup>97</sup>

In a later report, the Journalist Rawle Knox writes about those who arrived in Calcutta:

They spill from trains entering Calcutta like people tumbling into another world, not happy, just bemused...Figures mean less than the emotions they arose...despite getting independence 17 years before...India and Pakistan never forgot that August of communal slaughter. Both countries still blame Hindu-Moslem animosity on the cunning 'divide and rule' policy of British imperialism rather as though the English were to blame the Romans for Scottish nationalism. The problem is endemic though few are prepared to get to grips with it...Both India and Pakistan regard these refugees more as propaganda material than as human beings. Senior officials go to look, bless and say goodbye. The refugees on both side of the border are in fact shunted round like cattle in trucks...There is always someone around to incite a man where he is at his worst, and he is at his worst when uprooted and hungry.<sup>98</sup>

Knox termed the refugees as 'prisoners of peace' who were the cannon-fodder for the Indian and Pakistani politicians. It was true that, riots did not happen in Calcutta on a similar scale of violence in the years following that of 1964. But sporadic localized violence managed to find its way. As reported by the Press and BBC, there was communal rioting in Calcutta on 13 and 14<sup>th</sup> November 1966. The origin of the trouble was immersion of idols objected by a Muslim in Metiabruz. It involved cases of arson and acid throwing, and the next morning trouble spread to wider areas. Police pickets were stoned by the mobs and the police opened fire killing two rioters. Eighteen more were injured. This time, the Calcutta police commissioner restored order efficiently and fast. It was thought that the disturbances were purely communal and *not unusual* on such occasions.<sup>99</sup>

### **Summing up: A Closer look at the Riot Violence**

The above discussion on the two riots brings out a predictive pattern: both of them began with a stray incident which initiated a sudden influx of refugees across the borders. The minorities

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<sup>97</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> Feb 1964 Parliamentary Debate, *ibid*

<sup>98</sup> "Prisoner's of India's Uneasy Peace" from Rawle Knox, *Daily Telegraph* on 11th March 1964, *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> Calcutta to New Delhi Telegram, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1966, DO 196/234, British Archives

brought with themselves several stories of horrid experiences which were shared with the press and the local population. This, in turn, led to more aggressive rumors and panic, along with a chain of retaliatory violence. The communal organizations readily took the opportunities to spread their propaganda. Intense violence in the form of murder, arson, bombing, stabbing and looting resulted in widespread intra-city displacement. Only with the arrival of army, and imposition of long curfew hours, the situation gradually got normalized. Another aspect which was common to both the riots was the involvement of the *goondas*, the underclass of the city who had been the major ‘fire-tenders’ since the late colonial period.<sup>100</sup> The pockets in which the mob activities were focused were typically Muslim dominated neighborhoods, which also provide hints about the nature of violence en-framed with the idea of spatial politics. The incidents show that each of these elements of prejudice, conflict and violence are inter-related, one leads to the other, and yet these three sociological expressions of inter-community relations have an autonomy of their own. Conflict is transformed into violence, if the sense of relative deprivation is high, legitimacy of the government is low, chances of communication are blocked, sense of insecurity is intense, beliefs and traditions sanction violence, and instruments of violence are readily available.<sup>101</sup> As seen throughout the chapter, these aspects were indeed present during the first two decades after Partition. With repeated violence since 1947, Calcutta, thus, emerged in a new mould – a potpourri, where the social space came to be contoured along communal, ethnic and linguistic lines.

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<sup>100</sup> This term is borrowed from Paul Brass. By fire-tenders he means those who keep intergroup tensions alive through various inflammatory and inciting acts. See Brass, *Forms of Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms and Genocide in Modern India*, (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006), , p4

<sup>101</sup> Ashghar Ali Engineer ed. *Communal Riots in Post-Independent India*, (Bombay: Sangam Books, 1984). p4

Hence, it is important to view violence not as an isolated act, or a series of isolated acts, but rather a total social phenomenon. The antecedents, the enabling conditions, the cycle of violence that a violent act initiates or reinforces, the forms that it takes, the wide sections of society that it involves, the consequences that it has both near and far—all these must form part of the study of violence. There is a violence involved in the unrelenting construction of enemies of the nation, and the concomitant denial of equal rights or respect to the latter. Seen from this perspective, the violence is unceasing, partly unconscious, and often disguised.<sup>102</sup> This routinized pattern of total violence was true for the minorities in both East Bengal and West Bengal after decolonization.

Despite a continuous wave of moderate migration of Hindu refugees, it is noteworthy that full-fledged communal violence was absent in East Bengal until the 1950 riots. Pre-1950 incidents in East Bengal can then be characterised as ‘soft violence’—it was ‘relentless, insidious and disorienting’. The Hindus there could no longer tell with confidence whether old friends had now become new foes. Haimanti Roy has called this situation ‘routine violence’, which was ‘daily, small-scale, and often transmuted through psychological threats’. It was also mediated by actual singular incidents of petty theft, loot, kidnapping of women and murders, destruction and/or defacement of religious icons, by verbal threats, rumors aimed at maximizing minority insecurities and through embellished representation of communal incidents in the public media, political speeches and thinly veiled state propaganda. Together they created a continuous ecology of fear.<sup>103</sup> In this connection, Sekhar Banyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhary refer to the philosopher Slavoj Zizek’s book *Violence* (2008) for a theory of violence to consider.

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<sup>102</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*. (California:Stanford University Press, 2006). Introduction

<sup>103</sup> Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198081777.001.0001, See chapter 5 ‘*The Routine of Violence*’ for more examples

Zizek distinguished between 'subjective violence', which signifies a visible incident of direct violence perpetrated by a 'clearly identifiable agent', and 'objective violence' which could be 'symbolic' and/or 'systemic'. Symbolic violence pertains to language and its various forms and may include incitement and use of speech that asserted domination. Systemic violence is 'inherent to ... [the] "normal" state of things' and is 'invisible', yet to be taken seriously if we are to understand sudden eruptions of subjective violence. It is 'the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.'<sup>104</sup> While the riots in Bengal in 1946 and 1950 would fit the definition of subjective violence, what the Dalit peasants faced in East Bengal in the 1950s looked more like objective violence - both symbolic and systemic.

For the time being, let us consider the element of subjective violence happening in Calcutta during the riots. The violent events during the 1950 Riots were termed in the government discourse as 'sporadic outbreaks of violent activities.' In fact, it is an aspect of the political game, engaged in by the preeminent leaders and highest authorities to insist that the actions of persons from one's own community were spontaneous, while those from the other side were pre-planned. But there can be no massacre from the side of the populace without both planning and enthusiasm. Massacres by the authorities may require only planning and discipline, but popular participation requires enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm could be induced by rumor of imminent danger, deep-seated prejudice, or any other such precipitants. This forms the intimate link between subjective violence and symbolic/systemic violence. Hence, to dub the riot violence as 'spontaneous' is a method to justify it and relocate the blame from the actual perpetrators onto an

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<sup>104</sup> S Banerjee and A. Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal*, p102

objectified, frenzied mass of nameless people.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, the instrumental role played by the mob with active cooperation from the *goondas* should also be considered. The mob violence exhibited intensification of emotion and ‘inhibition of intellect’. Due to lack of emotional restraint and incapacity of moderation and delay, there is a rush of intolerance towards other. The riotous crowds imbued with the idea of unfair and illegitimate advantages enjoyed by the enemy, rapidly engaged in acts of destruction, arson, looting and killing in order to reduce the enemy’s margin of advantages.<sup>106</sup> The usual pattern of angry Hindu mobs attacking the Muslim shops and bustees around Amherst Street or Central Avenue, once the hapless refugees arrived in Sealdah, exhibited such outburst of sudden furies.

The riots of 1950 and 1964 can also be analyzed with Paul Brass’s theory of ‘*Institutionalized Riot System*’ (IRS).<sup>107</sup> In places where riots are endemic, they are the results of a dramatic production in which there are three phases: preparation/rehearsal, activation/enactment, and explanation/ interpretation. In these sites of endemic riot production, preparation and rehearsal are continuous activities (again this hints at the forms of routinized violence). Activation or enactment of a large-scale riot takes place under particular circumstances, often in a context of intense political mobilization or electoral competition, in which riots are precipitated as a device to consolidate the support of ethnic, religious, or other culturally marked groups, by emphasizing the need for solidarity in the face of the rival communal group. The third phase follows after the violence in a broader struggle to control the explanation or interpretation of the causes of the violence. In this phase, many other elements in society become involved, including journalists, politicians, social scientists, and public opinion. In such sites, persons can be identified, who

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<sup>105</sup> Paul R. Brass, *Forms of Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms and Genocide in Modern India*. p46

<sup>106</sup> S J Tambia, *Levelling Crowds: Ethno-nationalist Conflict and Collective Violence*, (California:California Press, 1997). p 297

<sup>107</sup> Paul R. Brass, *Forms of Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms and Genocide in Modern India*, Introduction

play specific roles in the preparation, enactment, and explanation of riots after the fact. Especially important are the "fire tenders" who keep intergroup tensions alive through various inflammatory and inciting acts; 'conversion specialists' who lead and address mobs of potential rioters and give a signal to indicate if and when violence should commence; criminals and the poorest elements in society, recruited and rewarded for enacting the violence; and politicians and the vernacular media who, during the violence, and in its aftermath, draw attention away from the perpetrators of the violence by attributing it to the actions of an inflamed mass public. It distracts one's attention from the activities, incidents, and preparations, that are involved by riot producers, who fasten upon local controversies, when the time is ripe to let loose the violence. The contexts for the creation of an IRS may change over time, placing the activation of the riot system in dormancy or, rather, reducing it to the rehearsal phase, but not eliminating it from the site. Far from being spontaneous occurrences, the production of such riots involves calculated and deliberate actions by key individuals, the conveying of messages, recruitment of participants, and other specific types of activities, especially provocative ones, that are part of a performative repertoire.

### **Conclusion:**

So far, the chapter has discussed the two most important riots in post-colonial Bengal. However, as seen in the last section, communal violence do not happen in vacuum, it maintains intimate connection with relatively peaceful times. This is what Asutosh Varshney labels as *Institutionalized Peace System*.<sup>108</sup> He talks about inter-communal networks of civic life which bring different communities together. These networks or engagements can, in turn, be broken down into two parts: associational and quotidian. Business associations, professional

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<sup>108</sup> A Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2002). p11

organizations, reading clubs, film clubs, sports clubs, festival organizations, trade unions, and cadre-based political parties are some of the examples of the former. Everyday forms of engagement, on the contrary, consist of simple and routine interactions of life as Hindu and Muslim families visiting each other, eating together, jointly participating in festivals, and allowing their children to play together in the neighborhood. Both forms of engagement, if robust, promote peace; contrariwise, their absence or weakness opens up space for communal violence. Where such networks of engagement exist, tensions and conflicts are regulated and managed; where they are missing, communal identities can lead to endemic and ghastly violence. Though both these forms of inter-communal engagement promote peace, the capacity of the associational forms to withstand national-level “exogenous shocks”—such as India’s partition in 1947 or the demolition of the Babri mosque in December 1992 is substantially higher. Everyday forms of engagement may make associational forms possible, but associations can often serve interests that are not the object of quotidian interactions. For example, inter-communal business organizations survive by tying together the business interests of many Hindus and Muslims, not because neighborhood warmth exists between Hindu and Muslim families. Though valuable in itself, the latter does not necessarily constitute the bedrock for strong civic organizations. If associational networks are not strong enough, then local level peace keeping efforts would bring limited results. Though Varsney’s argument is highly noteworthy for understanding communal relationship in a given locality, I argue that in actual settings, people do not always maintain a separation between these two forms of engagement. In fact, it is highly unpredictable when one would turn communal and violent, and one would not, despite provocations. The subsequent chapters will elaborate on this further.

One can wonder why no major riot occurred in Calcutta between 1964 and 1992. There might be many factors behind this. The wave of migration of the Hindu refugees from East Bengal had receded by the late 1960s. It would erupt again with 1971 but this time, Calcutta showed remarkable solidarity towards the Bengali Muslims who were the victims of genocide perpetrated by Pakistani *Razakars*. Also, most of the refugees had to settle themselves either in the border districts or in the suburbs or on the outskirts of Calcutta. For the urban dwellers, the visibility of trauma was limited. Secondly, from the archival files, it seems that the major political discourse since the mid-1960s shifted towards the steady growth of leftist politics in West Bengal. The United Front, a coalition of leftist parties, was unstable and came to power by defeating the Congress for a brief tenure in 1967 and 1969. Yet, the frequent lock-outs, gheraos, labour insurgency, food movement, strikes and rallies were slowly changing the political climate of the city. Throughout the period, the communists were successful in bringing up certain issues which touched *ghatis* and *bangals* (terms used to refer to people of West and East Bengal respectively), Hindus and Muslims alike. Their ability to combine, formulate and implement a joint programme of action, and their capacity to mobilize effectively different sections of the people gained them remarkable popularity. In a report titled *Aftermath of Riots* (1964), it was stated that the communists, most of whom, by then, were out of detention, appeared to have conducted themselves more moderately than the rest. Their present line seemed to be that they were the only party which transcended communal feeling and under whom West Bengal, or possibly even a united Bengal could live in peace and prosperity.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps this was the beginning of the Institutionalized Peace System. Perhaps this can explain why communal riots wreaked havoc in Udaipur, Ranchi, Ahmedabad, Bhiwandi, and Jalnao in 1970 and Aligarh and Jamshedpur in 1979 but Calcutta remained peaceful in all these affairs. Why then the riot of

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<sup>109</sup> Extract from Calcutta Monthly Report, February 1964, DO 196/341, British Archives

1992 happened, what exactly went wrong, and how it was different than previous riots is a matter of different inquiry to which I will get back in the last and final chapter. In the next two chapters, I would look into the network of everyday, the quotidian, through the prism of shared living spaces in the mixed neighborhoods of Calcutta.

## IV

### **DIALECTIC OF DWELLING I: STORIES OF MUSLIM RESIDENTS IN MIXED NEIGHBORHOODS**

The previous chapter showed how the post-independence years witnessed the breakdown of inter-communal trust and confidence in Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> The riots had a lingering impact on the cityscape and its demographic blocks. During my travels for digging up sources in the state archives, I used to have long bus journeys cutting through major commercial and residential areas in the city—Kankurgachhi, Belgachia, Maniktala, Sealdah, Rajabazar, Mullick Bazar, M. G. Road, Harrison Road, College Square, Park Circus—the names which also cropped up in the dusty files of the state archives at Bhabani Dutta Lane and Shakespeare Sarani. The police records contained fierce reports of arson and looting of shops across these streets and innumerable accounts of bombs being hurled at the passenger bus, similar to the ones on which I travelled daily. I wondered how far we have come from those anxious days. Apparently, the overcrowded street side bazaars, pretty garment shops, *Kasaipatti*, *Marwaripatti*, several mosques, and churches on the way never showed any sign of uncomfortable co-existence to my eyes. However, moving beyond the archival files of shocking reports and looking beyond the overtly simplified discourses of ‘City of Joy’ and ‘Unity in Diversity’, my ethnographic endeavors revealed different results altogether. For this, one needs to go beyond the larger frames of the urban and delve into the social within the urban.

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<sup>1</sup> Anglicized spelling of ‘Calcutta’ was replaced in 2001 when the spelling echoing with Bengali pronunciation ‘Kolkata’ was given sanction officially. As the chapter follows thematic chronology, based on the context, both Calcutta and Kolkata have been used here.

A neighborhood occupies a unique location in the life of a city. It is located in between the home on one side of a social axis and the anonymous and alienated city on the other.<sup>2</sup> While cities are generally identified with anonymity, apathy, and indifference between citizens, neighborhoods are often looked upon as havens of face-to-face encounters, intimate knowledge, and residence-based solidarity.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the idea of a neighborhood not merely mediates and connects the interiority of homes with the anonymous city but, due to this unique spatial function, it is also endowed with its own spatial agency and subjectivity. Thus a neighborhood is not only about a little bit of warmth that a home longs for and a little share of violence that the urban unleashes. It is about a space of dwelling in relation to both—the home and the city. This is the entry point through which my ethnographical quest began.

The areas with predominantly Muslim population such as Park Circus, Rajabazar, Tangra, Topsia, Khidirpur, and Metiabruz have been the sites of inquiry by conducting interviews with both Hindu and Muslim residents. The respondents are generally chosen from Hindi and Bengali-speaking educated middle-class backgrounds, employed either in white-collar service sectors or small to medium-scale businesses. These neighborhoods have long history of mixed domicile, though Muslims are greater in number. Often the alleys and the by-lanes within a small geographical space are divided between Hindu and Muslim settlements. It has already been established in the previous chapter how Muslims have witnessed systematic marginalization in the city-scape and have been ghettoized in closed living enclaves. While they rely upon the

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<sup>2</sup> Sadhan Jha, Amiya Kumar Pathak and Dev Nath Jha eds, *Neighbourhoods in Urban India: In between Home and the City*, (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2021). p1

<sup>3</sup> Hilal Alkane and Nazan Maksudyan, eds., *Urban Neighbourhood Formations Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2020). p11

strength of their numbers in their neighborhoods/*Para/Mahalla*, they can also sense a sort of alienating gaze and active otherization once they step out of their comfort zones. On the other hand, such spatial subjectivities are reversed for the Hindu neighbors. They, in general, feel cornered and victimized due to living in a Muslim *para*. Despite enjoying the status of the majority community in every sense in the wider domain, in the embedded sphere of their living spaces, the Hindus struggle with their supposedly minority identity. The present and the next chapter specifically attempt to understand the dialectics of dwelling within the spatial settings of such neighborhoods in Calcutta. It shows that proximity does not guarantee intimacy, especially in these quarters where the residents have different religious orientations, that too as Hindus and Muslims who are often perceived as ‘quintessential other’ of each other. This chapter is dedicated to show the contested terrain of belongingness for the Muslim citizens, while the next one will talk about their Hindu neighbors.

### **Muslims and the City-scape:**

With the onset of colonial mercantile forces in the 18th Century, the indigenous comprador families, exclusively Hindu and almost entirely Bengali, tended to be concentrated in the northern division of the city.<sup>4</sup> The distribution of these families abruptly stopped at the second main axis of the intermediate town—the Dharamtala Street—starting from which, through the rear of the European town, there was a high degree of concentration of Muslim occupational groups, *khansamas* or table servants, *ostagars* or tailors, with a sprinkling of *vakils* (lawyers) and learned scribes. The Muslim population in Kolkata is as old as the city itself. It has grown in number with the growth of this urban center since its inception in the 17th century. Muslim landownership was indeed a strikingly noticeable feature in the intermediate zone of the city and

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<sup>4</sup> P. Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History*, (Kolkata:Firma KLM, 1978). pp 38-40

the city's immediate suburbs. Even in the northern zone, in the comprador-dominated Indian town, Muslims owned significant blocks of real estate, mainly on the eastern fringes, in the mid-19th century. Spatially, the upper and middle levels of the Muslim community tended to be dispersed over two sectors of the intermediate town, the north-west and the south-east, and the outlying parts of the Indian town. Muslim aristocracy, so far as it existed in Calcutta, lacked a spatial cohesion. The Nawab of Lucknow and the exiled descendants of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore, were located at the two opposite ends of the city. The Muslim mercantile aristocracy did have a focus but that was in the highly mixed and extremely cosmopolitan north-western sector of the city—a sector inhabited by the Arabs, Jews, Persians, Greeks and Gujaratis.<sup>5</sup> The earliest census of the Muslims of Calcutta was taken in 1837 by F. W. Birch and the Muslim population then was 59,622.<sup>6</sup> The number increased to 111,170, as recorded by another census in 1850 by the Chief Presidency Magistrate, and further increased to 124,480 in 1881.<sup>7</sup> But communal violence in the late colonial period and after Partition had led to alterations in these enclaves. In fact, Calcutta went through fundamental shifts in terms of urban demography and settlements during the first decade after 1947. The first census of independent India in 1951 describes Calcutta in these following words:

Calcutta now belongs to as much to West Bengal as to the world. Her features, intensely local and individual, have acquired universality. Originating as a small town, she is now bursting at the seams with overgrowth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> P. Sinha. *Calcutta in Urban History*. p.39

<sup>6</sup> Abdul Shaban, *Lives of Muslims in India: Politics, Exclusion and Violence*. (Routledge: New York, 2008), Second Edition. p230.

<sup>7</sup> For Muslim Presence in the city, check Kenneth Mcpherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta 1918 to 1935* (Wiesbaden: Steine, 1974); M. K. A. Siddiqui, *Institutions and Associations of the Muslims in Calcutta: A Preliminary Survey* (Calcutta: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997) and *Muslims of Calcutta: A Study in Aspects of Their Social Organization*, (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Census 1951, volume 6, part III, p25

Population of Hindus in Calcutta in 1951 including Displaced Persons	2125907
Population of Hindus in Calcutta in 1951 excluding Displaced Persons	1692670
Population of Muslim in Calcutta in 1951	305932

TABLE 1

Source: 1951 census

Indeed, between 1931 and 1951, her population has more than doubled. The most densely populated areas were Jorabangan, Jorasanko, Colootala, and least populated were Watgunj and Hastings. The CIT had been transforming fringes of the cities for her extension to attract hungry settlers away from the congested areas of the city and distribute the density. The State Transport Department and State Electrical Supply were extending their services to bring the suburbs within the heart of the city.<sup>9</sup> Major regions of Sukea Street, Fenwick Bazar, Maniktala and Beliaghata, which used to have considerable number of Muslims, lost their cosmopolitan characters. About 13100 Muslims were away from the city on the eve of 1951 count.<sup>10</sup> The diminishing Muslim population was filled by displaced Hindu migrants who however brought a 'social health' in the city. 433288 displaced Hindus came in their place.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the Muslims, who were mainly single men staying in the city for livelihoods, the migrants came as families. Despite this, the city still remained a source of business and work. It is interesting to note that the areas which had extensive Muslim population were not favoured by displaced persons for resettlement. These places included Alimuddin Street, Ripon Square, parts of Tangra, Entally, Beniapukur, Ballygunj, Watgunj, Hastings.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Report by Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1953, National Library, Kolkata

<sup>10</sup> Census 1951, volume 6, part III p 26

<sup>11</sup> Census 1951, volume 6, part III, p28

<sup>12</sup> Gathered from resettlement data of Displaced Persons in Wards of Calcutta, Census 1951

Year	Percentage of Muslims	Percentage of Hindus
1951	12	83.41
1961	12.78	83.94
1971	14.20	83.13
1981	15.34	81.89
1991	17.70	80.47
2001	20.3	77.7
2011	20.6	76.51

TABLE 2: Percentage of Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta through Decennial Census.

It is ironic that for at least a few centuries before Calcutta started its career as a large-scale urban agglomeration, the major force behind the larger urban formations in India came from Islamic and allied peoples from West and Central Asia. Presently though Muslims constitute 16% of the population in the urban areas of West Bengal, they are largely concentrated in slums areas and are engaged in menial works. The slums from the beginning, like the bazars, created a condition of urban heterogeneity representing a distinct socio-cultural world, very much urban but not crystallizing at a point of organic development. In such a situation, the slightest opportunity can lead to island-like or shell-like formations, representing a defensive attitude. Such an attitude tends to be most intensive in the zones of interpenetration.<sup>13</sup>

Ghettos are most often found in cities with a history of communal violence. For instance, in a city like Bengaluru, there are areas with a majority Muslim population, like Vasanth Nagar or Shivaji Nagar. Situated right in the middle of the city, at walking distance from the famous

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<sup>13</sup> Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History*, pp 38-40.

Benguluru landmark, Cubbon Park, these localities are not ghettos, but just another part of the city, unlike Okhla in Delhi. The Muslim dominated areas in Okhla have not grown organically during the course of the development of cities, unlike the Jama Masjid/ Nizamuddin West area of Delhi or the Mohammed Ali Road neighborhood of Mumbai. Places like Ohkla, Mumbra on the outskirts of Mumbai, or Juhapura in Ahmedabad are urban islands created as a result of the action of the state and the attitudes of sections of non-Muslim inhabitants of the city. They are an indictment of the cities in which they exist. Mumbra, for instance, a township developed entirely by Muslims who built one facility after another, following the 1992–93 riots in Mumbai. Muslims started to move there as the city of dreams turned into a nightmare. Today, it enjoys the dubious distinction of being the largest Muslim ghetto in India, housing more than 900,000 people according to the 2011 Census. Even today, Mumbra is an oversized urban village tied to Mumbai through an ‘umbilical cord of memories’.<sup>14</sup> The neighborhoods in question in this thesis are not strictly an example of a ‘ghetto’. As it had been already shown, the Muslims had a considerable presence over these areas since the origin of Calcutta. However the series of communal violence in Calcutta led to intra-city migration of the minorities, Muslims from other neighborhoods fled to these areas for greater safety. This culminated in a process of ghettoization and increased congestion in Muslim majority areas.

In this context, this chapter is an attempt to look into these mixed neighborhoods as an intimate place with blurred yet shared boundaries in the mental maps of its residents. Their histories, material formations, as well as transformations indicate micro and macro-level social phenomena. Historically as much as recently, neighborhoods thus become the loci of resistance

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<sup>14</sup> Ghazala Wahab, *Born a Muslim: Some Truth About Islam in India* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2019). p78

and political dissidence, but also coexistence of potentially hostile groups.<sup>15</sup> The function of boundaries is less to separate and more to make a certain neighborhood identifiable from the rest of the city. The process of identification may be based on residence histories, everyday practices, conceptual registers, or to embodied ethnic differences. The boundaries, therefore, do not have to be material (walls, railways, highways) but in any case, they are materialized in the bodies, in the language, and in the daily practices of neighborhood dwellers and also outsiders, making each and every neighborhood knowable, recognizable, and identifiable. Against this background, this chapter looks into stories of Muslim residents in Kolkata neighborhoods where they stay in majority. They are generally asked about their belongingness to their residential areas, how much they have changed with time and more importantly what they think of their Hindu neighbors. Kolkata Muslims majorly speak Hindi. While choosing the respondents, I have focused more on their economic footing and cultural capital. They are mostly middle-class educated business people, school teachers or employed in white collar jobs. There are certain unbridgeable gaps between Bengali Muslims and non-Bengali Muslims in terms of their taste in attire, food choices, entertainment preference and so on. While Bengali Muslims are more accommodative about reforms needed in Islam, have liberal opinion regarding *Pardah* for women, and have comparatively easier acceptance among Hindu Bengali *bhadralok*, the non-Bengali Muslims in general do not share these qualities. They have more trust on ‘proper representation of Koranic injunctions’ which do not require much reform, the women themselves accept *Pardah* by choice, and obviously, both the Bengali Hindus and Muslims try to maintain a distance from them. However through repeated field visits and interviews, it can safely be concluded that identity building is a polymorphic process and lived experiences in these heterogeneous times within cosmopolitan neighborhoods are multifaceted, multi-directed, and impossible to bring together

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<sup>15</sup> Hilal Alkan eds. *Urban Neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies*. p1

within a single and fixed narrative. In fact, any effort to do so has potential risks of generalization and simplification of identities, which undermines the foundational essence of this chapter as well as the thesis. Hence, the interviews, or rather, the discussions I had with them were not structured. Though they revolved around some basic questions about their neighborhood, their perception of the self and the other, it ultimately led to repertoire of private stories, completely candid and far from a fixed narrative. Before moving on to the next section, I must mention the published ethnographic research by Anasua Chatterjee on Park Circus Muslims.<sup>16</sup> She has done an excellent work of profiling the neighborhood into different segments and has brought up similar issues which were equally relevant for my work. But I have tried to focus particularly on middle-classes and their unique and individual way of negotiation of the self and other. The over-all aim of the thesis is also wider than her scope of inquiry. However, often our methods and questionnaire seem to be strikingly similar which brought up similar results. This ensures the strength and validity of ethnographic research work in micro-spatial settings.

### **Battle of Belonging: Glimpses of Urban Muslim Dwelling**

Let us begin our story with the family of M. Zameel.<sup>17</sup> He lives in Entally, close to Padmapukur Petrol Pump. The area is extensively intersected with numerous roads and lanes and spread in Ward number 54, 55 and 56. It is bounded by Sealdah and Beliaghata in the north, Tangra in the east, Beniapukur in the south and Taltala in the west. Entally had cosmopolitan characters since colonial years as the Odia palanquin bearers, poor Christians, Muslims, Chinese and other lower

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<sup>16</sup> A.Chatterjee, *Margins of Citizenship: Muslim Experiences in Urban India*, (New York:Routledge, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Interview on 12.10.22

caste communities lived here.<sup>18</sup> Zameel's residence at Entally is in a multistoried building. Small and medium shops are located on the ground floor. The rest has residential flats. The corridors are shabby, dimly lit. On my way to the third floor, I was wondering whether I would get to meet my target group, as I felt that the housing condition did not fit the typically affluent educated middle-classes. I was judgmental and skeptical until I reached their apartment. It was spacious, aesthetically designed, and contained a small library with reading section. I was greeted by Mr. Zameel and his wife congenially. He runs a motor repairing business and his wife is a school teacher. Both seemed to be extremely informed and updated citizens, active in several socio-cultural causes for the minority in the city. He began the conversation with a textbook description of the 1964 exodus of Muslims following the Hazratbal incident. But the couple considered the coming of the Left Front in 1977 as the beginning of a long term 'harmonious relationship' between the communities. Zameel was careful to mention the frequent events of political killings in which Muslims got murdered, but he emphasized that one should not brand them in communal colours. Rather, on the national plane, the years between 1950 and 1980 were truly critical for engineering riots in major Indian cities, which implied that the Partition was far from being complete. However, Zameel repeatedly said that the Muslims stayed here strictly by choice. The chunk of the elite went to Pakistan and majority of the ordinary Muslims had to adapt to the Indian situation. But they had leaders like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad whom they looked up to. The Hindu Right had a consistent presence in the political scene but the National Congress had adequate control over them. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War had been a watershed factor for the Bengali Muslims. Many of them felt more secured in India. There had been attempts of the post-colonial state to systematically marginalize Muslim heritage, culture,

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<sup>18</sup> P. T Nair, "The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta", in Sukanta Chowdhury ed. *Calcutta: the Living City*, vol 1, pp 15-18,

and language, but this could not ruin relationship with the Hindus. However, there was a major shift after the 1992 riots. Even then, in spite of degradation of harmony at the national level, Bengal showed exemplary attitude. They formed peace associations and organized peace marches in their neighborhoods during the riots. This tradition of peaceful protest continued even in the anti-CAA movement via forming joint forums against the recent proposals. The enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA 2019) and publication of the National Register of Citizens (NRC 2019) in Assam re-opened old debates and triggered existential anxieties. The NRC, prejudiced since its very inception, virtually rendered almost two million residents of the state of Assam, stateless, a majority of them being Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims.<sup>19</sup> The CAA, on the other hand, refrained from granting legal citizenship to the Muslim refugees from neighboring states, thus allowing for the surreptitious entry of religious and ethnic markers in the attainment of citizenship. This was also a moment of reckoning for the Indian Muslim. Beyond the metaphysics of faith and identity, concrete questions of being and existentiality, entitlements, and equality acquired pertinence.

In this connection, the respondents were asked repeatedly how they perceived their own community, their problems and visions for future. Most of them singled out the baneful existence and significance of the Muslim clergy over the general public. Mr. Zameel was eloquent about the importance of clergy in Muslim society as a complete curse. In moments of actual crisis, when the Muslim houses get bulldozed, the clergy and the *imam* (Muslim religious leaders) do not utter any words of protest. In tandem with some Muslim politicians, these *ulama* have been more concerned with the cultivation of Indian Muslims' socio-religious particularism than with the upliftment of the community.

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<sup>19</sup> Tanweer Fazal, Divya Vaid and Surinder Jodhka ed. *Marginalities and Mobilities among India's Muslims* (New York: Routledge, 2024). p4

Not only Mr. Zameel, but this sort of dissatisfaction with the Islamic clergy is a common concern among the respondents. 52 year old Md. Taher Zurus Beg lives in Boubazar area in a mixed residential plot.<sup>20</sup> He is originally from Delhi and speaks Urdu. He has a printing business and identifies himself as a middle-class businessman. He raised two very persisting points regarding the issue of accommodation in the cityscape. He pointed to the steady growth of polarization after 1992 but still maintains his faith on ‘maintaining decorum’ in public life. He felt that the agencies for brainwashing the ‘innocent’ had increased their presence considerably. But ‘self-control’ is the key to keep the situation under restraint. Apathy towards education among the young Muslims living in ghettos and clusters is a big hindrance for peaceful co-existence. They have few sources from which they might find positive influences in their neighborhoods. They tend to fall for the tropes of *local Maulavis and Imams* who take advantage of the followers who do not know Arabic. It is easy for them to misinterpret Koranic injunctions and resist modernist growth. Often they manipulate the believers, keeping them in constant fear. The ‘persecution complex’ of such sections of the minority further inhibits the scope for exposure and brighter future. The burden falls more on the young generation who remain inward-looking and unwilling. Thus, Mr. Beg echoes the traditional anxiety for Muslims in general in the city: “They are rarely brought to the ‘mainstream’, they hardly join the government services, and their women get married off early.”

Though alarming reports had been submitted to the Government of India since the 1980s, the general impression that the Muslim community was increasingly lagging behind gained

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<sup>20</sup> Interview taken on 7.07.2021

momentum only by mid 2000s. The Sachar Committee report (2006) showed, among other things, that only 8% of the urban Muslims were part of the formal sector whereas the national average was 21% for Indian city dwellers. Of the formal sector, a meager 7.05% of them belong to the public sector, against an average of 18.13%. On the other hand, 68% are part of the informal sector, against about 52% as an average. The 2001 Census points out, in a converging way, that Muslims have the highest percentage of household industrial workers, 8.1%, compared to 3.8% for Hindus.<sup>21</sup> The NCRLM (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities) which came to be known as the ‘Ranganath Mishra Commission’ (after the name of its president, a former Chief Justice of India), showed that the Muslim minority had the lowest literacy rate among all Indian communities(2007).<sup>22</sup> Most significantly, the Sachar Committee turned the Muslim question into a developmental problem that could potentially influence intellectual thinking, civil society interventions, and policy formulation. The Report and its startling findings provided an unprecedented recognition of Muslim marginality and underdevelopment by the Indian state.<sup>23</sup> Instantaneously, it demolished the myth of Muslim appeasement, a propaganda tool frequently deployed in the Hindutva construct of Hindu victimhood. On the contrary, it underscored the need for systematic and exhaustive empirical research on their social and economic life. It advocated the inclusion of Arzals, the bottommost in the Ashraf-dominated social hierarchy, among Scheduled Castes, or among the most backward. At the same time, it desisted from recommending blanket reservation for all Muslims. In August 2013, Ministry of Minority Affairs (MoMA) appointed a Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee (PSEC), under the chairmanship of Professor Amitabh Kundu to ‘evaluate the process of implementation of Sachar Committee and the outcome of the programmes being

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<sup>21</sup> Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot eds. *Muslims of Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, p3

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*,p4

<sup>23</sup> Tanweer Fazal, Divya Vaid and Surinder Jodhka eds. *Marginalities and Mobilities among India’s Muslims*, p6

implemented by the MoMA and other ministries and to recommend corrective measures'. In the PSEC report submitted to the minister of MoMA, Dr. Najma Heptulla, in September 2014, the Kundu Committee observed that 'available financial resources and physical targets have been meagre in relation to the deprivation of the minorities, especially Muslims, and for some of the schemes this meagre amount has not been fully utilised and this requires that allocation of resources to the Ministry of Minority Affairs be increased.'<sup>24</sup>

Shoeb Ahmed Khan from Khidirpur, a mechanical engineer presently employed in sales and marketing, responds to this statistics with genuine anxiety.<sup>25</sup> He too points out that, in general, the Muslims lack enthusiasm for studies and end up opting for business, often in the unorganized sectors, for faster returns. This has led to a vicious cycle. Their linkages with the unorganized sector undoubtedly mean dependence on fluid cash flow. Mr. Zameel remembers how the years after the Demonetization led to a huge setback in business due to vanishing of small capital.

Zameel also refers to the anxiety of missing out on the new vistas emerging due to opening of markets after the Neoliberal reforms in India. He says that both higher education and cracking government services and entering white collar job market are the gateways for upliftment of the community in general. Yet the WBCS examination does not offer Urdu or Arabic as medium of writing the answers, except for the optional language paper. However, the dependence solely on the government to initiate changes has to have limited results. Mr. Zameel is an active force behind Milli Educational Organisation, which tries to promote higher education among the minorities. With its sincere and continuous efforts, Milli Al-Ameen College for Girls was established in 1992. After much deliberation, it acquired affiliation from Calcutta University in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p36

<sup>25</sup> Interview taken on 8.10.22

2000. Mr. Zameel says that the college has fulfilled the long cherished desire of the Muslims of Kolkata to have a degree college for girls belonging to educationally backward sections of the society in general, and of the Muslim community in particular. The organizers purchased a landed property of approximately 15 cottahs at 43, Hare Krishna Konar road, Kolkata-700014 and constructed a new four-storied building on it, according to the plan sanctioned by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, with donations, contributions, and subscriptions collected over the years from the members and institutions of the Muslim community. Therefore, the general feeling is that socio-economic marginality is a reality that has to be 'somehow' overcome rather than be sat over and begrudged about. One view that seems more or less common across classes and ideological divides is that education is essential and, in a way, indispensable, for the individual and the community for development and a 'better life'.<sup>26</sup>

The anxiety to climb the social ladder fast is also felt by Mehzabi, a student of humanities in Jadavpur University residing in Park Circus.<sup>27</sup> The inner alleys of Park Circus are a different world in itself. A few meters away, there is the Seven Point crossing, one of the busiest junctions in South Kolkata. It has widely popular biriyani joints, numerous fine dining restaurants of Mughlai cuisine, a huge shopping mall with foreign high-end brands, a spacious *maidan* and a number of prominent educational institutions as well as hospitals. However, if one enters through one of the by-lanes into the Muslim *mahallas*, one can find unplanned multi-storeyed buildings, small beef shops, open urinals, extremely narrow lanes, small-scale workshops and shabby squatters. If not informed otherwise, one would easily mark these areas with the remarkably well-known adjectives of 'uncultured, uneducated, filthy, dingy, unruly, Muslim *para*'. However, by dint of experience, I knew that some of the youth hailing from these shabby living

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<sup>26</sup> Anasua Chatterjee, *Margins of Citizenship*, p130

<sup>27</sup> Interview taken on 27.01.2024

blocks with merely one or half bed room flats joined the rank of teachers, bureaucrats, engineers and doctors and other well-known professions regularly. Coming back to Mehzabi, being a bright student, she has become the poster girl of her locality. Her parents proudly told me that she had been intelligent and diligent since her childhood and nurtures a fire within her. Her family has a small scale printing business and a manufacturing workshop and no one has studied beyond graduation except Mehzabi. Her aunt thinks that upliftment of lifestyle through education has to be a slow and steady process. It is indeed difficult for a first generation school-goer to pass Class X level. But their offspring do much better in studies; they are better informed about new opportunities and can achieve greater milestones easily. However due to persistent poverty and illiteracy, Muslim lower classes choose 'easy returns with limited investment'. Thus, the girls do not pursue higher education and they get married off early as marriage remains their only aspiration. However, recently, the women are increasingly joining the job market. Many part-time works are available to them which can be done from their home. The limited earnings act as a confidence booster without disrupting their domestic duties. But Mehzabi feels such employment vistas are, after all, not helpful and the only way to have one's presence felt in the mainstream is by achieving higher educational degrees. She clearly lays out the middle-class cultural project – education is the means to civilize Muslim boys, to empower Muslim girls, to secure decent jobs and achieve respectability. Economic capital is not enough in itself ('random business'), rather it must accrue from certain forms of cultural capital (educational degrees) duly achieved.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Zaid-al-Baset's unpublished thesis: *Inhabiting Religion, Performing Class Middle Class Muslims in Contemporary Kolkata*, CSSSC, 2021, p113,

Does more education mean loosening of religious involvement? Does the older generation notice any change in religious inclination of the younger ones? The issue of dependence on religious performative rites is a contested terrain among the Muslim respondents. The All India Shooter, 72 year old Jamaluddin, sits in his *attar* (exotic perfumes) shop with a constant smile on his face in Zakaria Street, a couple of kilometers away from New Market. The place evokes a mixed aroma of the legendary Kolkata biriyani, kababs from roadside shacks, fresh bakery and *halwai*. The bylanes are all the more exotic with lines of colorful and dazzling *attar* shops, some of them dating back a hundred of years. Few meters away from them, wholesale and retail markets of shoes attract a wide range of customers. The whole locality has the imposing presence of the Nakhoda Mosque, the mighty red four-storeyed building, beautifully designed and immaculately maintained. The giant clock outside conspicuously displays the scheduled times for *namaz*. It seems that the whole area breathes under a dual time and space. The immediate surrounding around the Mosque has a somber presence of city life, with slow movement of pedestrians and vehicles and witness almost the permanent gaze of passers-by over the mosque. Again, on the surface, the road junctions, the narrow busy lanes and goods-carts, extremely shining perfume shops and dingy shoe workshops evoke a constant sense of mobility. Moreover, the area has innumerable centers of readymade stores for wedding attires. One can often find dotting couples (especially Hindus) looking for their choice of clothes and having Biriyani and Taskeen's Kulfi after their endeavor. With all these images, Zakaria Street is more than a stereotypical palette for food vloggers during Ramzan.

Coming back to Jamaluddin, he was born and brought up in Zakaria Street. His shop is on the ground floor of an erstwhile 'Rajbari' which is presently under lease by his family for '999

years.’<sup>29</sup> He accused the younger Muslims of not attending the mosques and *Jamaat* regularly. Some of my young respondents also confirmed this and said strongly that they were sincerely trying to come out of the clutches of Islamic clergy and religious bindings. But this is not true for all.

29-year old Shoeb Ahmed Khan from Khidirpur genuinely laments that he feels guilty for not being able to attend five times *namaz* regularly due to work pressure. He lives in Khidirpur in a predominantly Muslim locality which is marked by notoriety and criminality. Shoeb does not have blind adherence to injunctions by *maulavis* and *imams*. In his opinion, that arises only out of lack of enlightenment and exposure. However, following religious mandates are important to secure positions in life after death. The young generation should be more inquisitive, should question orthodoxy and verify false propaganda. Similarly, Aftab Hussain from Topsia, a young ground level worker employed in an NGO called “Child in Need Institute” (CINI) follows religious rites as far as possible. *Jumma* prayer is a tool for him for bonding with co-religionists; but sadly, it is not always feasible due to work load.<sup>30</sup> However, often the wealthier Muslim families organize religious festive gatherings in their homes, especially around the date of *Milad-un-Nabi* (the birthday of the Prophet celebrated in the third month of the Islamic calendar). There are also public festive gatherings organized by Muslim organizations, local *Masjid* Committees, and Muslim youth organizations during the same time in the Muslim dominated neighborhoods of the city.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interview on 15.9.22

<sup>30</sup> Interview on 7.4.22

<sup>31</sup> However, there are considerable differences in the ways of celebration of the special events based on who follows which Islamic religious tradition (Ahl-e-Hadis or Deobandi or Barelwi etc.) The Deobandis for example treat the Barelwis as backward and ignorant, not following proper injunctions of Islam at all. See, Zaid-al-Baset’s unpublished thesis: *Inhabiting Religion, Performing Class Middle Class Muslims in Contemporary Kolkata*, CSSSC, 2021

Thus the oral interviews with the urban Muslims gradually built for me a forum for testimonies. They complement the incompleteness of the supposedly complete archival records. The underlying aim has been to fill the gaps of human history and understand subjectivity. However, dealing with memory became a complicated affair when the questions revolved around their personal experiences of everyday living with the Hindu neighbors.

Zameel Family told repeatedly how they had experienced communal otherization very subtly in their daily affairs. They mentioned that Bengal never had toxic communal enmity, unlike in UP, Maharashtra, or Gujarat, and that communalism here is more 'cerebral'. Nevertheless, he endorsed the minority tendency of residing in closed neighborhoods for physical security. The Muslims even pay higher prices to obtain residential flats in these particular enclaves.<sup>32</sup> He was, however, skeptical about how far this can save lives if the other community desperately tries to claim their lives. He cited the unfortunate example of Ehsan Jafri: after the Godhra incident in 2002, the Hindu mob started pelting stones and attacking the Bohra-Muslim Gulbarg housing society in Ahmedabad's industrial area. In the attack, dozens of Muslim residents were killed, several houses were set on fire, and the former Congress MP Ehsan Jafri was burnt alive. According to the eyewitness accounts, Jafri made several calls to the police for help, but to no avail. The tragic incident made the middle-classes jittery even in Kolkata. Anasua Chatterjee also mentions one Mr. Karim, a university professor, who narrated the incident of Jaffri and expressed the usual concern to her.<sup>33</sup> Generally the middle-classes prefer to keep a distance from those who directly get involved in riot-violence. Also, the fact that the slums are the traditional

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<sup>32</sup> Almost all academic work on urban Muslim dwellings refers to this tendency of clustered living. For example, see Nida Kirmani's *Questioning the Muslim Women* in which she describes living patterns and identity formations of Muslims in Zakirnagar, especially chapter 4 and 5. Also see, Jaffrelot and Gayer ed *Muslims in Indian cities*. On Kolkata Muslims in contemporary times, see Anasua Chatterjee's *Margins of Citizenship: Muslim experience in Urban India*, Routledge, new Delhi, 2017, and Jeremy Seabrook. *People without History: India's Muslim Ghettoes*. Pluto Press:2011

<sup>33</sup> A Chatterjee, *Margins of Citizenship*,p152

victims of communal violence also justifies their stance. On the other hand, the slum areas adjacent to comparatively affluent localities act as a buffer zone in case of potential violence. But the unfortunate incident of Ehsan Jaffri, who lived in an affluent Muslim neighborhood and who himself had a position of power yet could not save his own life, increased the sense of vulnerability of the Muslim middle-class. Even those who have never seen any riot in the city live in fear of ‘potential violence’, as they have grown up listening to the stories of the Babri Riots and the Gujarat carnage. It becomes part of a sense of collective memory, built upon the knowledge of past violence that has been passed on to them to be continually reconstructed through narratives.<sup>34</sup>

Md. Irfan, from Park Circus, an engineer in his mid-30s working for ISRO in Dehradun told me about the psychological impact of indirect violence.<sup>35</sup> In north India, communal hatred reflects in action. He cites examples of viral videos showing Muslims offering *namaz* in a train were ridiculed by Hindu co-passengers loudly singing *bhajans* (Hindu devotional music) deliberately to disturb him. But in Bengal, Hindu-Muslim division rests more in the form of discourses and debates. Hence as of now, such aggression is unheard of in West Bengal. This has been affirmed by all the respondents. When asked about his experiences in Bengal, Jamaluddin simply stated, “*Jaha Jeena Hai Wohi Marna Hai*”/ one has to die where he has lived. This thought had resisted his ancestor’s decision for migration to Pakistan. I inquired repeatedly about the riots in 1964 and 1992. Jamaluddin recalled the 1964 Riots quite vividly. But he refused to give photographic details. When asked about this, he readily said: “Gurjali Lal Nanda visited Calcutta at that

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p152

<sup>35</sup> Interview on 28.01.2024

time..we had Congress Zamana”(regime).<sup>36</sup> When he was questioned about Babri Riots in Calcutta, he just said, “Oh we had curfew over here!”

He interestingly evoked memories of violence along with governance and mechanism to control it. Never did he mention any account of hooliganism and loss of security due to these torrid events. Instead, he repeatedly emphasized on the term ‘*Mohabbat*’/Love which has been dwindling across the years. He said ‘*puraane log ek jaisi thi, naye log alag sa hai*’/ ‘Earlier people had similarities but the new lots are different.’ This is in contrast to what he said next: Muslims used to wear *Lungi* and *Kamiz* in older days while the Hindus had only *Dhotis*. Of course, this is a gross generalizing remark. Attires do not always depend on religious adherence; it is essentially location based, linguistic group specific and culture specific. But his remarks had wider implications. What he implied is that the communities might have different choices of attire and appearance in public life, but they had a sense of harmony in their mutual relationship. They used to have different food items and arrangements for Hindu guests at a Muslim marriage ceremony, but this ensured the other’s participation. But the new millennium brought baffling changes in every aspects. This was readily endorsed by his staff in his shop. These changes came in a tiptoed but steady manner. It brought qualitative transformation even before one could make complete sense of it. This is something repeatedly portrayed by all the respondents.

The notion of neighborhood immediately connotes proximity; but it also invites the question of how to manage that proximity, how to establish boundaries. Neighborhood is made through relationships, as much as the relationships are built within and through places. Md Taher Zurus Beg from Boubazar has Hindu neighbors in his building. His neighborhood boasts of a club-

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<sup>36</sup> G. L. Nanda was the Minister of Home Affairs between August 1963 and November 1966. He paid his visit to Calcutta during the Hazratbal riots in early 1964. See chapter 3.

house and a field/*maidan* where participation of both communities can be seen. He even gets involved in Durga Pujo Committees which organizes nightlong medical camp during the festival, near Gate Number 4, Medical College. He openly admitted, “*dekhte gele ektu difference ache*”/ “frankly speaking, there are certain differences between us and them”. But for him, such differences are manageable. After all, days are numbered for all. Differences are visible in the way the communities conduct their festivals. Hindu festivals are public affairs, often pompously celebrated and conspicuously exhibited. Muslim festivals are family centric, more private. One needs sincere access to the inner periphery of Muslim families to celebrate them alike. Such access is rare, neither truly desirable. This statement was followed by talks about illegitimacy and non-acceptance of inter-religion marriage. But domains of public life does not evoke similar objection. Hence for him, the schools and colleges are important for forging bonds. After all, every religion teaches one to purge out the evil and also the inner beast. Hatred towards the other community is nothing but a politically concocted false propaganda. It is imperative to stay together. Differences would be there, but should remain within the four walls of household.

Notes of inherent differences are also affirmed by Tahamima. A Bengali Muslim in her 40s and a school teacher, she has spent her life in one of the most cosmopolitan parts of Calcutta.<sup>37</sup> She stays at the junction of Alimuddin Street and Doctor’s Lane. On one end of the road, there are Hindi-speaking Muslims, on the other, Hindi-speaking Hindus. Majorly the area has no Bengali residents. Interaction level among the communities has always been cordial and smooth until recently. They celebrate all the festivals: Christmas, Id and Hindu Pujas with enthusiasm. But it seems that spending festivals together do not simply ensure warm-hearted access to the inner circles of another’s community. Therefore, in spite of intermixing, common stereotypes are

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<sup>37</sup> Interview on 07/09/2022

always present. The liberal outlook is limited to public domain. There has been shrinkage regarding access to public spaces recently. In earlier generations, the neighborhood clubs had participation from both the communities. Now it is becoming exclusive gradually. For example, the field adjacent to Wellington Square is used by all, but the one at Lebutala is no longer frequented by the Muslims. These localities now do not attract Bengali Hindus at all, unless they had been older residents already staying there for years. She also referred to the underlying social tensions between Bihari Muslims and Bengali Muslims, who do not share bond of mutual trust and amity very often. She could not define the sources of anxiety and uncertainty behind this relationship, however. All she said, “*ajantei bibhajon hoye jai*”/ “Separation occurs unknowingly.”

Though I have taken all the interviews in isolation, certain responses from different people fall together in line. Shoeb Ahmed Khan from Khidirpur complements Tahamima’s sentiments. He said that this unfamiliarity of each other is fed on by vested interests in politics and power-hungry religious fundamentalist preachers. He wisely said. “Believing without verifying leads to stereotypes and fault-lines between religious communities.”

Similarly Aftab Hussain from CINI said that lack of knowledge about the other sometimes leads to funny assumptions. He noticed since his school life that his Hindu classmates were more studious, and hence, he preferred to bond with them. Some of them told him that: Muslims bathe only on Fridays! He said, this should be treated like long-lasting communication gap between the communities. He began to have Muslim friend circles only in his college life. Presently, he is the sole Muslim in his team at his office. There he faces questions like, “Why one must enjoy two-days holiday for Id?” He lamented to me that his Hindu colleagues comfortably forgets how he has to work in nightshifts for their relief during Durga Puja. Similarly Shoeb, the mechanical

engineer from Khidirpur said, he has felt people's gaze as an 'other' whenever he has stepped outside his neighborhood Khidirpur. He accepts that majoritarianism is part of reality. This is even true for the Hindu grocers and storekeepers in his locality who are regularly extorted by the local Muslims. However, Arafat, a government servant from Park Circus denied this. He rather said that Hindu shop-owners are keen to set up their business in Muslim localities because they are densely populated.<sup>38</sup> Also unlike Hindu Bengali *bhadralok*, who do not have much of a social life after they come back from office, the Muslim neighborhoods are vibrant all day. They spend their time in the local shops, chatting casually with their friends for hours. This ensures greater business for the shop owners. Hence, no Hindu businessman would ever leave these locations. In fact they are doing business comfortably for the last 60-70 years.

Anasua Chatterjee however points to the contrasting picture of a weekday and night-time in these localities. Daytimes, especially during the weekdays, draw out a more urban, cosmopolitan crowd, which does not necessarily carry the usual markers associated with inhabitants of a communally distinct neighborhood. People seem to shed their communal lifestyles and get ready to participate in the everyday cycle of urban life and work. Busy commuters, both from within and outside the neighborhood throng the principal streets, and there is a general attitude of non-attachment and matter-of-fact-ness on the part of the passers-by. The expected signifiers of community life withdraws to the background and is visible only in an occasional man in a skullcap or *kurta*, or in a woman in plain dress covering her head at the call of *azaan* at midday. However, as evening progresses, most parts of the neighborhood begin to take on a very different aspect. As the workday closes, people return to their homes; and community life, in all its various forms, begins to take precedence. Men, young and old, are seen to gather in groups

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<sup>38</sup> Interview on 28.01.2024

around the local grocery stores and tea stalls, women accompany their wards to tuitions, children play, young girls in *burkhas* and *naqabs* pass by, families go out for strolls; it seems as though everybody has momentarily taken to the streets. This evening crowd is, however, a very remarkable one and can be characterized by a number of factors. At one level, it is almost entirely Muslim, a fact evident in styles of dressing, manner and body language, all of which are characteristic of an unhindered Muslim space. At another level, in spite of the neighborhood being in the heart of Kolkata with a sizeable section of relatively well-to-do households, the roads are completely devoid of what might be called a *bhadralok* presence. The affluent and the middle-classes among Muslims, very much like their Hindu counterparts, do not seem to approve of mingling with the ordinary ranks of Muslims in the area, and take every measure to keep away from engaging in social interactions with them, wherever possible. Suddenly the whole public space becomes the community's own, only to be lost during the day when a more cosmopolitan, mixed crowd takes over.<sup>39</sup>

Hussain, being an NGO worker, is deeply knowledgeable about his locality. He refers to the Muslims in Topsia as majorly second or third generation migrants from UP and Bihar. He talked about their increasing presence. Topsia has numerous small scale businesses. The multistoried constructions are used for factories, workshops, retail shops as well as for private residences. Promoting property, construction business and selling clothes are major sources of income in these places. The general notion portrays Topsia as a crime prone zone Husain thinks otherwise. Husain said:

The girls are safe here. Liquor is not consumed publicly. The disturbances that happen between Hindus and Muslims here are generally over control of shops or due to political motivation. But they are publicized in communal colour.

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<sup>39</sup> Anasua Chatterjee, *Margins of Citizenship*, p50

Topsia, thus like Khidirpur and Metiabruz, can be referred to as the classical example of ‘negative space’ or stigmatized neighborhood (Louis Waquant).<sup>40</sup> For example, Mominpur is perceived as a Muslim-only neighborhood. But Mominpur is adjacent to the dockyard and witnessed the advent of Germans in the early 19th century.<sup>41</sup> Today, people from other states work in the German bakeries that endure. There are people speaking at least seven different languages here. The cosmopolitan character of these neighborhoods is hardly discussed. The maximum glory they can attain is through the popularity of *biryani* joints among the foodies of Kolkata. Thus the space is no longer regarded as a mere stage upon which history unfolds or into which social actors intervene. Rather, space is increasingly held to be both produced by, and productive of, the social.

Hussain’s wife Zenab had different priorities while discussing her neighborhood with me. She is a young girl whose family was uprooted in the 1964 riots from UP and settled in Kolkata since then. She stays in Kohinoor Market which has considerable middle-class residences. Though they have always cherished good relationship between the communities, they feel insecure in the present regime. Unlike any of her co-religionists, she said that Hindus are more orthodox than Muslims as the former are more conscious about pollution/purity norms. She mentioned that charges of appeasement towards the Muslims are nothing but political propaganda. Why she hasn’t got any job then?<sup>42</sup>

Several interviews unwittingly led to utterances of political names. Israr Ahmed, a shop-owner in Zakaria Street, and a resident of Ward 44, talked about “perfect communal harmony” until the

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Kirkness and Andreas Tijé-Dra eds. *Negative Neighbourhood Reputation and Place Attachment*, (New York: Routledge, 2017). p 2

<sup>41</sup> “Heritage Group to Honour 110 year Old Kolkata Bakery of German Bread Fame” in *The Times of India*. Nov 22, 2022 . Also see, “K.Ali Bakery: the Century old Heritage Bakery of Mominpur” by Suranjana Mitra, getbengal.com

<sup>42</sup> Interview on 5.04.2022

1990s in Bengal.<sup>43</sup> The short conversation with him led to blaming of political parties directly. He accused the BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani for implanting a strong ‘us/them’ binary between the communities for the first time in the 1990s. Finally Narendra Modi made the division more potent and permanent. The younger generation and even the kids now prefer not to intermingle in the locality. The Muslim and Hindu shops have different clientele for obvious reasons. This polarization is solely the gift of political propaganda. The TMC has ‘Muslim Dil’/ Muslim heart while the BJP has ‘Hindu Dil/ Hindu Heart’ while their common hidden agenda is to eliminate the National Congress, though the Congress regime in Bengal ended five decades back and Bengal experienced an ‘apparently secular’ rule by the CPI(M). For him, if the left remained in power, the force of Communal BJP could have been resisted.

The onslaught of the Babri riots in the city was temporary. Calcutta absorbed its violence with commendable restraint. In this connection, a small piece of memory shared by Beg who lives in Boubazar is insightful and impressive. He mentioned one Kali temple at Phears Lane where a Hindu saint/*sadhubaba* used to stay. Somehow he did not appeal to Mr. Beg in any manner, he never acquired any reverence from him. Suddenly amidst stone pelting from some Muslim miscreants during 1992 riots, the *baba* received injury on his forehead. Beg remembered the moment graphically. He delivered a vivid description: “Blood from his injury marked red spots in his long white beard. When the Hindu mob came to his rescue, he simply said that he got this injury by accidentally falling down.”

His judicious tackling of the heated atmosphere saved the situation from getting worse. This inspired Beg to a great extent. The *sadhu*’s reply had brought ‘tears to his eyes’. He realised

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<sup>43</sup> Interview on 15.09.2022

how important it was to accept people beyond external markers of otherness. Since then he became a regular visitor to him and even asked for his *ashirvad*/blessings.

But the Loksabha election results of 2014 brought changes in inter-community relationships beyond repair. This is the experience across all classes and borders. The media reports of communal riots, public lynching, loss of livelihood and living spaces have led to constant self-doubt and increased insecurity. Clustered living could not help them to mitigate the fear. It has come down to personal levels. For example, Shoeb from Khidirpur lamented loss of friendship in recent years. Any difference of opinions leads up to communal allegations against each other among his friends; hence relationships are becoming strained and uncomfortable. This was echoed by Md. Irfan, the engineer working for ISRO, whose native home is at Dargah Road, Park Circus. He started sharing his experiences of happy moments from the past, how he used to have many non-Muslim friends and how they had comfortable interactions. He had been an active volunteer in *Durga Puja* in Park Circus Maidan, which also has a huge mosque. All the festivities have passed peacefully; it has been the norm always. *Burkha*-clad women used to visit the Pandals and the adjacent fair at the Maidan regularly during Puja. However, last year (2023) , when Irfan was getting ready with his wife and children to visit the Puja Pandal, he stopped for a moment. He thought, what if, someone threw some derogatory remark at his family? What if something bad happened? Was it okay to take his family over there? However, he re-assured himself, got back his momentum and pursued the plan to enjoy the festivities. But he told me that the fact that he had second thoughts regarding his safety, was in itself is a great victory for the Hindutva forces. They have won half of the battle by instilling psychological fear among the minority in Kolkata, something which is new even for the young generation. In this connection, he also told a story about a campaign on cancer awareness. Some NGO asked for donation from

the public towards the cause for treatment of cancer patients. Majority of them denied. Then the NGO distributed free wristbands on cancer awareness to the public, which they received quite spontaneously. Thereafter, when the NGO again asked for money, the turn-out was much better than, during their first attempt. People by using the wristbands felt closer to the issue and came forward to donate money to the cause, in other words, they showed deeper interest in it. Citing this evidence, he said, the Hindutva forces are consistently normalizing anti-minority campaigns in similar tactful ways, which would lead to further marginalization of Muslims, relegating them into second-class citizens.

The systematic attempt of injecting insecurity among the Muslims has been experienced by Mehzabi as well, that too from her classmates. When she shared a Whatsapp status against the inauguration of Ram Mandir on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2024, one of her classmates targeted her as an ‘anti-national’. She was told, if she was not happy with the temple, she should check her DNA, ‘which must have Mughal lineage!’ Also, she should immediately leave for Pakistan. She bounced back with answers. She claimed that she was as much an Indian as her classmate was. Also, she had no Mughal lineage, as her family must have converted to Islam no earlier than five or six generations ago. Her guardians too claimed sharply, ‘*Kiu jayenge Pakistan? Why should we go to Pakistan? In 1947, we decided to stay in India by choice. We are not going away now. We shall fight for our constitutional rights.*’

However not everyone shares the similar fighting spirit. Essentializing religion as the sole identity- marker makes Safrulla Ahmed, a 48 year old upper-class businessman jittery. Safrulla is a director of a well-known Life Insurance Agency.<sup>44</sup> He is originally from Aara, Bhojpur. He had been brought up in a cosmopolitan setting. He had Hindu neighbors throughout his childhood

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<sup>44</sup> Interview on 20/5/2023

and adolescence. He even arranged Ramlila for them. He shifted to Nizam Palace in Calcutta in 1993, when his father got a job in this city. He stayed in a posh locality. His neighbors and companions were all highly qualified. Throughout his life, he has never seen any riot, neither in Bhojpur nor in Calcutta. He prefers to live in a gated and secured community where one can evade these disturbances. He has the mobility capital to secure his well-being and safe living. This he says repeatedly due to his anxiety about the current political scenario of the nation. He is a regular follower of NDTV and Ravish Kumar. He keeps himself updated about discriminatory news against the minority and claims for Hindu *Rashtra* by the Hindu Right. He repeatedly pointed out the relevance of Shaheen Bagh protest against CAA and NRC and put the situation in West Bengal in comparison. He unabashedly stated that Bengal offers the safest haven for Muslims. Women can enjoy utmost safety here. Yes, people are poor, job opportunities are scarce, but they do not have threat to life here. Otherwise, if considered nationally, communal polarization has reached a climax. It is almost similar to the 1947 Partition days. If situation worsens, he would prefer to move out to Dubai. The Muslim community in Ekbalpur, that was mainly employed in blue-collar profession, revealed the same emotions. They might be defensive about their Hindu neighbors but do not have the luxury to stay complacent anymore.

Though my thesis primarily talks about the middle-class Muslims and their aspirations, I tried to meet people from other sections as well. Being poor and Muslim simultaneously bring many handicaps. In most of the times, for an affluent Hindu, the major service providers happen to be Muslims. In general, one find the cab drivers, the app bike riders, local fruit sellers, local carpenters, community garbage pickers or the meat-sellers are all Muslims! However, interactions with these occupation groups generally happen to be outside the household. But the domestic helpers, mostly the maid servants, must enter the homes to get their work done. Often,

many Muslim women take up Hindu names, wear conch-shell bangles and put vermilion on their forehead, to work as maids in the Hindu houses. This has also been observed by Anasua Chatterjee. There is also a continuous contestation between Islamic religious identity and finding a job. Chatterjee met Yasin Khan, a young accountant in his mid-twenties never disclosed to his employer that he hailed from Park Circus, otherwise he would not have been given the job. On the other hand, another way in which symbols of religious identity affect Muslims at the work place, usually in the more middle-level jobs, is through the enduring association of tradition with the Islamic way of dressing and self-presentation. Chatterjee writes about Razia, a typist and a front desk executive in a private company, who faced several questions in the job interview as she wore a headscarf. She said in despair, “Your family wants you to keep a *burkha*, your workplace doesn’t.”<sup>45</sup> Again, wearing *burkha* is indeed a matter of choice for some of my young interlocutors. A few years back, I used to teach in a girls’ college in South Calcutta. I met a number of young Hindi-speaking Muslim girls in my class. When they entered the college, they used to take off their veils. Almost each of them used to wear heavy make-up under their *burkhas*. I asked them quite naively, if they had to cover their face all along their journey, why had they taken so much time to deck up? They said strongly that they wore the veil out of their choices, and they decked up simply because they loved to look pretty to themselves and to their friends. However some of them clandestinely told me that *burkha* enabled secrecy. They could safely meet their boyfriends without the risk of being suddenly caught by their relatives! Interestingly, seven years later, I met another group of female Muslim teachers in Santoshpur, a mixed neighborhood area near Metiabruz. They too told me how *burkha* help the young girls to roam ‘freely’ with their friends and lovers, watch a movie in a cinema hall and do similar

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<sup>45</sup> Anasua Chatterjee, *Margins of Citizenship*, pp 126-128

outdoor leisurely activities, which are otherwise forbidden in a traditional orthodox Muslim family. Thus, instead of a hindrance, the veil becomes an enabler!

The identity of a practicing Muslim in a majoritarian society is riddled with confrontations. The Muslims' fear of loss of identity might have two consequences. As individuals, the poor Muslims start to underplay their identities and, as if to compensate for that, when in strength, they start to assert it more and more. Hence, today one sees two kinds of Muslims in public places in India. The first kind comprises those who work in mixed environments. They try and merge with their surroundings, becoming as invisible as possible. It's not very difficult to do this, aided as they are, by their non-Muslim colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances, who would ideally prefer a Muslim not to show her/his Muslimness. Yet, when they unexpectedly come across a Muslim in a non-Muslim situation, they immediately try to build a 'brotherhood of Muslimness'.<sup>46</sup> Again, most of the middle-class Muslims, especially the Bengali Muslims, do not sport Islamic symbols in their everyday attire. Once their Hindu colleagues or neighbors get to know their name, they often exclaim in disbelief that they do not look like a Muslim! Despite having many such examples of people who are Muslims but do not look like a Muslim, Muslimness keep on haunting the Hindus and this puts the Muslims on their guard. The realm of the everyday can never be entirely free from the ideological and political constructions of monolithic entities of being 'the Muslim' and 'the Hindu'. Therefore, while there can be many distinct types of individual Muslims (or Hindus), ideologically there remains but one Muslim (or one Hindu). Indeed, it is a strange dialectic between the particular and the general where any number of

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<sup>46</sup> Ghazala Wahab, *Born a Muslim: Some Truth About Islam in India* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2019). p56

concrete individual instances of neighborliness and goodwill are looked upon only as exceptions and never pass on to constitute the general in society.<sup>47</sup>

Despite a constant presence of perceived otherness, almost all the interlocutors have univocally shared their uncompromising trust in the present regime of Bengal which acts as a cushion against the aggressive Right wing propaganda from the Central government. During the interviews taken in 2021 and 2022, the sense of security among the Muslims had been greater, while the responses from late 2023 were slightly different. However, the Muslim families involved in government jobs and service sector are critical about the state government's tokenistic service to the minorities without fundamentally alleviating their situation. They complained about limited government opportunities for career counseling programmes for the youth, lack of awareness programmes regarding civil rights and civic duties, and they demanded more official initiatives to provide free tuition to first generation learners and so on. They are also critical of continued importance of the Islamic clergy, who often misinterpret the Koranic injunctions, do not encourage active reading of the holy text, and ultimately contribute to greater schisms between the communities. For them, the version of liberal Islam does have a quotidian existence, but the government chooses wrong advocates to represent the Muslims in the public. On the other hand, there is another group of Muslims who feel that Koran and Hadis are infallible, Islam in every sense is a modern religion, ensuring adequate rights for women and it needs no reform at all. In many cases, the Muslims themselves are ignorant about their rights given by 'Allah' especially in matters like Triple *Talaq* and polygamy. Their ignorance is exploited by the political parties; they become pawns in their electoral game.

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<sup>47</sup> Anasua Chatterjee, *Margins of Citizenship*, p81

With the inauguration of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2024, a change of paradigm is noticed among the minority. So far, the incidents of Babri Mosque demolition and even the Babri riots were not deeply etched in public memory in the city. Even those who had witnessed Calcutta Riots between 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> December 1992, agreed that they were momentary and spontaneous in nature. As mentioned before, many even applauded the Left rule for containing the violence in an effective manner.<sup>48</sup> The Gujarat pogrom of 2002 had no repercussion in Bengal. Yet the events on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, with their live coverage by all major media including Dooradarshan in all languages, immediately and widely brought back memories of 1992 alive. Such re-awakening of memory however is selective. Even many of the religious non-communal Hindus, who are not the voters of BJP, welcomed the temple warmly as they ‘simply felt happy’ seeing a grand Temple inaugurated with such majestic paraphernalia. The mainstream media continuously propagated the events preceding 22<sup>nd</sup> January as simply the establishment of a grand temple, long due on a controversial land and not publicizing the contested and violent history behind it. But for the Muslims, it brought back intimate memories. Suddenly, the fateful events on 6<sup>th</sup> December came back alive, proximate and direct, ironically more direct than it had been 32 years ago. The newly constructed Ram Temple rang as warning bells to them. In the last week of January, when I met Md. Irfan, he said poignantly, ‘ *Mandir Banake ka dukh nahi hai. Masjid Tor ke banaya is ka dukh hai/* we are not sad because a temple has been erected, we are sad because the temple is built by demolishing a mosque.’ Similarly Arafat, a resident of Park Circus, a government employee working for state electricity board, mentioned that one can build more than one temple, but why after destroying the Muslim heritage sites? What message does it convey to the public then?

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<sup>48</sup> However the Left regime had a role to play in orchestrating the violence, the slums especially in East Calcutta were burnt by hooligans supported by CPM party-holders. Most of the perpetrators avoided penal measures and Muslims once again were targeted as major culprits for the violence. Refer to Next chapters for more detail.

My conversation with Arafat was interesting in many ways. Unlike other salaried middle-class people, he openly advocates for exclusive treatment to the Muslims. He feels that the Muslims are treated as minorities, their aspirations are not attended to by the government, they have limited representation in the job market, they are discriminated against in the interviews, and often, they are denied constitutional rights. So, if the present state government is accused of ‘appeasement’ politics, be that as it may. He remarked strongly, “If they stop treating us differently, we will not expect anything different or more. Otherwise we will keep on demanding special status and treatment.” However, he is also the one who told me that in Islam neighbors are more important than kin or relatives. Neighbors are the one who come to immediate rescue if there is a crisis. Hence, maintaining harmony and healthy relationship with their Hindu neighbors are imperative for Muslims. He also appreciates typical Bengali Hindu neighborhoods—how by dusk, the young generation goes back inside their houses, spends time in studying or practising music, how unlawful activities are rare in those areas, how they are cleaner than Muslim *muhallas*, they have disciplined parking of bikes and so on. Yet, he ferociously opposes any interference with Islamic religious mandates. He says, “If we are allowed having four wives, let us have it. We are not imposing polygamy on Hindus, then why impose this on us?” I asked him about his opinions on Uniform Civil Code. He feels, it is not feasible in India which is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious country. Further, why uniform civil code targets the *sharia* only? Private family laws exist for the Jews, Christians, and Parsis as well. Does anyone have the guts to meddle into the internal affairs of tribal societies?

However the anti-CAA movement had been a turning point in public life of the Muslims, especially for the Muslim women. It gave them a new vista, a new exposure and there is no turning back. By relying on group solidarity, a lived conception of citizenship based on the

‘collective’ was showcased through dynamics of protest on the levels of consciousness, will and action. The anti-CAA movement of 2019 marked the arrival of a ‘new Muslim’ – part of the new middle-class. The new Muslim public at the protest sites was not saddled by the symbolism of the past, neither burdened by the guilt of Partition. By its very constitution, this newly emerging class is not dependent on the largesse of the state, unlike the old elite. Feudal ideas of moral control and honour are progressively less abided by. Dignity and self-respect have made a noticeable headway among the most cherished values. In the newfound assertion of identity in the public domain, it wishes to make its presence on the terms of equality and recognition. The signs of this change are visible, though less acknowledged. Veil and hijab-wearing women transgress the confines of home to enter public spaces – colleges, universities, banks, and bazaars, as do the skull-cap wearing men. As men and women thronged the protest sites, they found a new camaraderie sending traditional segregation of sexes as much as the gendered codes of conduct, for a toss. Popularly perceived as hyper-masculine, the community was being led by its women at the protest sites, and it was their resilience that provided vigour and perseverance to one of the most effective mobilizations of the Indian Muslims in the recent history.<sup>49</sup> But unfortunately, this movement had to die an untimely date due to Covid-19 and lockdown.

### **Messiness of identities: in absence of closure**

The discussions with the Muslim residents point to the fact that the process of identity construction has multiple locations, it is flexible and continuous. Their accounts whether relating to home, locality or the nation, reflect the multiplicities and interconnectedness of various social

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<sup>49</sup> Tanweer Fazal, Divya Vaid and Surinder Jodhka ed. *Marginalities and Mobilities among India’s Muslims*, p4

boundaries. The ethnographic discussion is a window to understand how ordinary middle-class Muslims claim their belongingness in the cityscape through quotidian affairs. The Muslims in these case-studies are divided among themselves regarding devotion to religious mandates. 'Being Muslim' in everyday life can be viewed through Soares and Otayek's concept of Islam Mondain.<sup>50</sup> As a concept, it does not privilege Islam over other concept of everyday life, but attempts to focus on relational aspects of Islam with other dimensions of everyday life. It shows how ethics in everyday life with their multiple sources and interpretations contribute to the notions of 'being Muslim' rather than prescriptions emanating from authoritative discourses of Islam. Although 'mondain' can be translated as "secular" in English, it is not quite secular. Rather, it points to the ways of being Muslim that exist in secular societies and spheres, without necessarily being secular. Those Muslims inhabiting this Islam Mondain might focus on self-improvement together with the correct practice of Islam. The debates on the correct way of being Muslim are often vociferous and judgments are passed on others that reflect schisms along class lines. This is most obvious when middle-class individuals insist that poor and uneducated Muslims do not practice 'true' Islam.<sup>51</sup>

Naturally, the narratives become more complicated when it involves perceptions about the other. In general, it can be summarized that the older generation which has cognitive memory of the 1960s-1990s repeatedly evokes nostalgic idealized images of Hindu-Muslim unity in the city, riots are nothing more than a blip for them. However, the younger generations see tendencies for communal violence as endemic in present political climate which threatens mutual friendship and trust between the communities, even at the level of quotidian interaction. They refer to a

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<sup>50</sup> Otayek R. & B.F. Soares ed. *Islam and Muslim politics in Africa*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Introduction pp 17-24,

<sup>51</sup> Baset, *Inhabiting Religion, Performing Class Middle Class Muslims in Contemporary Kolkata*, p98

situation where certain groups within a society are systematically disadvantaged and discriminated against.

Also, the chapter points to the intermediary gray zone between a formal rhetoric of secularism and informal attitudes and practices which exclude Muslims from the Indian nation. Indian Muslims were rendered parenthetical citizens—‘Indian citizens (Muslims)’—because their presence in India disrupted the narrative of Partition in which religious affiliation and national loyalty were merged.<sup>52</sup> On the discursive level, these localities also provide excellent window to realize the formation of mini ethno-national symbols through the performative space of quotidian contestation. This, in turn, provides avenues for establishing power and hierarchies with communal identities. Thus, like nations, the neighborhoods are not only lived in and experienced, they are also imagined and narrated. Stories situate neighborhoods between a past and a future; they also attribute textures and flavours to them. Yet, stories also fiercely compete with each other. Some become dominant—even official in the end, while others are completely marginalized.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Taylor C. Sherman, “Migration, Citizenship and Belonging in Hyderabad (Deccan) 1946-1956” in Sherman et al ed. *From Subjects to Citizens: Society and Everyday State in India and Pakistan 1947-1970*, (India: CUP, 2014). p117.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, (Oxford: OUP, 1999). Introduction

## V

### DIALECTIC OF DWELLING II: STORIES OF HINDU RESIDENTS IN MIXED NEIGHBORHOODS

“There is a Muslim tailor next to our house who creates stylish designs.”

“The Muslim fruit vendor visits our flat regularly.”

“We had an enigmatic Muslim professor who taught us Shakespeare.”

Rarely have I seen any Hindu talking about someone, who happens to be a Muslim, without mentioning their Muslim identity as a prefix. These acquaintances are majorly non-communal; they generally advocate liberal outlook and these discussions are always held casually. But none of them would ever say, “My Hindu neighbor makes savory desserts.” I always found this tendency quite intriguing. But when I decided to delve into the matter through my thesis, things became more complicated. I had to deal with the Hindu residents in those neighborhoods where Muslims are more in number. It was like entering into discourses of clash of civilizations exacerbated by chanced and forced cohabitation.

Initially, as a researcher, I supposed that interviewing the Hindu neighbors in the mixed neighborhoods would be a smooth process. Despite not being so much of a practicing Hindu, I am still a Hindu. I am born and brought up in a salaried middle-class urban Hindu family. I took part in Hindu festivities, and honestly, I rarely had Muslim friends! I have a couple of Muslim classmates, batch mates and colleagues, but no friends. Hence, I felt what I am doing is an ‘insider’s job’, and I can gain the trust of the respondents in no time. I was wrong. The

interviewees of Park Circus, Khidirpur, Tiljala, and Metiabruz never opened up spontaneously. I had to bend my narratives time and again to let them speak up their minds.

This had psychological explanations. For them, they are experiencing duality of space and time. They live on the edges. They stay in localities where they are minority and increasingly losing their numbers. Yet looking beyond their neighborhood, they are a thumping majority. In post-1992 years, being more in numbers demographically brings out greater significances. Living in these neighborhoods has sharpened their ideological belongings throughout generations. This has led to drawing and redrawing of several mental maps within their own neighborhoods leading to a series of internal partitions. Their suspicion and wariness is not solely towards Muslims. This is applicable even to me who has not stayed in these ‘negative spaces’ of the city. Hence, whenever I tried to gather information from them, they felt that I am not one of them. I have no experience of living with Muslims or ‘bearing with the Muslims’ in my lived experiences. I might not be able to grasp their emotions, and would never realize “what it feels like to be here”. As they lament their diminishing numbers in these areas, my figure emerges as a representative of the privileged majority to them. This leads to hindrances in our mutual bonding and understanding initially. Reframing the questions however yielded better results.

What comes up from the interviews is an intense urge to prevent Hindu private sphere from becoming profane due to such close proximity with the Muslims. The way Dipesh Chakraborty has analyzed the memoirs of *Chhere Asha Graam* is very relevant here. He says that the arrangement of Hindu home is linked to the central problem of the history of Hindu Bengali nationality. Hindu nationalism fostered a sense of home which was a combination of sacredness with beauty. This sacred was not intolerant of the Muslim. The Muslim Bengali surely had a place created through the idea of kinship. But the home was always a Hindu home, in which the

Muslims were the valued guests. Its sense of the sacred was constructed here through an idiom that was recognizably Hindu. What had never been considered was how the Hindu might live in a home that embodied the Islamic sacred.<sup>1</sup> This explains the contentious domain of lived experiences of the Hindus who could hardly accommodate a fully performing mosque and Muslim-run shopping arcades in their close proximity. Intermingling in the public sphere is limited, more so in private drawing rooms.

This chapter is an attempt to show how the middle-class Hindus negotiate their identities and spheres of control in these localities. It is well-known that except these few blocks, Muslims hardly have presence in other parts of Calcutta. They are denied access to tenancy and even ownership of flats in Hindu dominated neighborhoods. Hence, the Hindus living in areas like Khidirpur, Metiabruz, Tiljala or Park Circus project themselves as victims of Muslim ghettoization. Given an opportunity, they intend to move out of these places. Interestingly, moving out means settling in those places which are widely believed to be the neighborhoods of *bhadralok*—Salt Lake and Rajarhat-Newtown are their primary choices. This needs to be studied with the complex phenomenon of increasing flow of global capital, expansion of urban frontiers, and myths of gentrification linked with consumerist culture and the advent of Promoter-*Raaj*. The moving out of these Hindus should be seen through the lens of re-ordering of middle-classness which has been happening in a rapid momentum in these areas. This chapter thus looks into accounts of Hindu middle-class residents, both Bengali and Hindi speaking, about their perceptions of the ‘other’, about the dividing zones in the neighborhoods, whether any changes

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<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakraborty, “Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition,” in Mushirul Hasan ed. *Inventing Boundaries : Gender, Politics, and the Partition of India*, (Oxford: OUP, 2000).pp320-337

could be noticed through decades in their perception, and how far national events and policies could affect them.

### **Claiming a sovereign space:**

The stories lined up next can be summed up as a sort of collective anxiety of losing one's own sacred sovereign space, both in the form of physical occupation of land as well as in the domain of moral and cultural superiority and validation. This crisis of ownership among the middle-class intelligentsia is ingrained into Hindu revivalist discourse since its inception in the colonial period. Literary tradition and public opinion reflected in the contemporary magazines, periodicals, and newspapers give out varied examples of such discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Modernity carries with it a particular ambivalence towards that which is old. On the one hand, newness is lauded. On the other hand, history is fetishized. This can be exhibited through an unusual example pertaining particularly to the urban space. Against the British claims that Calcutta was a commercial city founded and developed by the Britons, the Bengali Hindu men at the turn of the twentieth century declared that this city had in fact been founded by the devotees of Kali who discovered her *murti* (embodied form) on its sacred soil hundreds, if not thousands of years before. The middle-class authors like Surjyakumar Chattopadhyay, Gaur Das Basack, Prankrishna Datta, and Atul Krishna Ray wrote historical articles and books featuring Kalighat as the foundation of the city— a site to which pious and valorous Hindus had flocked for centuries— thus making Calcutta great before any Englishman set foot on its soil.<sup>3</sup> Scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Deonie Moodie, *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City: Kalighat and Kolkata* (New York: OUP, 2019). Chapter 4

studying the middle-classes largely agree that individuals in this segment of society— whether one refers to them as one class or not— share a common set of modern values including civic engagement, rationality, and a kind of order. The modernities they have created would vary from one another, yet they would stem from a shared reservoir of pre-existing cultural elements and a common set of values.

However, this would soon produce conflict. Benedict Anderson has distinguished between nationalism and the politics of ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> He does this by distinguishing between two kinds of seriality resulting from modern imaginings of community. The first type is the unbound seriality encompassing everyday universal categories in modern social thought such as nations, citizens, revolutionaries, bureaucrats, workers, intellectuals, and others. The second type is the bound seriality which refers to governmentality: it talks about the finite totals of distinct categories of population created through modern census and electoral systems.

Unbound serialities are archetypally imagined and recounted by means of the model instruments of print capitalism, especially, the newspaper and the novel. They allow the individuals an opportunity to visualize themselves as parts of some broader than face-to-face solidarities. This enables them to act on behalf of those solidarities, through an act of political imagination which surpasses the limits imposed by traditional practices. Unbound serialities are hence potentially liberating. But, as we will see, these may also contain seeds of conflicts.

In contrast, bound serialities, operates only with integers. This means that within each category of classification, individuals can only be counted as either one or zero, never as a fraction. Consequently, this means that all partial or mixed affiliations to a category are not recognized.

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<sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Anderson's Utopia." *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999): 128–34.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566381>.

One must fully belong to either side of a binary distinction: such as being black or not black, Muslim or not Muslim, tribal or not tribal, without any scope for partial and contextual identifies.

This idea has been put in the sphere of operational democracy by Partha Chatterjee. One ideal espoused by modern democracies everywhere is that all citizens bear equal rights and are full and equal participants in civil society. In reality, this ideal is never fully realized. One major reason is the overlap and confusion between the concepts of ‘citizens’ and that of ‘population groups.’ Everywhere around the world, the citizens of democratic nation-states are segregated by disparities in wealth, class, and education. Describing this division particularly in the context of India, Partha Chatterjee uses the terms “citizens” and “populations.” The former, benefitting from their privileges, utilize the instruments of civil society, such as voluntary organizations, NGOs, and the press, to address and interact with the formal institutions of the state. In contrast, “populations,” do not realistically have access to those mechanisms. They are categorized into quantifiable groups (such as those below the poverty line, or those residing in squatters’ colonies etc.) which are eventually subject to the control and welfare of the state and civil society. However, the legitimacy of the democratic state lies on the notion of popular sovereignty. Pragmatically, populations comprise vote banks that are crucial to the success of politicians. Populations can thus make demands— even illegal ones— that are heeded. They, therefore, operate not on the terrain of “civil society” but on what Chatterjee dubs “political society”.<sup>5</sup>

The Hindu middle-classes in these mixed neighborhoods identify themselves as belonging to the civil society which is however foregrounded on the basis of an imagined Hindu *bhadralok* identity. Hence, they culturally relate themselves to the imagined world of unbound serialities.

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<sup>5</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed :Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, (New York:Columbia University Press, 2004).chapter 1 and 2

But this entails lamentation for their loss of privilege with the ‘rise’ of the popular and rise of ‘mediocrity’ (pointing to the Muslims) in contemporary political space. This is not at all a recent development. This is comparable to what happened to them in East Pakistan with decolonization and Partition. As already mentioned, a considerable section of Hindu memoirs evoke a sense of confusion about why the Muslim population of East Bengal turned against their Hindu neighbors. The memoirs of Hindu migrants generally do not bring up coherent answers:

And our Muslim neighbours? For eons we have lived next to them sharing each other's happiness and suffering, but did they feel the slightest bit of sadness in letting us go? (Ramchandrapur, Sylhet)<sup>6</sup>

They pointed out how lands of East Pakistan must have been feeling barren and lonely once the Hindus were gone. A letter from upper-caste middle-class Hindu *bhadralok* refugee from Senhati (East Pakistan) to the West Bengal government showcases their attachments to their *bhite*/ancestral land by dint of their cultural merit.<sup>7</sup> They complained:

Senhati is one of the most advanced and reputed village in education, culture, public welfare work. It had 6000 villagers where majority was middle-class. Senhati had high court judge, barrister, magistrate district judges, lawyers, professors, physicians, and other learned professionals. About a month ago steamer loads of refugees from Calcutta were disembarked at Senhati and they (Muslims) occupied almost all of the houses by removing the existing residents and breaking the locks. The villagers left their home and hearth in panic, could not even carry valuable movables. These refugees have not only occupied houses but also *mandaps* where regular worship was held. It is also reported that cows are being killed in Hindu houses to utter disregard of the sentiments of the Hindus. In the present context of things, Durga puja celebration seems impossible.

Hence the appellants wanted the Muslim refugees to be removed from the village not only for asserting occupational rights, but also for recovery of temples and places of worship “that have not been desecrated so far, may immediately be protected from further acts of sacrilege”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Dipesh Chakraborty, “Remembered Village: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition”, in *Inventing Boundaries*, pp321

<sup>7</sup> *Representation of Villagers of Senhati, District of Khulna*, Home Pol CR B April 1954 25-31, WBSA

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

This letter lying unceremoniously at the state archives resonated with the spirit of the writers of 'Chhere Asha Graam'. The 'native village' is pictured as both sacred and beautiful, and it is this that makes communal violence an act of both violation and defilement, an act of sacrilege against everything that stood for sacredness and beauty in Hindu-Bengali understanding of what home was. But one thing is clear: nothing in this combination had anything much to do with the Muslim pasts of Bengal. Muslims are mentioned in these essays; indeed, their depiction is critical to the depiction of an idyll, but their 'traditions' are not part of the sacred or of the beautiful. In the first chapter, I have demonstrated what the Hindu refugees meant by losing their homes. This nationalist construction of 'home' was a Hindu home. There is not a single sentence in the memories described in *Chhere Asha Gram* on how Islamic ideas of the sacred might have been of value to the Muslims in creating their own idea of a homeland or indeed how they might have helped create a sense of home for Bengalis as a whole.

In this connection, I would like to mention an interesting anecdote found in Annada Shankar Ray's memoir.<sup>9</sup> He was invited by Maulana Bhasani<sup>10</sup> to a conference in Kagmari village in East Pakistan in the mid-1950s, along with some other litterateurs. Ray could not make it but Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay was among the invitees who attended the conference.<sup>11</sup> Bandyopadhyay recounted his experiences to Ray and shared what Maulana Bhasani had told them. Pointing his finger towards the village, Bhasani once said, "See how everything is dark and silent everywhere. When Hindus lived here, there used to be *kirtan*, *bhajan*, and various

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<sup>9</sup> Annada Shankar Ray (1904-2002), a Gandhian, was a senior bureaucrat in the Indian Civil Services. He is an extremely popular essayist, poet and litterateur among the Bengali speaking population. I have used his *memoir Juktobager Smriti O Muktabanger Smriti* published by Mitra & Ghosh in 2022 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) in this portion.

<sup>10</sup> Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani (1880-1976) was a prominent political leader in East Pakistan and Bangladesh and had foundational role in the leadership of the Awami League.

<sup>11</sup> Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (1898-1971) was another legendary Bengali novelist and wrote widely on the themes including communal riots, war, famine, the political implications of economic inequality, the independence movement, social conditions, the conflict of modernism with traditionalism etc.

festivals. There used to be lights. The Hindus have left this place. With them, the festive spirit also departed. Can't they return again?"<sup>12</sup> Ray has referred to this incident more than once throughout the book which implies that Bhasani's words deeply affected him. He spoke fondly of his Bengali Muslim friends who were noted intellectuals in Bangladesh. But he was a man of great stature and great connections. The people I deal with in this chapter are much closer to the ground.

In fact, the tales of the migrant Bengali refugees are also not my focus of inquiry here but their experiences form a strong foundational methodological background for this chapter. Coming back to the city, this chapter attempts to get hold of the quotidian experiences of Hindu residents in Calcutta's Muslim 'ghettos', the limits of their accommodation and tolerance through localized historical and ethnographic focus. Everyday lives play out through a variety of freedoms and constraints which unfold upon and through specific spaces. Homes, offices, parks, shopping malls, streets, footpaths, *bazaars*— those threads that bind cities are crucibles of urban social life.<sup>13</sup> The following interviews should be seen as glimpses of a slice of life of the Hindu residents, which is primarily focused on how they perceive the self and the other in their mundane routinized fields. In the previous chapter, it was discussed how neighborhoods ensure warmth of homeliness against the violence of the urban. But for Hindu residents, this statement works in reverse.

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<sup>12</sup> Ray, *Juktobager Smriti O Muktabanger Smriti* (Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh, 2022).p145

<sup>13</sup> Sanjay Srivastava, *Masculinity, Consumerism, and the Post-National Indian City: Streets, Neighbourhoods, Home* (Cambridge:CUP, 2022). pp 1-10

## **Boundaries Within: Hindu Homes in the Mixed Neighborhoods**

Mina Nandy is a 71 year old Bengali lady who has lived in Bene Para Lane, Jannagar Road, Park Circus since her birth.<sup>14</sup> Only recently she has shifted to Salt Lake. This is primarily because the older residence was a rented property. I asked her who was the owner of her erstwhile residence. She replied, “He was a Bengali. Benepara region is a Bengali region.” Enquired farther, she clarified that by ‘Bengali’, she meant ‘Hindus’ only. The Muslims stayed either in the slums situated mostly in the neighboring periphery, or in small ill-maintained houses in large numbers. She could not avoid these places as they were en-route to her visit to the doctor’s chamber. But she never felt comfortable at the sites of Muslims living in such proximity. However, she said that despite living in a mixed zone, she had never felt the brunt of the 1964 riots nor the 1992 riots. She had witnessed processions and meetings of Muslims during those days but never had to experience any sort of violence. In fact, despite staying together for years, she has no idea how a typical Muslim lifestyle is. She was a member of yoga club in the neighborhood where many Muslim women also visited. She made some friends there as well, but she felt uneasy around those wearing *burkhas*. Otherwise, she had normal interactions and even shared jokes with other Muslims. It might be inferred that the sight of people being visibly Muslim perhaps created a sort of ontological barrier for Mrs. Nandy. She had always wondered how the Muslims practised Namaz even during yoga Classes. The feeling of estrangement did not go away even when she got invitations to attend Muslim family functions. She observed that, their choice of recipes, alignment of rooms, taste in decorating houses were significantly different. She had one Muslim school friend named Bilkis. She enjoyed her company but never felt comfortable in her home. She sternly criticized their dressing sense as well, stating, “*jholla jholla jamakapor pore, eksom*

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<sup>14</sup> Interview on 20.11.2021

*bhalo lagena/* they wear over the top dressing suits, I don't like them at all." She described the whole area surrounding the Chittaranjan Hospital as 'awkward' and 'uncomfortable'. Eventually she started to express strong communal perceptions about the Muslims, which were not simply limited to disliking their drawing rooms or bed sheets. Her voices were echoed by other respondents as well.

Khidirpur once could boast of thriving middle-class residences in its neighborhoods, belonging to both Hindus and Muslims. However, they are internally marked with limited interaction between Hindu and Muslim spaces. Manish Bera, a 43 year old Bengali, has family business of clothes in the locality.<sup>15</sup> He stays in Avidipta Park, a predominantly Hindu *para*, also marking a sort of demarcation line from Muslim areas. He lives in his ancestral home which is more than 100 years old. He spontaneously referred to immense and unbridgeable cultural differences with Muslim areas. They are *nongra/* 'filthy', the inhabitants are of extreme nature/ *ugro*, they are uneducated/*ashikkhito*, and absolutely impossible for any kind of intermingling. He said, "Those areas are congested, dotted with illegal construction, and hence, very unhygienic/*aswashthokor*". When I asked whether this was true for all Muslims or only for those in the slum areas, he asserted that even the middle-class Muslims keep their surroundings in filthy condition. He emphasized, "*Baire ta eto nongra je gaa ghinghin kore*"/ the outside of the houses are so dirty that I feel I need to throw up."

Mrs. Mina Nandy similarly told me how she felt nauseated when she had to share her seats in a public transport with a *burkha*-clad women. Exactly the same sensation of nausea is described by Mr. Manoj Mishra, a school teacher of Hindi language who is originally from

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<sup>15</sup> Interview on 1/7/21

Beneras but shifted to Khidirpur for professional reasons.<sup>16</sup> He, like Manish Bera and Mina Nandy, neatly divided his neighborhood into limits of Hindu and Muslim occupational and living spaces. Such division is not simply out of cartographical necessity; the borders become the sites of cultural contentions. Hence the Muslim dominated areas, for Mishra, are invariably congested, filthy, stinking and inaccessible. The dust-bins of the municipality are rarely used as they prefer to litter openly. The lack of civic sense among the lower orders of the Muslims generates a sense of cultural superiority among the Hindus.

However unlike Nandy, Manish Bera has different views while discussing the aspiration of Muslim neighbors. He describes about how in the last few decades, formal education has increasingly become popular among the Muslims. The first generation Muslim learners needed home tutors for better guidance and often employed Hindus. Manish Bera has taught in many Muslim houses, he had always been received with utmost dignity. Though he appreciates such gesture, he feels education ultimately has limited reach for Muslims. On the other hand, Swarup Saha is another respondent from Khidirpur area who lives near St. Thomas School amidst Hindu neighbors.<sup>17</sup> . He also owns a shop at the Fancy Market which is almost 30 years old. It has two Hindu and one Muslim employees. The latter had been working there since 1981. He said generally Hindu shops do not allow Muslim employees as idols and images of Hindu deities are always kept inside the shops. They prevent the recruitment of Muslims to resist the sacred space inside from getting ‘polluted.’ After telling me how he perceived the Muslim areas in exactly the same way as the others, he said that the Muslims never prioritize education. They always resort to ‘*churichaamaari*’<sup>18</sup>/ unlawful activities to get easy returns. However, for him, this is not true

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<sup>16</sup> Interview on 5/6/21

<sup>17</sup> Interview on 3/6/21

<sup>18</sup> a term loaded with casteist indignation

for Bengali-speaking Muslims. There are hardly any cultural differences between a Bengali Hindu and a Bengali Muslim. The Hindi-speaking Muslims of Rajabazar, Park Circus, and Khidirpur have a different way of living and life choices and it is impossible to have any nexus with them. Though all my interviewees more or less mentioned this distinction between Bengali and Hindi speaking Muslims, this did not influence their judgment on their relationship with the Muslims as a whole.

For example, Manish Bera holds that education might help them for upward mobility but they are closely tied with injunctions from their religion. It creates hindrance to be truly 'modern', to be truly likeable. Swarup Saha too says that often the Muslims climb up the social ladder through easy money unaccompanied by 'cultural upliftment.' So they remain very orthodox and hardly follow proper etiquette in social life. The educated middle-class urban Hindus suffer from a sort of collective amnesia that their visits to temples, occasional pilgrimages, weekly fasts or ritual avoidance of meat, or worshipping the household deities thrice a day, do not make them non-claimants to modernity. Arranged marriages are rarely inter-caste even today. Almost every life events of a Hindu has to be sanctioned by a Brahmin priest (several homely sacraments or *Pujo* after birth of a baby, marriage, death, *grihaprabesh*/house warming and so on) on supposedly 'auspicious' days.

Conversation with Bera brought out the fear he has in his mind of the Muslim neighbors. It relates to the specific combination of stigmatization and emulation of the threatening 'Other' as pointed by Christophe Jaffrelot in his multiple volumes on Hindu Nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Bera mentions the unity in Muslim brotherhood so much so that the 'whole gang' assembles in no time in any

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<sup>19</sup>C. Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007). p9, also see *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s : Strategies of Identity-building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with Special Reference to Central India)* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999).

moment of conflict. Such unity is ‘threatening’ for Bera. To combat the threat, he thinks of emulating the pattern. Thus, he laments that such cohesion is missing among the Hindus which is the major reason for instilling in them the fear of the minorities. This supposed lack of unity has been keeping the Hindus behind in the race. He speaks in a concerned voice: “*Amra picchiye porchhi.*”/ We are lagging behind.

Manoj Mishra relates to the idea of lagging behind with his experience of gathering data for Census, an additional duty ascribed to the government school teachers. He gives out some curious ‘data’: Northern Kolkata might have a few Hindu dominated pockets, but 90% of these areas are filled with Muslims. Hence, according to him, Kolkata has a minimum of 50% Muslim population. I tried to show him census data through decades where they are not even close to 30%, he refused to believe me! Living in Muslim dominated neighborhoods resulted in a myopic vision for Mishra, the presence of Muslims is overwhelming for him to realize the bigger picture. Muslims are no longer a national minority to him (or to the other Hindu respondents). This is further manifested in his remarks on the provision of scholarship for minority students. Among the state government’s several measures to provide scholarships to all kinds of students, some are, of course, oriented towards the minority. This is in consonance with what a welfare state does to ensure greater participation of its less privileged groups. Manoj Mishra is highly critical of such exclusive benefits which, according to him, might lead to enmity between students from a very tender age.

The feeling of lagging behind is endorsed by the notion of ‘appeasement policy’ or ‘pro-Muslim’ policy of the state government. The local network of Muslims is strengthened by political

leaders, whose voices and aspirations have more value than those of others.<sup>20</sup> According to Swarup Saha, these areas are breeding spaces of organized crime and the state government keeps mum despite everything. This legitimizes the claim of the BJP to garner Hindu votes and encourage communal polarization. Cultural elitism and arrogance of *bhadralok* class is further reflected in another comment by Manish Bera: “*Age oder eto buddhi chhilona/* earlier they did not have much intelligence...this is a recent gift from political favouritism.”

This implies that it is not at all expected of the Muslims to have a greater presence in the social fabric of the urban milieu through their own agency. This is again validated by their ‘rigorous relationship with their religious life’ as a cultural other of truly rational and modern beings like the Hindus. This is in line with what the Hindu Right tries to portray through its propaganda: a brazen division of India into the civilized (Hindus) and the barbarian (Muslims). The former are said to be educated/potentially educable and rational. And the latter is declared congenitally incapable of attaining these conditions, and unwilling even to try.<sup>21</sup> The civilized are concerned about the problem of rapid population growth, and attentive to hygiene, science and needs of medicine. The barbarians choose to live in ghettos, dirty, over-crowded, and unventilated; they multiply like rabbits, and spread filth and disease. For all these reasons, the pronouncement goes, on account of their innate religious bigotry and aggressiveness, the Muslims are a source of grave danger to society, 'modernity', 'civilization'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The fact of the matter is that the ruling class and centrist parties have been 'soft' towards both 'majority' and 'minority', depending upon their calculation of political advantage at different times and in different places. In order to win votes, political parties across the board have pandered to some of the worst instincts of chauvinist 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Sikh' forces.

<sup>21</sup> This is in tandem with what Joya Chatterji wrote regarding the *bhadralok's* perception of the Muslims in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Refer to chapter 1.

<sup>22</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'Which of Us are Hindus?' in G. Pandey ed. *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today*, (New Delhi: Viking, 1993) pp238-268

“Poisa and Politics”/ money and political privilege is a deadly combination for any Muslim, opined Mr. and Mrs. Halder, from Mollapara, Mahendra Roy Lane (outskirts of Park Circus). Halder family is a middle-aged couple whose earlier generation came from East Pakistan against the backdrop of communal violence. Originally the locality had similar refugee households, now like any other areas, it is changing its contour. Old houses are gone, new apartments spring up every other day. Earlier, Mrs. Mina Nandy told me that keeping a Muslim maid in house was out of question. But the Halders could not maintain this stance. They grudgingly told me, “What would we do without them? Our maid is a Muslim, the *sabji* vendors, fruit vendors all are Muslims! We have to depend on them.” They are expanding their numbers fast and capturing more living spaces. They start encroachment with a ‘mosque and a *Mazhar*’ and then build up their settlements in a new neighborhood. The Halder couple said how they feel inhibited while crossing the road when Muslims offer their *namaz*. They echoed Mina Nandy while expressing the inexplicable discomfort as they look at the Islamic patterns of performing daily activities. The *korbani*/ sacrifice during *Eid* makes their days miserable, they can never imagine to be a part of such festivities. They might have been neighbors since the 1950s, but they never wished to have close bonding with them whatsoever.

Thus, Manish Bera repeats that the Hindus in these neighborhoods are increasingly becoming more ‘ghettoized’ and more cornered. They feel cheated ‘in their own land’. The only option they now have is to move out of these areas, which are conveniently branded as negative spaces. Mrs. Halder says, “How can I live peacefully knowing my neighbor is a Muslim? I want to move out to a place where I don’t have to face any of them regularly.”

These respondents wish to sell their houses to Muslim buyers who nevertheless provide better prices for these areas. Moving out is also a response to the over-all decline of respectability of

these neighborhoods. They feel that the local schools which two-three decades back attracted students from ‘cultured educated families’, now no longer do so. The respondents can no longer send their children to these schools because the upwardly mobile Muslim children constitute their major roll strength. The Muslims now might have money, but they lack the ‘finesse’ of ‘*bhadralok* culture’, a culture that is essentially Hindu, elite and upper caste. Swarup Saha says clearly that the source of money to the Muslims is dubious. They operate around a sort of ‘dark economy’, no wonder their offspring are bereft of proper ‘culture.’ Hence children of Hindu gentrified families/ *bhadrabarir santaan* can no longer adjust to these changes, neither is this desirable. Manoj Mishra says that ‘decent’ Muslim households are simply a microscopic minority in Khidirpur which is otherwise dominated by ‘*tapori log*’ or lumpens. Hence, intermingling is not possible at all. Similarly, Metiabruz has a few wealthy Muslim businessmen who can still maintain decorum in their public and private lives, but majority of the Muslims are nothing short of barbarians. Mishra talks about a downward movement of decency among the Muslims which is proportional to the distance it has from urban centers of Kolkata. Hence, according to him, the Muslims of Mominpur are quintessentially and unconditionally bad.

His statement is in opposition to what I found through the experiences of Ashok Mullick and his family in Kanchantala, Ward number 141, Kolkata 700044 (nearest Rail-station is Santoshpur in Budgebudge Route).<sup>23</sup> He could trace his family history up to 300 years back, identifies himself from *Tafshili* category, and as original settlers of the land. My findings from Hindus in the city so far have revealed a considerable amount of communal apathy and intolerance. Often the xenophobic responses pushed provided a different scenario. Though on paper the area is under Kolkata Municipality, it looks nothing like a city. It has elaborate old houses inhabited by

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<sup>23</sup> Interview on 23/9/222

extended families in idyllic settings. The buildings are not congested. Often water bodies, bushes and gardens act as dividers. The narrow lanes are covered with tall coconut trees. There was hardly any person by mid-afternoon on a weekday in the locality. Mr. Mullick said that the Muslim neighbors are majorly tailors/*darji*, under whom Hindu boys and girls learn as apprentices. They are the major suppliers of clothes to the weekly *haat*/market in Metiabruz. Apart from agriculture and brick kilns, tailoring forms the backbone of the local economy. This area has majorly Bengali and a few Bihari Muslims, but they do not evoke communal paranoia. His words were affirmed by his neighbors also. They told me spontaneously, “Problems with Muslims? Never thought in that way. We frequent each other’s houses regularly.” The nephew of Mr. Mullick is a local school teacher. He invites his Muslim students for having ‘*bhog*’ / ritual food offering on the day of Saraswati Puja. The local police arrange inter-community meetings before Durga Puja to ensure safety and peace during those days. Mr. Mullick emphasizes the growth of education among Muslim girls while the boys still prefer to earn early. He and his son both agree that the Muslims have more cash in hand, but this is not due to their involvement in some ‘dark economy’. This is because, they start earning early; they choose all sorts of jobs and are more hard-working. While Hindu boys spend their time on mobile phones or chatting unproductively in the neighborhoods, and have certain reservations doing menial jobs, the Muslims in the area are different. Yes, they are deeply pious, their celebrations, their cultural programs, even quiz competitions are focused solely on religious matters. This does not mean they are not eligible for friendship. The responses from Mullick family do not, therefore, fit in the narrative that I have received from the other mixed areas in the city. The people of his immediate neighborhood in Santoshpur are living together separately, accepting each other’s

differences and life choices, and maintaining over all tolerance. This is not utopic or too much to ask for. But situating it in the larger framework, it truly feels outwardly.

I visited Santoshpur in more than one occasion and I met with people from its various neighborhoods. While Ashok Mullick's locality at Kanchantala which is just beside the mighty Ganges evoked a picture of peaceful co-existence, it became clear that not all neighborhoods in the area share the same peaceful atmosphere. This was directly demonstrated when I met a group of school teachers at Hazi Ratan More, around three kilometers away from Santoshpur rail-station. Initially, Samsuddin Purkait, who has been living in the same region, talked about friendly cohabitation between communities.<sup>24</sup> His name sounds peculiar which contains both Hindu and Muslim nomenclature. According to him, his ancestor got converted to Islam only after Nawab Wazid Ali Shah reached Metiabruz with his entourage. He runs a small private school in Santoshpur in which around eight young Bengali Muslim girls are employed as teachers. All of them are from the same locality. The only Hindu employee is a middle-aged woman who lives in Rabindranagar, hardly two kilometers away. The girls spoke to me confidently about the recent political situation and said that despite provocations, their region remained peaceful. The complete take-over of Trinamool Congress Party by replacing the CPM in all posts has mitigated the risk of communal threats. Due to continuous one-party rule, communal tension is not significant. Existence of the BJP is nominal, and whatever sporadic violence happens, it is only due to political instigations. In fact, in the Muslim shops of Akra Phatak (around one and half kilometers away), Hindu employees are preferred for their educational background. For example, Mr Mullick's son is a full time recruit by one such

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<sup>24</sup> The interview took place in his school with the teachers on 29/12/23

Muslim businessman. He says proudly, “I control his entire shop and warehouse; I am the one-in-all/ *amar haatei sob kichu*’.

However, the middle-aged school teacher from Rabindranagar, another neighborhood within Santoshpur region, could not boast of such happy state of beings. She said that in her *para*, no Muslim is ever allowed to trade a property. They are even forbidden to hire the local banquet hall for marriages and other social functions. This often leads to contestation between stakeholders and often, the police have to intervene to solve the disputes. One of my Hindu respondents of Park Circus asked her relative who stays in Rabindranagar area to communicate with me directly regarding Hindu-Muslim relationship in his neighborhoods. He felt unsafe to contact me directly. Instead, he sent voice recordings to her, which were then sent to me. The unknown face claimed that he was in his mid-30s and had witnessed widespread changes in his region. He began his discussion saying, how in the early 1990s, there used to be a thriving Hindu Bengali business community as well as government servants in his area. The Muslims were mainly menial workers such as well-diggers, plumbers, rickshaw-pullers, and construction workers. Further, there were the *ostagars* who invested in garment business and recruited poorer Muslim tailors. In fact, the garment industry is still very popular in this belt. When he was an infant, Babri Riots happened in Calcutta. This was the first time he realised that everything was not right between the communities. He talked about Farooq, a known face to him, who used to have many non-Muslim friends. But it was suddenly found out that he urinated in a nearby Hindu temple during the riots and was arrested by police. But this was all temporary. Overall, peace prevailed in this region. But considerable change in the situation happened in the first decade of the millennium. The narrator mentioned that he suddenly found an upsurge of Bihari Muslim migrants settling here, especially around Santoshpur and Akra. Many Hindu *bhadralok* started moving out of

these localities and chose nearby areas which had Hindu residents. They sold their houses at 'jaw dropping' prices to the *ostagars*. For the Hindus, it was almost impossible to resist such lucrative selling offers. Their cultural alienation was compensated by the rising prices in land and resale houses. This would slowly change the demography of the region. However, there came a time when a Hindu family found that all his neighbors had turned into Muslims. In such a situation, he would try to leave soon and sell his property at a throw-away price. Thus, the narrator talked about a sort of planned colonization of neighborhoods by Muslim businessmen which has led to 'exodus' of Hindus. The Hindu Bengalis primarily chose Parnasree and Behala as their next suitable abodes. Meanwhile, inter-community relationship declined considerably. For example, the maids in the narrator's (who sent me the voice-notes anonymously via his relative) house were Muslims who worked for years. Suddenly, they started coming up in *burkhas*. The narrator was taken aback at how, all of a sudden, they all became *par-purush*/ unknown men to their maids. In retaliation, the Bengali Hindus too decided to counter the Islamic propaganda. They built cooperatives which denied selling of property to non-Muslims.

Accommodation and tolerance is not lost for all. The Hindus in some parts of Khidirpur pay donations for Muharram customarily; the Muslims too come forward if any Hindu family needs some kind of assistance. In fact Manish Bera's locality showed exemplary peace during Babri riots, no single Hindu temple was harmed. But that does not mean Hindus could remain complacent. The old mosques in these areas were in bad shape, now they are conspicuously renovated. Almost all of them are multistoried and nothing less than a palace in grandeur. Manish Bera echoed the oft-heard traditional majoritarian anxiety of 'Hindus in siege'. He says that priorities of the Hindus are not being heeded. Soon there would be no Durga Pujo in

Kolkata. Once again he overlooks how Durga Pujo in recent years has actually attained a pompous show of wealth and grandeur in every pockets of the city. Mina Nandy also laments in a similar vein about how Hindus are leaving the old neighborhoods resulting in fewer number of Durga Pujos every year! Even the neighborhood temples are no longer sacred. Clumsy bazaar and dingy bustees have occupied their boundaries. Thus, the Hindu spaces in these areas, both temporal and psychological, are shrinking rapidly. Swarup Saha even goes further. He says, his neighborhood has a rule for promoters for not selling flats to any Muslim families. This is their desperate attempt to save their *para* from Muslim aggression.

There is more to it sanctioned by incessant propaganda of Hindutva bodies which is accepted by the docile Hindu minds in these areas. This is related to the muddy terrains of ‘love jihad’ popularized by the Hindu Mahasabha, the Hindu Samhati and the Sangh. Manoj Mishra says how Hindu girls find the ‘robust’ Muslim boys difficult to resist. The Muslims in these areas now have plenty of *knacha poisa*/ liquid cash, unlike their previous generations. The Hindu girls are duped with visits to shopping malls, exciting bike rides and fancy restaurants. According to Mishra, such lucrative amusements are yet not so popular in cultured Hindu families. The young girls thus fall prey to these attractions and ‘sacrifice themselves’ to these boys who generally date them with a false Hindu name. Often after secret marriages, she gets to learn that she has married a Muslim and then there is hardly any way to get back. These events are meticulously planned and not mere accidents. ‘Some Muslim extremist organizations’ carefully look after these nexuses as marrying a Hindu woman is equivalent to attending a Haj!’ The only way to resist this depends on effective and strict parenting within Hindu families; they must keep their daughters in check since they hit adolescence. Manish Bera similarly says that incidents of Love Jihad are definitely on the rise, poor Bengali girls easily fall for the outward glamour/*chakchikya*

of young Muslims, only to have disastrous consequences. Thus, Islam is said to pose a threat to Hindus not only through tools of fear, but also through attraction. Muslims seduce the Hindus through propaganda, lies, money, and the promise of a better life. In this way, a certain stereotype of vile and virile Muslim masculinity is conjured that performs the function of the constitutive Other against which the new Hindu Self is roused. The Hindu households try to hold on to traditional Victorian morality with a consciously asexual discourse; 'the Muslim' on the other hand, has a conspicuous dimension of porno-sexuality compared to the ordinary young Hindu male.<sup>25</sup>

I asked Manish Bera whether he can foresee a strong, secular, non-communal, tolerant, united and accommodative neighborhood in coming years. He shook his head in suspicion. He said the way the Muslims are 'spreading their tentacles', Khidirpur would be lost to the Muslims by next 30 years. For him, Khidirpur is like a hot cauldron. Even the BJP might not be able to teach the Muslims a lesson here. Similarly Mrs. Nandy spoke with concern, how Hindu dominated Benepara would soon transform into another Rajabazar, already infamous as mini-Pakistan.

Restraint was a rare phenomenon once I could gain trust of the respondents in these localities. Only those few either actively linked with Leftist politics or at least having someone in family practicing left politics use careful words of caution while narrating their stories. Mr. Arijit Guha works in Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC) and is a party member of the CPI(M).<sup>26</sup> He is born and brought up entirely in Park Circus region. He belongs to a refugee family, his grandmother came here from Dhaka to avoid communal disturbances. They stayed together with his paternal uncle until gradually his other family members joined and took up business here. I

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<sup>25</sup> Dibyesh Anand, *Hindu nationalism in India and Politics of Fear*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). see chapter 3 for more detailed discussion

<sup>26</sup> Interview on 22.3.2023

asked whether they felt inhibited coming back to a Muslim-dominated neighborhood again. He said that these areas had been more cosmopolitan back then as a few Sikh and Christian families stayed here as well. However the 'raees' or the elite had always been the Muslims while the slum areas had both Hindu and Muslim populations. Arijit invoked the familiar tropes of idyllic syncretic past nevertheless. He lamented how the Hindus and Muslims used to take active part in forming Puja Committees and feasting together during Eids. He was, however, careful to mention 'fine differences' between Bengali and Hindi speaking Hindus and Muslims in terms of cultural habitations and material lifestyle. Often these result in invisible competition between the communities regarding showcasing piety and outward cultural expressions. Arijit confidently spoke of lack of persecution complex among the city Muslims, even after the Babri Riots. For him, antagonism started only after the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when the BJP came to power with a thumping majority. He tried to convince me with myths of unity of the working class against communal biases. The Rightist government always targets the unity which leads to breakdown of inter-communal harmony and faith. I countered it with recent examples of communal disturbances perpetrated by Jute Mill workers in Hoogly. The narrative then moved to manipulations of political parties to garner Hindu votes. The workers have to comply with them to sustain their livelihood. He said, "*Peter Daaye Jai Shri Ram Bolte Hoy*"/ workers chant 'Jai Shri Ram' to maintain their living.

He echoed the mainstream leftist narrative of relegating the importance of religious choices to private sphere only. It is, as if, people are not communal; neither they have the agency to be so. They are manipulated to develop anti-Muslim feelings by political parties for vested interests. It is nothing but 'false consciousness' which could be easily wiped away.

This evokes the next question. Does that mean that people in Bengal are not truly communal? Arijit's reply was a case in point. He accepted that Calcutta had witnessed violent riots earlier, and that the city had been home for thousands of the unfortunate Hindu migrants who took shelter with their harrowing experiences of violence from East Bengal. But the CPI(M) regime for 34 years has been successful to keep communal sensibilities within check: "*samprodayikata ke payer niche chepe rekhechhilo.*"

This logically leads to the assumption that once the power of the CPI(M) waned, communalism raised its ugly head. There might not have been significant communal riots during its rule, but it could, in no way, contain discriminatory feelings of the majority towards the Muslims. After a bit of persuasion, Arijit accepted that the Left had never taken the issue seriously. Communalism was curtailed just outwardly. It always existed in covert ways. Intermixing has been limited by forming joint Pujo Committees and sharing Biryani platters during Eid. The Left had never attempted to know their neighbors beyond these boundaries. The secular discourse was entertained on paper but it was never practised at the popular level. Hence it could not resist the force of Rightist conservative propaganda in recent years. It never even attempted to organize systematic ideological exercises to counter social superstitions and communal discourses. The Left hardly cultivated the 'intellectual rigour' among the general masses, their study circles had limited appeal to them, that too declined in numbers considerably after the CPI(M) got comfortable in power.

What emerges from these discussions is that the way individuals interact with their neighbors often stems from how they were raised, whether they have any memories of childhood trauma, and what kind of political discourse prevailed in their family, among other factors. Before concluding this section on ethnography, I would like to consider a recently published memoir by

Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay, a faculty in the Department of History in West Bengal State University.<sup>27</sup> Though she specifically talks about her childhood and adolescence in the 1980s and 1990s when she lived with her parents in Park Circus, the scope of the memoir often transgresses generational barriers. Her account not only reflects on her personal memories and those recounted by her parents and neighbors, but also sheds light on broader societal themes. Mukhopadhyay offers readers a profound glimpse into the intersection of personal history and collective memory within the fabric of her neighborhood.

The narrator identifies space and time as the principal characters in her narrative. She writes a descriptive account of her neighborhood whose postal code is 700046. Her neighborhood, Gobra, spans across three burial grounds, some nameless/*benami* factories and a few lower class slum regions. Gobra lies on the eastern border of Park Circus which predominantly housed Muslim residents alongside some Hindu East Bengali refugees and a few convert Christians. Mukhopadhyay is unapologetic that her narrative largely is an outcome of collective memory and inter-generational history. She recalls how since her childhood she spent her time roaming in the nearby burial grounds. She found a number of tombs of those who lost their lives in the 1946 carnage. She observed how, during Islamic festivals, the tombs of the *Pirs*/Islamic holy saints were decorated and *halwai*/ sweets were distributed. She also grew up listening to stories of the 1964 Riots. There was hardly any family in the neighborhood that did not carry a *lathi* or a stick or took any part in the lootings. Osman, an Ashrafi Muslim from Uttar Pradesh, too, had his residence in the region. His sons were brilliant and successful; they all moved away from the dingy lanes and settled abroad. Osman was a close friend of the narrator's paternal grand-father who settled there after migrating from Faridpur in East Bengal. They played chess together and

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<sup>27</sup> Urvi Mukhopadhyay, Kolkata 46, (Kolkata:Gangchil, 2019).

lamented on the deplorable condition of the post-colonial nation state. Her grandmother hailed from an elite East Bengali family deeply involved in Swadesi politics. As an antidote to communal trouble, she often used to say, “Make everybody sit together, arrange a great meal, violence will end right away!” Indeed, the Muslim neighbors and friends had complete access to her kitchen where they often enjoyed a hearty meal without any fear of polluting a Hindu household. The narrator says, in return, they used to get the best quality mutton during Eid.

Mukhopadhyay also writes poignantly how several communal fault-lines occurred at a daily level. Zahir, a resident of Addibagan, a lower class and typically dingy and congested neighborhood, was a regular visitor to the Gobra library. He had passed his school level exam and was quite popular among the Hindu readers. One day, he came to the library wearing his skull cap after his Friday namaz. Suddenly, he could sense a different gaze from his co-readers. He could no longer chat with them as before and soon he left the library. From that day on, he seldom visited the library; even when he did, he never removed his cap again. Mukhopadhyay also mentioned that in 1987 during India vs Pakistan cricket at Eden Gardens Stadium, no one cheered for the Pakistani team even after their excellent win. One of her neighbors, Sankarda, who used to be shy and quiet, remarked bitterly, “Our girls are mad for Akram-Imran...they have sold the country to the Mollas.”<sup>28</sup>

Mukhopadhyay’s family fulfills all the criteria of an urban, highly educated, well-settled and well-to-do family with textbook middle-class values. A host of translated Russian literature was a constant companion in her childhood and teenage. Her family members were devout Marxists and inherently non-communal. One of her uncles was a doctor, greatly popular among the poor

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<sup>28</sup> Wasim Akram and Imran Khan were legendary Pakistani cricketers. Akram, a bowler, was active between 1984-2003 and Imran Khan was an all-rounder between 1974-1992. The latter also became the Prime Minister of Pakistan in 2018. In their youth they both enjoyed considerable female fan following.

Muslims of Addibagan, but the local Hindus seldom visited him except in the cases of dire emergency. They even wondered whether he was a hidden Muslim taking Hindu name only as a cover. His wife did not display traditional markers of marriage which aggravated such doubts. Mukhopadhyay mentions in detail how her family carefully avoided Hindu rituals in their daily lives, which made them somewhat ostracized in the neighborhood. She sensed a sort of alienation from her Hindu neighbors right from her childhood and faced many awkward questions. Thus, her experiences add another layer of internal partition within a small locality. Also, during the 1980s or early 1990s, the neighborhoods evoked considerable familiarity, the residents knew each other closely, the elders used to keep a watch on the younger generation, especially to prevent Hindu-Muslim romance. However, such ‘mishaps’ were not entirely absent, sometimes the parents accepted it grudgingly, sometimes such discords took shape of potential communal trouble.

Interestingly, Mukhopadhyay also talked about marking of borders through the local clubs and their zones of surveillance. In her locality, there was a Leftist club called Adarsha Sangha and another Congress-dominated club called Bipul Sangha. They had different zones of control—the local playing grounds and cultural activities were divided among them. The field under Bipul Sangha’s control was managed by a mosque and a madrasa committee. In the evenings, the boys could play there without any objection, but the young girls were always driven away by the local *murubbi*/leaders. Conversely, the girls could play safely in the field controlled by Adarsha Sangha. But Mukhopadhyay also reminded the readers that the most pertinent line of control was signified by the railway tracks—one side of it was the Hindu neighborhood, the other had the Muslim slums. Sometimes, a football match could bring the two localities closer but only if the outcome of the match was satisfactory. Otherwise, residents from both the sides would confront

each other with hockey sticks and wickets, only the local Mosque committee and local party members could quell the unrest.

Communal dynamics in the mixed neighborhoods are often unpredictable. Mukhopadhyay presents another intriguing piece of memory. In the early 1990s, two affluent Muslim gentlemen from Uttar Pradesh arrived in her neighborhood in search of a tomb of some *Pir*. After a few days of investigation, they found the tomb lying unceremoniously near a mosque. The Muslims then took the matter to the government to acquire permission to build a *Darga*. The Hindu *para* broke into protest: *Paray trahi trahi rob uthlo*. As it is, the *para* was dangerously close to the Muslim settlements, the *Para* itself housed many Muslim residents, it had Muslim burial grounds and mosques as well. Were these not enough symbols of profanity? There was a continuous gossip in the bazars and other public spaces about the perceived loss of living areas due to preponderance of the Muslims. The *darga* with a *mazhar* was built eventually. Soon, rumors spread that praying at the Mazhar brought good luck and fulfilled aspirations, particularly aiding romantic relationships. Quickly, both Hindus and Muslims, especially the younger generations, flocked to it. The area gained popularity as *Lalbabar Than* and became a bustling marketplace. However, in 2010, when another similar unknown burial place was ‘discovered’, the Hindu neighbors signed a petition and submitted it to the municipality. The police took control, called the area ‘disputed’ and barred entry of outsiders. In retaliation, the Muslims crossed the railway tracks, came to the Hindu *Para* to offer prayers and offerings to the newly discovered burial ground. They were resisted by the Hindus sparking a small-scale communal disturbance. The Rapid Action Force was called in and traffic was restricted to Park Circus Seven point crossing.

Mukhopadhyay’s memoir is a significant contribution in understanding the quotidian dynamics and micro-history of a cosmopolitan neighborhood in the decades of the 1980s-1990s, a period

which is generally looked at as ‘non-consequential’ so far as communal relationship is concerned. Being a professional historian by herself, she has been careful enough to find out the fault-lines and potential symbols of discord without eulogizing the myth of harmonious co-existence. Yet it should always be remembered that she hailed from a family which believed and practised Marxist liberal values, her parents and extended family members were highly qualified and already had a great exposure. Hence, the way she interacted with her Muslim neighbors and the way she perceived them should not be compared with the majoritarian discourse.

## **Conclusion**

Neighborhood, unlike many other social science concepts, is not abstract, but a ‘real collective level of lives as lived’.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of its legal or administrative designations, it is the residents themselves who, as social actors, transform an area within an urban settlement into a neighborhood. They make and remake the place by their exchanges with each other. These connections involve care and solidarity as well as conflict and hostility. They also involve clashing claims over the ownership and moral order of the neighborhood. The process of claim-making involves the dual process of collective remembrance as well as collective amnesia. Here memory acts as a complex process that carries and hides parts of the past while simultaneously modifying the content of what is being remembered. There is no unilinear access to the past, which is irrecoverable, and can only persist in a different space and time. For this reason, the narratives of memory are central to the construction of ‘imaginary geographies’ that exceed the

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<sup>29</sup> Hilal Alkan and Nazan Maksudyan eds. *Urban neighbourhood Formations: Boundaries, Narrations and Intimacies*, (New York:Routledge, 2020). p4

mere materiality of space. Memories become ingrained in the body, altering not only how individuals occupy physical space but also how they envision it during specific social contexts.

Therefore, for the Hindu neighbors, the repertoire of 'home' is not one-dimensional. It often does not provide immediate solace and warmth as against the outer world. The liberal accommodative outlook of staying together in proximity with the Muslims is indeed rarely seen among the respondents. As it is, Muslims are not encouraged at all to have a home in Hindu areas. Now, in these mixed pockets also, inner boundaries are coming up fast. The Hindu neighborhoods are forming cooperative-like structures, obviously constitutionally unsanctioned, to prevent local Muslims from renting and buying property in their areas. On the other hand, some are selling off their property at high prices to Muslims and moving away to more 'gentrified' localities such as Behala, Garia and obviously New Town. The gated communities, wide and well maintained streets and relatively cleaner and quiet neighborhood attract them greatly and give them an illusion of living with like-minded people.

Thus for the middle-class Hindus, who see themselves as the majority, as the one with power by dint of their number and richer 'cultural capital', their discourses of staying in these Muslim-dominated pockets act as a conflict between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless for prestige and status. With political changes over the years, as the dominant discourse started to revolve around the primordial identity sentiments, this divisive everydayness is becoming regular and reified. The fundamentalist forces have created a situation where a) riots and riot memories have come alive along with b) mutual avoidance and consolidation of community sentiments which have resulted in c) politico-religious alignment of both the communities. This has not only

driven out the secular democratic forces out of the socio-political spectrum but also made their line of arguments irrelevant, unappealing and outdated. Increasing politicization of hitherto under-represented and under-privileged Muslims in these neighborhoods have bred collective xenophobia among the Hindu neighbors. They miss the familiar docility of the minority. The nexus of 'paisa' (money) and 'politics' is something that the orthodox Hindu middle-classes avoid consciously to keep their cultural superiority unpolluted, no matter how much they lament the loss of both (and how, given an opportunity, they run after both). The onset of real estate promoting business in the 1990s has changed the cityscape to a great extent. One cannot ignore the supposed 'Arabization' of certain parts in these localities. Lack of political secular discourse and social practices have further encouraged the schisms between communities. In short, multiple forces have snowballing effect on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in mixed neighborhoods. Manish Bera's concluding words represent this hopeless times. After an hour long interview, Manish thinks, whether, what he has said so far sounded intensely communal. He questioned himself, "Do I sound too xenophobic?" He then tried to reason out his feelings. He said, "Whatever I am feeling might not be beneficial to the society in the long run. But trust me, I can't resist myself. The moment I step out of my home, these thoughts come back. I have lost my neighborhood open space where I used to play during my childhood. We as a community have lost to them due to their sheer numbers. I can't help myself being communal."

On the other spectrum, there are definitely certain attempts by informed educated citizens to demystify the notion of negative neighborhoods and stigmas in regard to places like Khidirpur, Metiabruz or Park Circus. They conduct heritage walks involving discussions between Hindus and Muslims regarding many inter-community issues and everyday practices. These attempts are promising, but as a researcher, I have some concern. Often after these discussions, the

participants end up planning how to organize a food walk in these areas, suddenly realizing their cosmopolitan character. Thanks to the youtube food vloggers, places like Zakaria Street remain extremely crowded during the month of Ramzan. This, in turn, leads to the branding of these neighborhoods with a cover of 'exotica': it is like discovering the undiscovered through happy and glossy events; avoiding the everyday. This does not lead to greater understanding of inter-community relationship at all; they hardly debunk communal stereotypes and myths, and can often lead to birth of new discourses in us/them binaries. Therefore, with increasing Right Wing propaganda, maintaining the plurality and multiplicity of the city remains a matter of grave concern.

## VI.

### RE-ORDERING THE CITY: THE BABRI RIOTS AND ITS LONG TERM RAMIFICATIONS

I got to know about the demolition on 6<sup>th</sup> December only after entering the office. Slowly, the news spread to other parts of the city. At that time, I stayed in a rented house in Kudghat. My colleagues asked me not to go there for the time being, as Kudghat is a *Bangal* colony (a neighborhood of East Bengali Hindu Bengali refugees) and they must be very agitated. Some even asked me to telephone my wife in Birbhum to assure her of my safety. The fact that I might be unsafe has not struck me so far. My colleagues happily offered their places to let me stay until the situations came under control. This reminded me of the 1964 violence when my cousin was given shelter by his classmates in a water tank. For me, it has simply been a part of a *golpo/smriticharon*-part of family tales steeped in inter-generation oral memory. But now, what was happening to me was reality; it was a hard core fact. I stayed in my office for two days. On 9<sup>th</sup> December reports of violence from Rajabazar arrived in my office. My colleagues once again got tense hearing the reports, the same way they were tensed about possible outbursts in Kudghat! Somehow it became clear to me that I am the representative of the minority in the city. And I must exercise more caution than the majority. This line of separation was always out there but now it became more pronounced.

-----Ekram Ali<sup>1</sup>

The Babri Riots in Calcutta began suddenly and ended quickly. The Bengali Hindus mostly viewed these events as an aberration in mainstream national politics. Perhaps a physical distance from the events happening in Ayodhya helped the city to move on as the media was not all-comprising during those days unlike in recent times. Also, the Muslims of Calcutta did not bear its psychological burden for long. The act of demolition brought limited electoral success for the BJP in the coming years. Also, the BJP distanced itself from several other traditional mainstays of its ideology, such as economic nationalism, while the BJP-led government in fact opened new sectors to foreign investment. This consideration for ‘liberalization’ caused some apprehension within the Sangh Parivar. Former socialists and other self-declared secularist allies of the BJP-

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Ekram Ali, “6<sup>th</sup> December er Age-Pore” in *Anusthup Danga Birodhi Sankhya*, Kolkata, 1993, accessed at Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library

led coalition government opposed Hindutva-centric goals such as the construction of a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya.<sup>2</sup> The BJP had to resort to building of coalitions to stay in power, but the rules of the coalition game had diluted its agenda.<sup>3</sup> However, a thumping majority in 2014 changed the rules of the game, not only in the national political space but it somehow managed to reach the psychological domain of the Hindu masses. So much so, that almost all the respondents have told me unanimously, '*Ager moto kichu nei*' 'Nothing is the same anymore. In this chapter, a brief recap on the Ram Janmabhoomi controversy would be presented to be followed by its impact in Calcutta. In connection to the Babri Riots, in the final section, I talk about the changing social structure in Calcutta, how a mega boom in south Asian urbanity redrew the social fabric in the mixed neighborhoods and thus I would close the narrative in the way I began it: by pointing out the new hierarchies within the city-scape.

### **In Defense of History: The Ramjanmabhoomi Movement**

This section might seem redundant as almost everyone in the academia knows about the twisted history of Ramjanmabhoomi debate and the political battle it entailed. But I wish to go through it briefly to remind myself and the larger audience about it, because now, it seems to hardly matter to people.

The mosque known as the Babri Masjid was allegedly constructed by Mir Baqi, one of Babur's generals in the sixteenth century on top of a temple of god Ram, which was allegedly destroyed

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<sup>2</sup> The first BJP led central government was formed after the 1996 elections. On 16 May, Atal Bihari Vajpayee became the Prime Minister of a BJP-led Government only to resign 13 days later, yielding to Mr. Deve Gowda of JD and a United Front coalition Government. Deve Gowda was succeeded by I.K. Gujral of the same coalition later during this term. Following Gujral's resignation, a new coalition government was formed under the leadership of Vajpayee who was sworn in as Prime Minister on March 19, 1998. The Vajpayee led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) ruled until 2004 when the Congress led UPA won the Lok Sabha Elections.

<sup>3</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism : A Reader* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007). Introduction,p22

by Baqi. Yet, adjacent to the mosque, there remained a platform revered by Hindus as the birthplace of Ram. In the mid-nineteenth century, these two adjacent sites provided occasions for religious, political, and legal confrontations between Hindus and Muslims concerning the appropriate uses of the site. In 1885, the dispute reached the district courts where a Hindu sub-judge and an English district judge both denied a Hindu application for permission to build a temple on the *chabutra* (platform) site and instead ordered the installation of a railing to separate the *chabutra* and the mosque to forestall communal confrontations. After Independence, some local Hindus thought the time had come to reclaim the entire site for the worship of Ram. A group of fifty to sixty individuals covertly took control and installed Hindu idols on the mosque premises. Immediately, the local Muslims demanded removal of the idols and restoration of the mosque. On 29<sup>th</sup> December 1949, the district court attached the buildings, locked them, and placed them in the hands of a court-appointed receiver. The issue was rekindled thirty-six years later. In January, 1986, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), with backing from the RSS and the BJP, initiated a campaign to restore the site for Hindu worship. Its goals were not confined to Ayodhya. Its leaders prepared a list of mosques in India allegedly built upon former Hindu temples, of which the most prominent were, in addition to the one in Ayodhya, the mosque in Mathura allegedly built upon Krishna's birthplace and the one near Kashi Vishwanath in Banaras. A writ petition was instituted simultaneously with the beginning of the agitation at Ayodhya and the petition to unlock the site for Hindu worship was granted. The Muslims, in retaliation, filed a writ petition against the order in February, 1986. After February, 1986, the issue was transformed into a national controversy. On the Muslim side, a national Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee (BMMCC) was established and other Muslim organizations were also mobilized to agitate for a prompt solution of the controversy in favor of the restoration

of the site as a mosque. On the Hindu side, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the RSS, the BJP, and leading Hindu religious figures carried on the campaign for the restoration of the entire site to Hindus to reconstruct a grand temple dedicated to Ram. The Hindu organizations, however, significantly outpaced the Muslim groups in rallying public support on this issue spearheading a movement to rebuild the temple with consecrated bricks brought to the site by the Hindu faithful.

Simultaneously, the issue of minority appeasement was revived massively around this time. As early as in the 1950s the Sangh Parivar criticized the Hindu Code Bill which aimed to reform Hindu customs of marriage, adoption, and inheritance, while the *shariat* and the personal laws of other religious minorities remained untouched.<sup>4</sup> This issue resurfaced in the 1980s during what is known as the Shah Bano affair, when the Congress was criticized for favoring the Muslim voters by reaffirming the status of the *shariat* in regulating the private sphere of this minority. In April 1985, the Supreme Court in Delhi delivered a historic verdict granting the divorced Muslim woman (Shah Bano) maintenance from her former husband by applying a section under the general Criminal Penal Code to the case. The decision broke with the legal precedents of treating matters of family dispute under the special provisions stipulated in the Muslim Personal Law Application Act, which was interpreted by the members of the *ulama* appointed to the Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB).<sup>5</sup> Muslim leaders influenced by conservative and fundamentalist currents in the Islamic world regarded the verdict as an infringement on the cultural autonomy of Indian Muslims and called for public protests. The agitation started as a cautious protest call during the Friday prayer, but quickly developed into a mass movement all over the country, to

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<sup>4</sup> Christophe Jaffreleot ed. *Hindu Nationalism : A Reader* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).p314

<sup>5</sup> T.B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).p149

the surprise of both Muslim and non-Muslim leaders.<sup>6</sup> The Shah Bano agitations provided an escape valve to the accumulated frustration of Muslims, while at the same time, it also propelled a new and more communally minded Muslim leadership into national prominence. In an attempt to align the Congress with the most conservative elements of the Muslim leadership, which appeared to have a grip on the Muslim community during the 1985 agitations, a bill annulling the Shah Bano verdict was passed haphazardly in May 1986, in spite of massive protests from most quarters of political life. The BJP publicized these events as the Congress's "pseudo-secularism" resulting in "minority-ism" at the expense of Hindus, who were merely the second-class citizens in their own country. This helped the party mobilize support for its Ayodhya campaign. This contributed in no small measure to making the Indian Muslims a perfect and demonized 'other' in the Sangh Parivar's subsequent mass production of communal stereotypes.

In the general elections of 1989, the vote for BJP and its subsequent representation in the Parliament increased, although it was the National Front that formed the government under Prime Minister V. P. Singh while the BJP supported it from outside. However, V. P. Singh's "Mandal" decision on the reservations policy for public sector jobs for backward castes appeared to undermine the BJP's drive to consolidate the Hindu vote in the country under its own banner. The Mandal decision required the party leadership to prepare for a new election and to seek to

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<sup>6</sup> Coordinated as a "Sharia Protection Week" by the newly formed All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), hundreds of thousands of Muslims gathered in October 1985 at rallies against the Shah Bano verdict and for upholding the status of Muslim personal law. The size and spontaneity of the mass rallies—such as the 300,000 people who gathered in Bombay on a call by a handful of relatively unknown Urdu journalists on 20 November 1985—indicated that frustration and a sense of insecurity had been fermenting for a long time among the Indian Muslims, especially in the major cities. The strong assertions of a Muslim identity in connection with the Shah Bano agitations in Bombay, Gujarat, and Kerala were undoubtedly informed by the newfound pride and the quest for recognition produced by the new flow of wealth and religious discourse. However, the development of ties between Indian Muslims and the Gulf countries and the conservative postures of Muslim leaders seemed to confirm all the run-of-the-mill stereotypes about inherently "anti-national" Muslims. for more details: see Hansen(1999),*The Saffron Wave*,pp149-153

strengthen its base in U. P. and Bihar with its only strong weapon, the demand to construct a new temple to Ram on the existing site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

With these considerations in mind, L. K. Advani, the leader of the BJP, proclaimed his decision to launch his *rathiyatra* (journey by [motor] chariot) from the Somnath temple in Gujarat on September 25, 1990 to Ayodhya on October 30, following 'a long and circuitous route' through the Hindi-speaking heartland, with the circuit concluding in the states of Bihar and U.P.<sup>7</sup> The BJP-Vishwa Hindu Parishad-Bajrang Dal-RSS combine of militant Hindu organizations left a bitter trail of communal antagonisms, riots, and deaths in the wake of the *rathiyatra*. The chief minister of Bihar, Laloo Yadav stopped the *rath yatra* by arresting L. K. Advani in Samastipur on October 23, 1990. After L. K. Advani's arrest in Bihar, the BJP withdrew its support from the government of V. P. Singh, which thereby lost its majority in the Parliament.

A four-month interregnum followed under the prime ministership of Chandrashekhar while the BJP and all other parties prepared for new elections, which were held in May-June, 1991. The BJP made the greatest electoral effort in its history before this election, in which it fully exploited the Ayodhya issue and the anti-Muslim hostilities, which its leaders and workers had successfully inculcated in the upper caste Hindu population of the country, particularly in north India. The Hindu-Muslim riots which occurred before and during the election campaign also contributed to greater polarization. The BJP emerged as the second largest party in the Parliament with 119 seats and as the ruling party in the state of U.P. The Congress, in turn, formed a fragile minority government at the Center and fell to third place in the state of Uttar Pradesh. In the subsequent months, a series of administrative and legal steps were implemented

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<sup>7</sup> Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, (Cambridge:CUP, 1994). Second Edition, p243

by the U. P. government to enable Hindu access to the site and to gain control of all lands surrounding it.<sup>8</sup>

In November, 1991, a critical step was taken when the U. P. government issued a notification for the acquisition of a 2.77-acre disputed site adjacent to one side of the mosque. Simultaneously, the VHP proceeded with plans for a mass *karseva* (voluntary work) in November-December, 1991. The VHP and Bajrang Dal activists moved into the mosque complex and began to clear the land and structures immediately around the mosque in preparation for the construction of the temple. The Muslim leadership of the Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC) saw clearly that the government's move would be followed by a transfer of the acquired land to the VHP and challenged the action in the state High Court, which issued an injunction against any such transfer of the land or construction upon it.

In April 1992, the national executive committee of the VHP, meeting in Hardwar, announced its intention to resume temple construction at Ayodhya within the month. The *karseva* was intensified in August when thousands of *karsevaks* in defiance of court orders engaged in eighteen days of construction activity, laying the foundation of the new temple on one side of the mosque. As events moved with increasing rapidity, and the determination of the militant Hindu leadership to continue construction of the temple even against court orders was reiterated, the Prime Minister initiated a long series of negotiations among the militant Hindu movement leaders and representatives of Muslim political organizations, including the BMAC. However, the negotiations ended without agreement on November 6, 1992.

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<sup>8</sup> Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, p87

Shortly after the termination of the negotiations, Ashok Singhal, the General Secretary and preeminent leader of the VHP, announced that *karseva* would recommence on December 6 and would not stop until the construction of the temple was completed. In the meantime, the BJP leadership coordinated its actions in such a way as to allow the entry of thousands of *karsevaks* openly carrying demolition equipment to Ayodhya, while orders were issued from the Chief Minister's office preventing the intervention of any state security forces. In short, thousands of militants openly defied court orders, while the government of Uttar Pradesh led by Kalyan Singh prevented its military and paramilitary forces from stopping the demolition of the mosque on December 6, 1992.

### **Long Term Maneuvers: Hindu Nationalism in Post 1947 India**

The 1990s witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in the rise of Hindu nationalism. Reflecting the socio-political and academic zeitgeist, the scholarly explanations shared several common features.

Firstly, most of the late twentieth-century scholarship has approached Hindu nationalism primarily in politically instrumentalist terms, portraying it as a deliberate and politically organized project of 'social engineering and collective identity formation.'<sup>9</sup> A detailed account of the Hindu nationalist movement in India since the 1920s has been provided arguing that political uneasiness, created by real and imagined threats of colonialism and the presence of minority groups led to the growth of militant Hinduism on the Indian subcontinent.<sup>10</sup> Countering

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<sup>9</sup> T. B. Hansen and Srirupa Roy ed. *Saffron Republic: Hindu Nationalism and State Power in India*. (Cambridge: CUP, 2022). p2

<sup>10</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s : Strategies of Identity-building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with Special Reference to Central India)* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999). He

essentialist arguments that assertions of Hindu group identity in Indian public life were eruptions of timeless religious passions, Hindu nationalism is sought to be understood as a project of collective mobilization and ideological engineering that reflected distinctly modern political aspirations and calculated power-plays by historically situated political actors.<sup>11</sup> In post-colonial period, after Gandhi's death, the negotiations between the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha under the aegis of Golwalkar and S.P. Mookherjee resulted in the creation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (forerunner of the present Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) in 1951, on the eve of the first general elections. The Jana Sangh always vacillated between two strategies. On the one hand, it followed a moderate strategy, positioning itself as a patriotic party on behalf of national unity, as the protector of both the poor and the small privately-owned businesses, deploying a populist vein. The other line, more militant, was founded on the promotion of an aggressive form of 'Hinduness', represented by the campaign to raise Hindi to the level of India's national language and protection of cows (by banning cow slaughter). This strategy changed in the 1970s. In 1977, the Jana Sangh resigned itself to following a moderate line and merged with the Janata Party, which had just defeated Indira Gandhi's Congress Party. Yet its organic links with the RSS and alleged role in an upsurge of Hindu-Muslim riots created dissention within the party and among the coalition as well. In 1980, the former Jana Sangh leaders started a new party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which remained faithful to the moderate strategy. The BJP, with Atal Behari Vajpayee as its first president, diluted the original ideology of the Jana Sangh to become more acceptable in the Indian party system and to find allies in this field. This more moderate

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traces it from the journey of religious reforms in Hinduism to revivalism which inaugurated a specific combination of stigmatization and emulation of the threatening 'Other'. See chapter 1 of the book for a detailed analysis on the Long History of Hindu Nationalism.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/239A70255DC3D18B323A810EFFF1E5E8/9781009100489c1\\_p1-24\\_CBO.pdf/what-is-new-about-new-hindutva.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/239A70255DC3D18B323A810EFFF1E5E8/9781009100489c1_p1-24_CBO.pdf/what-is-new-about-new-hindutva.pdf)

approach to politics was greatly resented by the rest of the Sangh Family.<sup>12</sup> The RSS maintained a distance from the BJP and made greater use of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad to regenerate ethno-religious political activism. This more militant strategy was manifested through the initiation of the Ayodhya movement in the mid-1980s.<sup>13</sup>

Moving beyond the political history of the growth of Hindu nationalism, T. B. Hansen writes that it has emerged and taken shape neither in the political system as such, nor in the religious field, but in the broader realm of what one might call the public culture—the public space in which a society and its constituent individuals and communities imagine, represent, and recognize themselves through political discourse, commercial and cultural expressions, and representations of state and civic organizations. To him, Hindu nationalism represents a “conservative revolution,” premised upon and yet reacting against a broader democratic transformation of both the political field and the public culture in postcolonial India. The desire for recognition within an increasingly global horizon, and the simultaneous anxieties of being encroached upon by Muslims, plebeians, and poor, in recent times, prompted millions of Hindus to respond to the call for Hindutva at the polls and in the streets, and to embrace Hindu nationalist promises of order, discipline, and collective strength.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, Hindu nationalism can be viewed in more cultural and historical term, and it was argued that the Hindu nationalists could be successful because they were drawing on older reserves of “religious nationalism” which had been a core component of various forms of Indian

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<sup>12</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, “Nation-Building and Nationalism: South Asia 1947-1990” in John Breuilly ed. *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Nationalism*, (Oxford:OUP, 2013). pp495-514

<sup>13</sup> In 1964, in association with the Hindu clerics, the RSS set up the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP—World Council of Hindus), a movement responsible for grouping together the heads of the various Hindu sects in order to give this rather unorganized religion a sort of centralized structure.

<sup>14</sup> T.B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, p5

nationalism. Hence, the scholarship of the 1990s drew attention to the specifically nationalist dimensions of efforts to create an ‘imagined community’ of the Hindu nation. The primary focus was on the culturalist and identitarian stakes of the Hindutva project, which examined the ideological and organizational strategies of Hindu nationalist actors and institutions, and the beliefs and choices of ordinary citizens who subscribed to the Hindutva cause. Its chief aim was to promote “sentiments of collective identification and cultural belonging; to affirm a Hindu self against a feared and hated Muslim other”.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the historians emphasized the necessity of an understanding of this pre-history of contemporary Hindutva, not only for purposes of research, but also to locate the transformations that the RSS has fashioned in a tradition they claim to be unchanging. The RSS and its ‘family’ regularly conceal their innovations under the guise of maintaining or reviving supposedly age-old traditions. The most remarkable example of this trend is the VHP, which in the 1980s employed the latest in media technology and political double-speak, with the professed aim of exalting a *Puranic* (mythical) hero as the model of Hindu character.<sup>16</sup>

Thirdly, certain tentative connections may also be suggested between the growth of Hindutva and the specific patterns of north Indian city and small town development in the 1960s-1990s. The new urban middle-class, spreading out fairly deep into rural hinterlands, was largely supported by the rapid growth of relatively small industrial enterprises and an attendant trade boom. Government planning since the 1970s promoted small private industries through training, initial support, and bank loans granted on an individual basis. This new sector has accomplished a significantly higher growth rate than that of the large-scale industrial units, whether public or private. The Green Revolution in parts of U.P. increased rural purchasing power significantly,

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<sup>15</sup> Hansen and Roy ed. *Saffron Republic*, p3

<sup>16</sup> Tapan Basu et al eds *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* (New Delhi:Orient Longman,1993). See chapter 3 on VHP

thus feeding into the boom in urban enterprises, consumerism and trade. The enormous growth of small towns after independence depended largely upon such developments. Even a metropolitan giant like Delhi was crucially dependent on these strata, as well as on the vastly expanded civil and military bureaucracy. In a marked departure from the cross-state kinship and caste-based credit and trade networks which had characterized earlier phases of Indian capitalist growth (most notably Marwari enterprise), the new middle-class tended to be fragmented into smaller, and more individual units. They were marked by intense internal competition, the steady pressures of new opportunity structures, ever-expanding horizons for upward mobility, and a compulsive consumerism that kept transcending its own limits. The very pressure of growth was disturbingly destabilizing; the brave new world of global opportunities created existential uncertainties. Consequently, new cults flourished and god-men were created, while the RSS *shakhas*, which had worked primarily among urban trader groups since the 1920s, remained highly relevant with their discipline.<sup>17</sup>

Fourthly, mirroring and reinforcing an enduring opposition between communalism and secularism that had structured Indian political thought and practice for many decades, the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s was seen to jeopardize the survival of secularism. Democracy also very often leads to forces, desires, and imaginings of authoritarian, anti-democratic, majoritarian and ‘moral’ backlashes against what is portrayed as “excessive liberalism” in the public culture. Therefore, one needs to evaluate Hindu nationalism carefully against the official secularism it opposed. One needs to take a closer and more informed look at the practices and meanings of secularism in the public culture of independent India. The evolution of the movement, its organization, and its political strategies must be located in the context of a

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p112

“constant negotiation and oscillation across the deep bifurcation in modern Indian political culture: between a realm of “sublime” culture and a realm of “profane” competitive politics.”<sup>18</sup> Thus majoritarian Hindu activism can be positioned in the wide domain of competitive populism which implies a complex network among state power, the institutions of government, electoral politics, popular mobilization, mass media, cultural production, consumer preferences, symbolic resources, collective emotionalism, economic liberalization, class formations, political violence, and social change.<sup>19</sup> The new communalism of the 1980s is intricately woven into structural change in India that is driven by forces that circulate in the world economy and also hide in the private spaces of family life.<sup>20</sup>

### **Babri Riots in Calcutta**

*A Narrative Account of the ‘City of Dreadful Nights’:*

The whole theatre of Ayodhya dispute and the maneuvers of the Hindu extremist wings were reported by the press in Calcutta in a rather distanced manner. The VHP members and the *karsevaks* were portrayed quite critically for assembling at Ayodhya in increasing numbers, defying court orders and chanting, “*Lathi Goli Khayenge Mandir Wohi Banayenge.*”<sup>21</sup> On 4<sup>th</sup> December, the journalist Suman Chattopadhyay reported in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*:

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<sup>18</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, p12

<sup>19</sup>Separate analysis on each of these categories is possible leading to a host of academic views on Hindu Nationalism. See, Ludden ed. *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, (New Delhi:OUP, 2005) for an overview of these aspects. Also See Zavos, *Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*, (New Delhi:OUP, 2000), Zavos and Reddy ed *Public Hinduism* (New Delhi:Sage, 2012) , Pralay Kanungo,D Berti and N Jaoui eds. *Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva* (New York:Routledge, 2020), Manjari Katju, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Indian Politics* (New Delhi:Orient Blackswan, 2003) etc. for the cultural and ideological activities of various Sangh Parivar organizations

<sup>20</sup> Ludden ed. *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, see Introduction for more details on these aspects

<sup>21</sup> “Sadhuder Kop Adalater Uporei”, *ABP*, 3.12.92,p1

Numbers of karsevaks and young volunteers kept soaring in Ayodhya. According to the VHP's estimate, 1 lakh 35 thousand had already gathered around the premises. Many groups of 'angry young men' (*ragi jubok*) could be spotted sporting white t-shirts with orange/saffron graffiti showing 'Jai Sri Ram' or 'I am an angry young man'! They were greeting the newcomers with slogans bearing Ram's name and expected the same in return! Overall, Ayodhya was under a 'spell of terror' owing much to several rumours constantly being circulated.

On the same day, it was reported in the fifth page under a small column that the police commissioner Tushar Talukdar had directed the police force to stay on high alert in Calcutta 'if any disturbance reached the city.'<sup>22</sup> Hence, it seemed that the administration did not expect that the Babri agitation would at all have any impact in Calcutta. As the three domes of the mosque were razed to the ground on 6<sup>th</sup> December, the initial reaction of the press, leading politicians and the citizens was surprise and disbelief. The press reports also mentioned how right after the demolition, the rank and file of the BJP leadership looked confused and clueless. Never before L. K. Advani, one of the most seasoned leaders, seemed more 'nervous' and 'helpless'; he simply commented that the turn of the event had been 'unfortunate' and 'regrettable'. Repeatedly, the press coverage mentioned, "*Erokom je hote pare dharona chhilona*/No one could believe this will happen."<sup>23</sup>

However, when the news of demolition on 6<sup>th</sup> December reached Calcutta, minor feuds erupted in certain localities especially around the port areas.<sup>24</sup> The ruling Left Front Government called emergency meetings. Both the Congress and the Left parties individually carried out peace marches across several localities. A '*Samhati padayatra*'/rally for unity was organized by the Congress from Subodh Mullick Square to Maidan. Mamata Bandyopadhyay, at that time, a fiery

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<sup>22</sup> "Ayodhyar Probbhab Rukhte KoRa Byabostha", *ABP*, 3.12.92,p5

<sup>23</sup> "Sangha Paribar er Kache Ei ghotona Bina Meghe Bajrapat", *ABP*, 7.12.92,p1

<sup>24</sup> "Army Stages Flagmarch as Violence Grips the City", *The Statesman*, 8/12/1992, File 68B States (U-W),1992, Tsraknath Das Research Centre, JU

Congress leader, addressed the crowd in Khidirpur around 3pm. Besides, a 24 hour strike was called the next day. It was declared that though public transport would be off, many other essential sectors and the media would be allowed to operate freely.<sup>25</sup> Describing the events at Ayodhya as ‘scandalous’, the Left Front said, “The Centre had totally surrendered to the communal forces. It had displayed its worthlessness playing the role of a mute spectator as the UP government supported the incidents at Ayodhya”. Congress (I) described the events as ‘unprecedented’ and the ‘blackest day’ in the history of India. However the BJP state president Tapan Sikdar remarked quite nonchalantly, “As Kalyan Singh has resigned taking moral responsibilities, there is no need for calling strikes!”<sup>26</sup> In fact, many VHP leaders were quoted saying that the demolition should be seen as a regeneration of the Hindus. Bal Thakre, the Sivsena leader in Maharashtra, publicly declared that he felt proud of the *karsevaks*.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the strikes and the peace rallies, on 7th December around 9am, an ‘orgy of violence’ was unleashed at Lichu Bagan and Kashyap Para in Metiabruz.<sup>28</sup> Houses in Mominpur and Garden Reach were ransacked, their inhabitants’ belongings were looted and burnt and the police were nowhere to be seen. Left at the mercy of a mindless mob, Biswanath Tiwari, a retired employee of Keshoram Cotton Mill was hacked with a chopper before he was burnt alive. ‘Rings of smoke’ went up from these areas. One Arvind Gupta (21) reported to the journalists, “Sword wielding mobs stormed into our houses, breaking down the door, and slashed me repeatedly, ignoring my wailing parents.” Longtime residents of Lichubagan said that such eruption of violence was unprecedented and unseen. In Garden Reach areas, local residents gathered in small

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<sup>25</sup>, “Left Front, Cong (I) Call For 24 Hour BanglaBandh”, *The Statesman*, 7/12/92, File 68, States (U-W), B, 1992

<sup>26</sup> “Protibade Bangla Bandh Aj”, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 7/12/92, p1

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *The Statesman*, 8/12/92, , File 68B, p1

groups shouting provocative slogans. The police initially retreated and when reinforced, fought a pitched battle. Several rounds were fired and two police vehicles were damaged. Further in Park Street, at Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, public and police vehicles were attacked and bombs were hurled from the rooftops prompting the police to fire tear gas shells in retaliation. The residents on the periphery of Nakhoda Mosque damaged more than 20 cars. Curfew had to be imposed in Calcutta and the army was deployed.<sup>29</sup> A lawyer's house in central Calcutta had been ransacked by the mob (media reported it as '*balgaheen tandab*' or 'lumpency unleashed'), though the police and the army had arrived in time. Curfew was extended even to the districts, especially in ten localities in Asansol. The political parties, religious leaders, and intelligentsia came out in numbers requesting to keep harmony and peace.<sup>30</sup>

Except in Metiabruz and Garden Reach, however, the situation on 8th December in the metropolis was improving fast. The Metiabruz Police Station had been the busiest as the fire brigade arrived multiple times with loud alarms and red lights to be followed by army vans. Eavesdropping on the wireless sets, the reporters heard paranoid voices asking for 're-enforcement' as several shops and houses were being burnt down and looted. The places of worship were under the *goondas*, so were the medical clinics.<sup>31</sup> Though curfew hours were getting relaxed, educational institutions were to be remained closed and qualification tests for *Madhyamik* and Higher Secondary examinations were suspended. 852 arrests were made, with accusations such as arson, looting and rioting. Nine people had been killed in police firing, and seventeen injured. In fact, what the reporters found appalling (*bismaykar*) was the complete

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<sup>29</sup> "Metiabruz e Guli, Nihoto 4", *ABP*, p1, 8.12.92

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Report by *Nagarik Mancha*, found in Anushtup Danga Birodhi Sankhya, 1993

absence of political leaders in the riot-affected areas. Thus one journalist reported, “Popular rage threw away the red flags in Rajabazar and Metiabruz”.<sup>32</sup>

There was no sign of restraint in the communal riots across the country. Not only in the urban centers of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, but the riots reached the rural areas also.<sup>33</sup> Two days after the demolition, at least 500 had lost their lives nationwide—while the casualty count was the highest in Maharashtra (130) and Gujarat (109). In West Bengal alone, 10 people had died.<sup>34</sup> But 9th December, Wednesday began with a considerable promise in Calcutta, so much so that the government decided to withdraw curfew from Thursday at 6 am.<sup>35</sup> Due to the last two days of consecutive strikes (on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> December), on 9<sup>th</sup> December, Wednesday, people came out in numbers and participated in daily activities. Except for the Burrabazar area, the BJP-called strike had no impact on the city life. The reports mentioned that, though curfew was imposed by Calcutta police, in some places, some people still crowded in the lanes, or peeped through their windows and rushed into the *galli* only if patrolling vans passed by. Otherwise, in general, during the curfew hours, with the intervention of armed forces, the streets were completely desolate.<sup>36</sup> However, several reports of scattered rioting kept on arriving from the industrial belt around Calcutta (Naihati, Jagaddal, Titagarh, Knachrapara). On 10<sup>th</sup> December, the nationwide death toll reached 800.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Upodruto Elakay Netader Anupasthiti Bismoykar”, *ABP*, 9.12.92, p3

<sup>33</sup> “Sara Deshe Hingsar Boli 500”.Casualty figures reported by the press: Rajasthan-25; MP- 45;Karnataka 40, *ABP*, 9.12.92, *ABP*. p1

<sup>34</sup> “Metiabruj e Gulite Nihoto Chaar”, *ABP*, 9.12.92,p1

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, *ABP*, 10.12.92, p3

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, *ABP*, 10/12/92,

<sup>37</sup> “Aro Choralo Danga”, *ABP*, 10/12/92, p1

After an overall peaceful 9th December, suddenly from midnight onwards, the situation in Calcutta deteriorated.<sup>38</sup> The earlier decision to limit curfew hours was to be withdrawn as East and South Calcutta including Tiljala, Tangra, Entally, Beniapukur, Kareya and Taltala Thana regions witnessed widespread looting and arson since 10pm.<sup>39</sup> With nightfall, neighborhoods around Entally, Park Circus, Rajabazar, Narkeldanga, Bagmari sensed something was not right! Spine-chilling screams could be heard from the neighboring areas, it was remarkable that even the posh localities like Ballygunge got hints of what had been going on around the city. In the evening of 10<sup>th</sup> December, army was deployed in Kareya, Beniapukur, Tangra, Entally, Park Street, Taltala, Maniktala and Beliaghata. Some bodies were found two days later. Near Kankurgachhi rail bridge, a news reporter found a body lying on its face; within a few feet lay another; within a few miles there was yet another—the only identity that these lifeless bodies revealed was they were all from the class of toiling masses.<sup>40</sup>

Tension and panic continued unabated in the western fringes of the city as well. The fact that Metiabruz was typically known for its ‘crime-friendly’ nature enhanced the popular suspicion around the region.<sup>41</sup> Already more than hundred were arrested from this region. The Chief Minister Jyoti Basu said at the Writers’ Building on 11th December, “The situation has deteriorated in Calcutta. What we expected could not be achieved. Though we thought that we would lift curfew on Wednesday, some people did not cooperate. They started fresh attacks in groups. So we have had to decide that we must deal with it rather strictly...Those who will attack religious places, stringent measures will be taken against them...Shoot at sight order should be

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<sup>38</sup> “Majhrate Fer Hangama, Curfew Cholbe Kolkatay”, *ABP*, 10.12.92, p1

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> *ABP*, 11.12.92, p1

<sup>41</sup> “Metiabruj e Tohol Bereche Traas Komeni”, *ABP*, 10.12.92, p1

maintained .No question shall be entertained in this matter.”<sup>42</sup> On the same day the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal were banned by the central government.

Finally from 12th December onwards, violence was quelled and the city heaved a sigh of relief. While the rest of Calcutta was slowly returning to normalcy, police and army was still operational in Garden Reach, Metiabruz, Tyangra, Entally. and Tiljala. Total death toll in the city was 32 and 2630 people had been arrested.<sup>43</sup> People responded to ten hour curfew relaxation (6 am-4 pm) in varied ways. While all agreed that normalcy was the first priority, the day conjured up images of nagging traffic jams and bustling crowds. Nevertheless after 4pm, the city went back to its deathly slumber. On 14<sup>th</sup> December, the educational institutions were resumed.

Even in such a communally charged situation, the Hindu nationalist rightist bastion did not lose confidence and prepared themselves to face the music.<sup>44</sup> The prominent leaders of RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal made preparations to send their gang members underground while the leaders would stay afloat to steer the crisis. Mr. Sunil Mukherjee, the *Pranta-Karyavahak* of Calcutta RSS office remarked that the RSS had been banned and faced persecution even before, and that they were strong enough to bear any onslaught from the side of Indian state. Describing the demolition of the Mosque as ‘unfortunate’, he held a group of ‘agent provocateurs’ responsible for it and claimed that the Sangh never entertained any kind of animosity towards any particular community! Mr Madhab Banhatti, the eastern zonal organizing secretary of the VHP, said that a

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<sup>42</sup>“Hingsha Daman e Fouz K Purno Swadhinata”. ABP, 11.12.92

<sup>43</sup> “Swabhabiker Dike Kolkata”, ABP, 13.12.92,p1

<sup>44</sup> *The Statesman*, File 6B , 9/12/92

contingency plan had already been drawn to deal with the situation. Refusing to further clarify it, he said that the organizational network of the VHP would not be much affected despite the ban on it. Describing the ban as totally unjustified, Mr Utpal Chakravarty, the state BJP's General Secretary, said that this would increase the party's responsibility. He actually hinted at providing shelter to its activists and sister organizations, and also did not rule out the possibility of setting up a new organization to accommodate such activists. A handful of members of the Jamat-e-Islami at the head office in Lenin Sarani said that they were still unaware of any official announcement regarding the ban on their organization. Following a tip off from the BJP central leadership in Delhi that its members can be arrested at any moment, the leaders of Calcutta decided that they would court arrest rather peacefully.

Due to this four-day disturbance, at least 35000 had been displaced and sought shelter in 13 camps.<sup>45</sup> The relief camps were not uniformly managed and resources were haphazardly distributed. For example, the Tangra slaughter house camp received adequate meals while at the camps of Radhanath Chowdhury Lane and Bengal Pottery complex, not a grain of relief had reached.<sup>46</sup> The shelter houses depicted micro-tales of displacement and insecurity. However images of mutual empathy and humane conscience were not entirely absent. At Dhobiabazar camp, the shelter givers were seen assuring a wailing woman who had lost her husband. That the consolors were of a different religion from that of the woman did not seem to be a barrier in communicating their concern and support.<sup>47</sup> When another woman suddenly fell ill and needed five bottles of blood at Ward no 82 in Chetla, the local people immediately arranged for it by

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<sup>45</sup> "Traan e Kothao Biriyan Kothao Fenabhat". *ABP*, 11.12.92, p1

<sup>46</sup> *The Statesman*, 13/12/92, , File 68B

<sup>47</sup> "Dharmandhader Swrikar Ora, Bnechhechen Dharmer Ashroye", *ABP*, 15.12.92,p1

setting up a blood donation camp. 35 bottles of blood were immediately collected and sent to areas where they were needed, since government blood banks had dried up due to massive unnatural demands.<sup>48</sup> Loreto Convent School too was filled with displaced women and children, but male family members were not allowed inside, which created emotional problems among the homeless families.<sup>49</sup> The most ironical example of a shelter house was, however, at 150B, Beliaghata Main Road. The building had been the residence of Gandhi when he fasted for five days to soothe the riot-torn conscience of the city in August 1947. Exactly 45 years after, Arati Dey's family with six kids from Bichalighat, Tangra, received shelter in the same place on 10th December.<sup>50</sup>

Resistance to violence and a determination to keep up the secular spirit were not lost completely. The Press reports diligently brought out a number of snippets where 'good senses' prevailed. For example, when a group of Muslim rioters assembled to demolish an old temple dedicated to Lord Shiva at Zakaria Street, the local Muslims resisted them spontaneously and saved the temple from destruction.<sup>51</sup> On 8th December, one Sasi Mukherjee in *The Statesman* said,

While the fear of the unknown gripped the city and people were drawn into the vortex of a Black Monday (7th December), religious leaders of all faiths prayed for peace and amity.. Where religious fervour seemed to be at the root of demented passions, saner heads of different faiths begged all to forget and forgive. Teresa and her nuns prayed throughout the day for return to sanity.

"The demolition of Babri Masjid has caused excruciating pain in the hearts of all Muslims but we should not cause pain to others as a consequence" – said Md. Nazim, the Imam of Nakhoda Mosque—"What happened at Ayodhya was a shame. Yet all of us should work together for

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<sup>48</sup> "Roktojhora Shohore Roktodan Shibir", *ABP*, 11.12.92,p4

<sup>49</sup> "ibid,p4

<sup>50</sup> "Arter Ashroy Mahamtmar Anashan er Shei Bari",*ABP*, 11.12.92,p4

<sup>51</sup> "Mandir Bhangte BADha Dilen Musholmanra", *ABP*, 9.12.1992, p4

peace and help to cool down passions.” He appealed for communal harmony, for that is what Islam teaches. Seven important Muslim leaders appealed to all people, especially to the Muslims, to keep their emotion under control.<sup>52</sup> The Sikhs in the city, mindful of the brunt of similar passions they had had to bear after Indira Gandhi’s assassination, appealed for peace and goodwill. Mr. S. Lakhwinder Singh, secretary of Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, appealed to all people to shun violence.

### *Babri Riots in Calcutta: Possible Explanations*

An interesting comparison between the riots of 1946, 1964, and 1992 was suggested by Ashis Chakrabarty on 15th December 1992 in *The Statesman*. First, he pointed out the differences: the December riots were in no way comparable with the August and January riots on the scale of casualty and cruelty perpetrated to the citizens. Despite fewer casualties, the 1992 riot had been more planned and organized, as both the Hindu and Muslim residencies had been targeted. Especially the sudden eruption of violence in Eastern Calcutta between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10th December midnight was orchestrated by anti-socials with sinister motives. However, similarities were there too: firstly, the state government reacted late in all these cases, the army was made operational after much deliberation and administrative confusion. Further, the days preceding the riots, both in 1946 and in 1992, showed popular outbursts of united spirit. Eighteen days before the Direct Action Day, on July 29, the communist backed workers’ rally in support of Postal and Telegraph Strike shook Calcutta. Similarly in late 1992, Calcutta witnessed two massive political turnouts at the Brigade parade ground. On 5<sup>th</sup> December ‘Calcutta Nagarik Convention’ arranged a public

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<sup>52</sup> “Rajye Shanti Sampriti Okkhunno Rakhar Byapok Prochesta” *ABP*, 8.12.92, p4. The seven leaders were, Maulana Muhammad Nizam, Ahmed Sayiad Malihabadi, Maluna aMahafuzul-ul-Karim Masuni, Maulana Fazlur Rahman, Maulana Muhammad Irfan Hussaini, Maulana Hakim Muhammad Zamal Hussaini, Maulana Ardul Rahaman Barkati.

meeting in Rajabazar More against religious violence. Around 2000 Hindus and Muslims joined it and the meeting got so big that buses had to be rerouted.<sup>53</sup> Thus, as I have pointed out earlier, Calcutta politics maintained a distance from its North Indian counterparts where ethno-religious mobilization was in full swing. Finally, the author gives examples of selfless sacrifice that one could see even in high moments of communal orgy. He remembered how in August 1946, the Muslim boarders at Tower Lodge near Sealdah had created 'legend' as they received knife wounds but forced a mob killing the Hindus to retreat. Similarly, in December 1992, the CPI leader Ramesh Tiwari died of burns at Garden Reach as he rushed into a burning house to save a stranded family. The CPIM's state committee member Nepal Bhattacharya had his skull broken as he faced a marauding mob at Jagaddal. However, given the range of criminal activities during the week after 6<sup>th</sup> December, the Hindu-Muslim peace rallies seemed to have nothing but superficial value. Such sacrifices on the personal level might seem futile too. Hence, Sandip Bandyopadhyay asks, on 9<sup>th</sup> December, when a young man was killed at Rajabazar, what happened to those 2000 men who were seen in the rally just three days before? Did some of the participants join the mob?<sup>54</sup> Actually past experiences show that there is no strict division between the rioters and riot resisters. Someone who takes active part might not be a complete communalist at all. Sometimes familiar communal faces unexpectedly end up saving their neighbors. Perhaps someone on the first day of rioting has not taken part in violence at all but; but on day two, he could have killed someone or taken part in arson. Some might have prevented violence in their localities, but wreaked havoc in a different neighborhood.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Sandip Bandyopadhyay, "Kolkatar Jeebone Danga" in *Anushtup Danga Birodhi Sankhya*, 1993, p10

<sup>54</sup> Ibid,p11

<sup>55</sup>Ibid,p15

Another journalist in the *ABP* similarly compared the riots in the city. The report was very critical about the role of the government representatives in case of 1992. While on the second day of Hazratbal Riots in 1964, the Home Minister G. L. Nanda visited Calcutta, this time nothing like that happened. Also, in 1964, Rs. 400 was allotted to each of the homeless family for their rehabilitation, no such announcement yet arrived from the Left Front even after a week of rioting.<sup>56</sup> In fact, in another report on 15<sup>th</sup> December, the press reported how Suhrawady and Prafulla Chandra Sen had fared much better than Jyoti Basu in tackling the violence and distribution of relief.

Suranjan Das posits a similar comparison between the three cases of riots in Calcutta.<sup>57</sup> Like in the 1964 outbreak, the emphasis of rioting in 1992 was not on physical assaults but on looting, arson, and destruction of property. Molestation of women was not reported, although snatching of gold necklaces and bangles was not unknown. The 'brutalization of human consciousness', which had dominated the 1946 carnage and manifested in the recent post-Ayodhya outbreaks in Bombay (Maharashtra) and Surat (Gujarat), was not characteristic of the last Calcutta outbreak. Not unnaturally, the majority of those killed during this riot—the estimate of which varies between the official figure of 33 and an unofficial count of 504—lost their lives from police/military firing, a feature reminiscent of the 1964 outbreak. It is equally revealing that the 'traditional' riot zone of Calcutta—Rajabazar, Khidirpur, Kalabagan, Zakaria Street, Keshab Sen Street, Chitpur, and Moulali remained outside the parameters of the 'unsettled zone' in 1992. Instead, the violence was concentrated in the city's south-west and eastern sectors comprising Metiabruz, Garden Reach, Park Circus, Tangra, Tapsia, Tiljala and Beniapur slums.

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<sup>56</sup> "64 Theke 92, Kolkatay Bodlayni Dangar Rup", *ABP*, 14.12.92, p3,

<sup>57</sup> Suranjan Das, "The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: A Relapse into 'Communal Fury'?" ,*Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May, 2000), pp. 281-306

Incidentally, unlike in 1964, the violence in 1992 remained a strictly Calcutta affair. Even the sensitive districts in the state such as Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda maintained communal amity.

As for the simultaneous attack on the six *Thana* regions on 9-10th December, the police, too, viewed the riot as a part of a 'broader plot'.<sup>58</sup> Who was behind this conspiracy is difficult to identify. But it appears that real estate 'promoters' played a crucial role in inflaming the riot, whose victims were mainly slum-dwellers. Their obvious aim was to clear the bustees for construction projects. Since the beginning of 1980, Metiabruz had developed as West Bengal's primary outpost of retail trade in garments. This economic prosperity gradually inflated real estate prices in the area, the cost of one *cottah* (7200 sq.ft) of land ranging between eight and ten lakhs of rupees. Responding to this phenomenal rise, non-Bengali promoters had been trying to construct multi-storeyed structures or shopping complexes in this area and rent them. Burning and looting of houses was an easy method to displace the inhabitants. Rioting in Garden Reach was also connected with a lucrative land market. From the late 1980s, this part of Calcutta had become the settling-ground for Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh and the neighboring districts of Bihar. These migrants provided the man-power for the brisk smuggling trade centering around Calcutta port which had enriched them. But their presence had caused a boom in the land market of this locality. Well-built housing complexes were fast coming up on both sides of the main road and the pressure on land continued to rise. Bustees like Lichubagan could alone provide new space for developmental projects. Incidentally, these were the prime targets of the violent crowd.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Riot not Communal Feel Left Parties" *The Statesman*, 15.12.02, p1

<sup>59</sup> Suranjan Das, "The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: A Relapse into 'Communal Fury'?", pp289

A convergence of commercial interests with religious zeal was equally explicit in eastern Calcutta. The Dhobiatala bustee with 1006 families has its origin linked to the 1964 riot. It was established to rehabilitate 48 riot-torn Muslim families. Eventually, the number of its inhabitants rose by 1992 to 5,000, of which 4,543 were Muslims, 450 Hindus and 7 Christians.<sup>60</sup> Apart from Dhobiatala, the slums at Mir Meher Ali Lane and Bibibagan were also congested with both Hindu and Muslim casual labourers. None of these slums had ever demonstrated any communal tensions in recent times. When on 9 December they were battered relentlessly by the mob, the residents were naturally taken aback. Abdul Rahim Khan, in his seventies and a witness to both the 1946 and 1964 riots, exclaimed, 'I don't know what happened. Everything was so peaceful.'<sup>61</sup> A clue to this riddle can, however, be found when the 1992 episode is viewed against the background of an increasing scramble for land following the growth of the tannery and leather industry in that locality. Not unnaturally, Dhobiatala bustee—encompassing at least 15 *bighas* of land whose occupants did not possess tenancy or possession certificates—constituted a prime site for estate developers. In the pre-riot days, a group of promoters were thus said to have offered each dweller in Dhobiatala twenty thousand rupees as an incentive to desert their huts. It cannot be a matter of sheer coincidence that this *bustee* was disfigured beyond recognition during the December violence. Thus, a possible 'promoter-nexus' behind the December violence is highly suggested from all quarters.<sup>62</sup> Often, the local anti-socials and a section of the police were allegedly ready accomplices of the promoters.

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<sup>60</sup> Suranjan Das, "The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: A Relapse into 'Communal Fury'?" pp290-291

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p296

<sup>62</sup> The police report on 16<sup>th</sup> December mentioned that 1300 houses in Calcutta had been destroyed due to the violence, in Dhobitala alone more than 450 houses were burnt down. The state government allotted 11lakh Rs for rehabilitation. *ABP*, 17.12.92

The Left leaders also particularly targeted the Hindi and Urdu speaking Muslims as the main perpetrators while the Bengali Muslims had protected their Hindu neighbors.<sup>63</sup> Suranjan Das too commented on the issue. In tune with all preceding Calcutta riots, the upcountrymen—Hindu and Muslim alike—were particularly restive in 1992. This can perhaps be accounted for by the fact that these upcountrymen failed to integrate with the ethos of Calcutta. Discriminated as 'intruders', and denied opportunities of secure employment, the Muslims among them could find solace from *mullas* (Muslim religious preachers) and sought strength from strong kinship bonds which only religious loyalty could provide. The young among them got reconciled with 'rowdyism' as means of livelihood, becoming followers of local musclemen like Mughal and Jhunnu.<sup>64</sup> As per the report submitted by Calcutta Police on 17<sup>th</sup> December, four major culprits were already arrested: Muhammad Wali, Arun Mondal and Dilip Rana from Tangra and Nizam from Metiabruz were behind the bars. However, the chiefs of the gangs, Bhaluk of Tangra and Ansari of Metiabruz were still absconding.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the repeated emphasis on not so communal character of the Babri riots, a communal distemper was certainly present during those turbulent days. Stories of desecration of places of worship or a likely attack on the police headquarters of Lalbazar, heaps of dead-bodies lying on the streets, and cutting of women's breasts were systematically circulated to excite sentiments of both communities. The police control room had a tough time managing the rumor-mongering. They heard strangest of the strange rumors all day long such as, "Is it true that at least 500 are dead in Rajabazar?." One journalist overheard a middle-aged man once he finished browsing

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<sup>63</sup> "Riot not Communal Feel Left Parties" *The Statesman*, 15.12.02, p1

<sup>64</sup> Suranjan Das, "The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: A Relapse into 'Communal Fury'?" p295

<sup>65</sup> "Luth-Tarajer Jonnoin 6<sup>th</sup> December", *ABP*, 17.1.2.92, p5

through the newspaper at his neighborhood *adda*, “These newspapers don’t write anything nowadays. They haven’t even mentioned that Nakhoda Mosque had been demolished already!” The Congress leaders like Mamata Banerjee, Somen Mitra as well as the CPI(M) leaders like Sailen Dasgupta or Biman Basu received a host of frantic phone-calls in either their residences or in the party offices.<sup>66</sup>

While stories of the destruction of Muslim property antagonized the Muslims, the fear of losing their traditional authority aroused Hindu sensibilities. Yet the actual nature of rioting did not manifest the heightened communalism of 1946. While the riot left the upper classes of either community untouched, the subordinate Hindu and Muslim social groups were its prey. Gour Kishore Ghosh wrote a series of eye witness reports in *Ananda Bazar Patrika* where he found that the riot victims saw the police as part of anti-socials (*hamlabaj*). He also mentioned the initiative of Loreto Convent to ensure shelter to the women and children. He quoted a nun who felt helpless that the convent could not arrange for food but kept her faith in God that something would be managed. Ghosh remarked that her undaunted faith in god evoked solace (*obhoybani*), not fear (*traas*). Unfortunately, as he added, this was not the case for Sabrun Unnisa of Matijhil, as the image of Ramlala made her homeless. Finally, he posed some meaningful questions, the questions might be easy but the answers were certainly not blowing in the wind.<sup>67</sup>

Shankar Ayat’s shoe factory has been burnt. He was self-employed. Who will now build up his workshop? Advani? His tools have been burnt? Who would buy his new tools now? Advani? Mahesh Prasad Sau’s grocery shop has been torched. Goods worth of one lakh rupees have been destroyed. Who will bring it back? Advani? Hundreds of Hindus and hundreds of Muslims have become penniless. Who will pay for it?

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<sup>66</sup> “Bocchor er Sera Gujob: Doya Kore Shunun.” *ABP*, 11.1.92

<sup>67</sup> The Series was called “Danga Kobolito Purbanchal” by Gour Kishor Ghosh in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*.

Advani?  
Asok Singhal?  
The dumbheaded saints? Mahantas?  
Or the government?  
How will the government arrange for the money?  
Who would answer these questions?  
Such questions are coming out of the ashes, daily.

*Responsibility of the Government: Ideological Inadequacies*

Before critically evaluating the role of the Left Front Regime in the Babri violence, a brief discussion on its governmental policies is necessary. The inadequacy of the government, which was evidently prominent during the disturbances, lay within its inherent structure and praxis.

One can safely conclude that after 1964, no major communal clashes happened in the city until 1992. This is indeed remarkable given the charged up communal situation in other parts of the nation.<sup>68</sup> But violence had a constant presence in Bengal, though not in communal forms. The numerous government reports found in the British archives point to staggering figures of political murders and urban violence due to the Naxalite movement.<sup>69</sup> With the Left Front coming to power in 1977, West Bengal got the nation's longest ruling democratically elected Communist government upto 2011. Despite socialist promises of agrarian and industrial reforms in a more revolutionary direction, in reality, these reforms were not undertaken. Besides, when the reforms were implemented, it promoted class and group interests hostile to more radical

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<sup>68</sup> Udaipur Riots (1965 & 1986), Ahmedabad Riots (1969, 1982), Varanasi (1977), Moradabad Riots (1980), Biharsharif (1981), Godhra (1980-81), Pune and Solapur(1982), Meerat (1982),Hyderabad (1983)- just to name a few major ones in post-colonial India.

<sup>69</sup> For example, the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs said in Lok Sabha that in West Bengal, between 1<sup>st</sup> July to 15<sup>th</sup> October 1971, 803 had been murdered in 309 interparty clashes. Presidents Rule was extended for six more months and the state government had asked for more batallions of central reserve force. – DO 133/199: Condition of West Bengal 1971, accessed at the British Archives.

change, making the development of a revolutionary conjuncture less likely. As a result, reforms came to a halt, and the Left Front's continued stay in office became counterproductive from a revolutionary Communist viewpoint.<sup>70</sup> Their electoral success was due to the following of certain policies that promoted rural middle- and upper-class interests, while distributing palliatives to the lower classes. By promoting various propertied class interests, it had given these groups a stake in the status quo, and made them more hostile to reforms that would benefit the society as a whole.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has provided a thorough critique of the Left Front regime in his book 'Government as Practice.'<sup>71</sup> The Left front evolved an art of conducting its government by strategically combining top-down policies with the lived experience of different population groups. The art was perfected through popular movements and alliance politics in the 1950s and the 1960s, which offered the backdrop for subsequent governmental projects of agrarian reforms and administrative decentralization in the late 1970s. This required a disciplined party and a complex structure of mass organizations for blending social democracy's ideological commitments with the everyday compulsions of postcolonial democracy. They helped the left consolidate its position among the rural and urban poor for an unprecedented duration. Once in charge, the two most important policies of the Left Front government were land reforms and decentralization of rural administration through local government, the panchayat, in the countryside. The reforms in the panchayat was aimed at cutting down the hold of bureaucracy and the influence of local elites in matters of policy implementation and opening an institutional

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<sup>70</sup> Ross Mullik, *Development Policy of a Communist Government : West Bengal since 1977*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).p2

<sup>71</sup> Dwaipayan Bhatattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*, (New Delhi: CUP, 2016).

space for negotiation, participation and interaction between the administration and rural population. While it entrenched Left front's control in the rural sector, it also led to the rise of a middle-class who were non-land holding, service dependent, frequently public sector employees, especially school teachers, predominantly male, 'often drawn from high-caste Hindu social background. The Scheduled Tribes (ST) and women were found grossly underrepresented, and the leading players were almost always from middle-ranking families with higher social status. Bhattacharyya calls this 'deepening of government' and 'governmentalization of the locality' without a necessary process of a simultaneous localization of the government. Similarly the left in West Bengal pressed its government into the crevices of the social without socializing the government. It received continuous support of the SC and ST groups yet these communities rarely found any place in the top leadership of the left parties or that of the government. It perhaps can be justifiably argued that this hierarchy between the upper castes and the Dalits across higher and lower governmental bodies turned the latter into 'mere foot soldiers' of the left, who were 'martyred, incarcerated and alienated from their homes and families' helping the 'the upper-caste leaders to flourish, and to establish their complete control'. As the left got ensconced in power, its reformism gave way to bureaucratic moderation and its insecurity waned with repeated electoral successes. Left's reformist campaigns, which generated huge populist appeal in the early years, were now pushed aside as winning elections became the central object of the government. Legislative innovations (or tactical use of law) were overshadowed by administrative routines; popular participation was reduced to token endorsement of official decisions. Asok Mukhopadhyay has linked this process with the issue of political violence inherent in this regime.<sup>72</sup> Not long after panchayats became an important lever in the local

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<sup>72</sup> Ashok Mukhopadhyay, "Politics in West Bengal", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, July - September 1994, Vol. 55, No. 3, Special Issue On State Politics In India (July - September 1994), pp. 321-334

power structure, splintered criminal gangs began looking for new patrons. Politicians lost no time in employing them for election purposes. With political rivalry becoming acute, local leaders turned to anti-social groups and befriended local dons through generous funding.

On the other hand, the Left Front hardly took any effort for specific community-centric goals of upliftment. Rather, the left preferred not to treat social marginalization as a problem requiring urgent attention. They either handled it as a function of poverty and inequality, resolvable through economic development and distribution, or proposed that 'class' as a collective subsumed every other form of exclusion, segregation, or indignity. The purposive exclusion of such programmes could be due to their secular ideological commitment, and it was adhered to rigorously.

However, the devastating consequences of such a policy of complete ignorance and subsequent absence of specific attention towards the welfare of Muslims in particular were soon emphasized by the Sachar Committee Report (2006). The report brought to light the dreadful performance of the West Bengal Government in community welfare and development. The Sachar Committee (2006) compared the status of West Bengal Muslims with the Scheduled Castes in the country and came to the conclusion that the former were worse off than the Scheduled Castes. The ordeals of the Left Front government were however far from over. It faced a serious task in 2009 when the Ranganath Mishra Committee Report, also referred to as the Report of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, was tabled in Parliament. Going beyond the Ranganath Mishra Commission recommendation, the West Bengal government provided 10% reservation in government jobs for OBC Muslims and 7% for non-Muslim OBCs. The 10% reservation facilitated fifty three backward Muslim communities in the state. This phase of attempted changes in policy formulations regarding the Muslims was, however, interspersed with

the Singur and Nandigram events that happened due to the government's ill-conceived industrialization plans. The government paid heavily for its policies on forcible land acquisition and eventually the Left Front was out of power after three and a half decades in May 2011.<sup>73</sup> One can argue that the Left Front failed, not primarily due to the limitations on its power and resources, but because it did not make suitable use of the "powers and resources that it had at its disposal."<sup>74</sup>

Along with it, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya stresses on the systemic corruption inherent in the structure of the governmental regime.<sup>75</sup> The new leadership in rural West Bengal by the 1990s emerged from local traders of fertilizer and pesticide, agents of ponzi companies, local transporters, suppliers of building materials, owners of brick kilns or rice mills, labour contractors, and ration shop dealers. Many used the party as an instrument for private gains, and exploited its vast network for advancing personal interests. They also managed a band of followers – a clientele of mostly unemployed young men around them. As they populated the branch committees and local committees of the CPI(M), the district and higher leaders began to depend on them for maintaining local 'peace' and for mobilizing support during elections. Rising corruption, rent-seeking and associated depletion of values competed with the refinement of its coercive mechanisms. When in 2006 it moved to break the status quo by a pro-market unilateralism from above, the initiative soon faced massive popular resistance, galvanizing a broad opposition from the extreme left to the right. The government, in response, activated the police, the coercive arm of the state. This caused violence and deaths of ordinary villagers. As

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<sup>73</sup> Bonita Aleaz, "Muslims, Christians and The Left in Bengal" in Rakhahari Chatterji and Partha Basu ed *West Bengal under the Left: 1977-2011* (New Delhi:Routledge,2011). pp223-245

<sup>74</sup> Ross Mallick, *Development policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal since 1977*. p4

<sup>75</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*,p40

soon as any moral recovery appeared improbable, segments of the left's structured support base, which was now attached to its organizational network not by any social or ideological bonding but mainly by instrumental quid-pro-quo, started switching sides. These aspiring segments of workers and upwardly mobile petty entrepreneurs had little choice but to look for alternative political protection in the messy and dangerous world of informal economy. Thus Left Front regime's own developmental policies gave birth to new clients, new prosperous sections, new lumpen elements, new hierarchies and new spaces of hunger, deprivation and underdevelopment.<sup>76</sup>

Coming back to the question of Ayodhya controversy, it was never given due prominence in Bengal's political scene. The Left adhered to the Nehruvian principals enshrined in the Constitution which would lift the nation out of the communal trauma. The crisis stemmed from a much more serious political error. The implicit and explicit politics of the Left was that capitalism was standardizing Indian society, that proletarianization would diminish rural "idiocy," that, like the freedom struggle, class struggles would reduce dogmatism, communalism and casteism, and, finally, the community fabric of society would be increasingly transformed into a class fabric. However, the development of capitalism in India has not led to the submerging of the communities in a great socio-political development. In fact, the dormant communities have now woken up, awakened communities have become more restive while a competitive polity based on a regime of subsidies and patronage. The problem, therefore, was more in the left's inability to make an adequate sense of its 'politics of small change', of the true worth of its everyday, mundane, contingent social exchanges. The top leadership of the CPI(M) had little interest to make intellectual investments in analyzing the realm of the party's everyday

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<sup>76</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal, 1977-2011*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2013), p. xxii

practices, or to encourage questioning of social and cultural norms in relation to religious, caste-based, gender-related, environmental or sexual domination.<sup>77</sup>

Hence, the Left's idea of secularism did not provide an adequate response to Hindutva politics. Its total reliance on Nehruvian liberalism was of no use against the resurgent communalism.<sup>78</sup> The debate between secularism and communalism was outlandish and irrelevant to that domain of popular consciousness. A radical reorganization that accepts the existence of communities, sub-nationalities, etc., and builds popular power on a new foundation was thus absent in the Left's agenda. Its secularism, hence, rose above religious communities and religiosity, while being unsuccessful in coping with religion in politics. The marginalization of the Left in the whole Ayodhya Controversy can thus be explained. Ranabir Samaddar in an essay written in 1989 captures the time poignantly:

The political rallies remained useless in preventing the tragedy at Ayodhya. The Left offered neither non-violent resistance at Ayodhya, nor did it order a halt to Mr. Advani's march at Purulia. More importantly, the slogans and methods to preach "secularism" were timeworn and antiquated, imprisoned by the rhetoric of the Nehruite liberal age.<sup>79</sup>

On the eve of 1990 General Lok Sabha elections, Calcutta was agitated with rape and murder of two women in Birati and Bantala and the plebian protest politics of Mamata Banerjee as a Congress candidate. In this milieu, the campaign for Ramjanmabhumi was initiated by the BJP. It put emphasis on small-scale gatherings, squad campaigns, video shows and propaganda by

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<sup>77</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India*, p41

<sup>78</sup> Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal* ,p38

<sup>79</sup> Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal* ,p39

microphones tied to three-wheelers (popularly called auto campaigns) going up and down small towns, settlements and hamlets on the highways. Along with it, there were other themes such as the need for saving Bengali traditions like the Hindu woman's daily offerings to the *tulsitala* at the family courtyard, or saving Bengali culture from a foreign ideology like communism and from the influx of illegal migrants from across the borders.<sup>80</sup> The BJP also addressed the needs of the Hindu Bengali refugees fleeing from the theocratic Islamic rule and, of course, projected the good record of the BJP administration in Madhya Pradesh. The smiling portrait of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee was retrieved from the dusty cupboard; people had by then almost forgotten him, so that to them, it now represented the ever smiling face of Advaniji. The BJP candidates also tried to free the party from the tag of being a 'Marwari party'.<sup>81</sup>

But these efforts could not mobilize strong support for the RJM campaign. Sandip Bandyopadhyay mentions that during the *karseva* days in 1990, he with his colleagues went to a slum at Metiabruz from where, reports of some agitation was coming in. They talked to many Hindus and Muslim workers and none of them showed much excitement about the Ayodhya Controversy.<sup>82</sup> Yet violence broke out after the news of demolition reached the city. The previous section on the riots in Calcutta has already demonstrated that though they happened suddenly, that does not deny the scope of already having a plan. Campaign such as '*Duniyar Muslim Ek Hou*'/all Muslims of the world Unite' could be heard in Metiabruz region. The lumpens were recruited from local populations or were informed by local gangs. They used the by-lanes and shortcuts to attack the slums and loot the houses. Many of the perpetrators were

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p54

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid* p55

<sup>82</sup> Sandip Bandyopadhyay, "Kolkatar Jeebone Danga", *Anusthup Danga Birodhi Sankhya*, p22

known faces to the victims—65 year old Begum Sayeeda from Tangra told the reporters, “We know them all. Those who set fire broke into houses; we walked together in rallies a few days back.”<sup>83</sup> In Meher Ali Lane and Bibibagan slums, CPI(M) held meetings on 9<sup>th</sup> December which was attended by the slum dwellers. Soon, when violence broke out, they could find their party comrades among the miscreants.<sup>84</sup> Thus, unfortunately, in the performative arena of riot violence, both the ‘agent provocateurs’ and the ‘conversion specialists’ were members of a Leftist party. In fact, all the major press reports and the fact finding committee reports repeatedly stressed on this particular factor that the violence was perpetrated by ‘familiar faces’/ *Chena Lok*. They formed an organized gang; they first vacated the victims’ houses, then looted them and finally burnt them down to ashes. This pattern was followed almost everywhere.<sup>85</sup>

The Muslims faced further victimization even by representatives of government officials.<sup>86</sup> Many Muslims from Metiabruz were arrested by the police; they were detained unlawfully for more than 90 hours before they were produced before the court. They were tortured in the lock up and abused by the police. The police pressurized them to chant ‘*Jai Sri Ram*’, they were repeatedly told to go to Pakistan. Many of the victims were teenagers or had just entered college. One Unkar Hussain, a *namazi* from a Mosque in Matiabruz was asked to drink urine when he pleaded for water. A businessman called Samsul Haque bled from his penis and his hand was fractured due to police atrocities in Behala Police station. Curiously, in Badrtala Lions Club Area, when a temple was harmed, the local CRPF raised funds and renovated it with chants of *Jai Siyaram!* Again, should it be taken as a surprise? When the Babri Mosque was demolished,

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<sup>83</sup> Anirban Chowdhury, “The Anatomy of Tangra Riots”, *The Statesman*, 17.1.292

<sup>84</sup> Report by Nagarik Mancha, found in *Anusthup Danga Birodhi Sankhya*,

<sup>85</sup> “Micchil Thaman Boktrita Thaman, Haat Din Asol Kaj-e”, by Gourkishor Ghosh, *ABP*, 15.12.92, p1

<sup>86</sup> Fact Finding report by APDR found in *Anusthup Danga Birodhi Sankhya*, has more graphical information on torture of Muslims by the police.

the journalists vividly mentioned how some of the CRPF present at the spot took an active part in the process.<sup>87</sup> It was only on 9<sup>th</sup> December that with more reinforcements, the CRPF and the RAF could push the *karsevaks* out of Ayodhya in a 45minute operation called ‘Operation Flush Out’.<sup>88</sup>

The complacency of the Left leaders was another major accusation among the victims.<sup>89</sup> None of the top ranking leaders visited the riot affected zones, their activism was limited in organizing peace marches! The responsibility to maintain peace and amity was shifted to the local level junior cadre. Gone were the days when the spirited communists and the industrial labourers joined hands and promoted communal amity. What happened to the tram workers who had shielded the helpless back in 1946?<sup>90</sup> Gour Kishor Ghosh in another article insightfully touched upon the theme of ‘ordinary’ in this extraordinary situation. He said that the present government had been busy in delivering evocative anti-communal speeches without even caring to visit the relief camps. The homeless now needed warm woolen clothes, utensils for cooking, a pair of mugs and buckets and other such small things about which, no one was bothered about.

### *The Brunt of the Violence: Different Voices*

From the above discussion on Babri Riots in Calcutta, it can be safely concluded that the violence in Bengal was much less in degree than it was in other parts of the nation. Yet there is no denying on the part that violence here had been systematic and institutionalized. In some cases, the role of the party cadres and their encouragement to the anti-socials cannot be overlooked also. Yet, I feel this is just one aspect of the complex story. One must locate the

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<sup>87</sup> “Sangha Paribarar Kache Ei Ghotona Binameghe Bajrapat.”, *ABP*, 7.1.2.92, pq

<sup>88</sup> *Karsevak Mukto Ayodhya*”, *ABP*, 10.12.92, p3

<sup>89</sup> “Netara Janni Nichutalar Kormira Otondro Prohori”, *ABP*, 10.12.92,p3

<sup>90</sup> “Hangama Protirodhe Dekha Meleni Partybabuder” , *ABP*, 12.12.92,p1

causes and impacts of a communal riot beyond the short period of abrupt violence. A quick glance on the editorials published in the *ABP* brings out several interesting facets of everyday communal dynamics, especially among the urban middle-classes.

As already mentioned, the majority of the Hindus viewed the demolition of the Mosque and the upsurge of Hindutva politics in North India as an aberration. On 9th December, the following sentences were published in an editorial titled “Maintaining Peace and Communal Amity is the Tradition of the State” (West Bengal):

The common Indian citizens would be on the side of those political parties which had ‘unity, progress and tolerance’ on their agendas. No religious Bengali wants a Vatican. For them, India offers numbers of old pilgrimage sites and temples. Those who forcefully want to resurrect a Hindu temple on the premises of Babri as a testimony to their majoritarian nationalism have not read Rammohan-Vidyasagar-Bankimchandra-Vivekananda and Tagore. They don’t know that Hindu religion is not confined to a particular temple or monastery. If in the Vedic age, the Hindus worshipped only the sky, fire and the air, the modern Hindus are not satisfied even with 33 crore deities. Instead of a temple, a Hindu can find bliss in a rock placed under a tree, or by putting up an idol in his house. This multiplicity is the essence of being a Hindu...Bengal is the land of Auls-Bauls, Saints and Pirs. For a Bengali, a poet’s heart is more pure than Ram’s Ayodhya. This truth must be retained with care.<sup>91</sup>

The Bengali liberal intelligentsia like Sunil Ganguly, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, Sipra Sarkar regularly wrote in the newspapers blaming latent communal stereotypes and inadequacies of governance to curb communalism even after four decades of achieving independence. For example, Sunil Gangopadhyay, one of the most celebrated authors in Calcutta, remarked that it was far easier to blame the RSS or the VHP because their brand of communal politics was direct. But what about those who did not take direct parts in the riots, but at the same time, did not question the demolition also? Gangopadhyay himself encountered many such people who clandestinely supported the marginalisation of the Muslims through these acts of vandalism. In

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<sup>91</sup> *ABP*, 9.12.92, p4

many casual homely get-together and ‘*adda*’, an apparently non-communal educated well-settled Hindu would comment non-chalantly, “After all, Muslims are difficult to trust, isn’t it so?” There were also a host of people who would never vote for the BJP, and yet felt that demolishing an old mosque was not something to worry about. Had not the Muslims in the past destructed hundreds of temples in India? Thus Gangopadhyay, indeed truthfully, located the hidden communalism in everyday lived experiences which he called more dangerous than the blunt Hindutva politics.<sup>92</sup> Sipra Sarkar, a professor of History in Jadavpur University, also wrote about the imminent dangers if the Hindu Right continued to thrive on the national plane. She urged the communist parties to retrospect and adjust their political and ideological tools to combat the strong forces of the right-wing politics.

Apart from the noted intelligentsia, the general readers too took part in this debate. On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1992, Mr. Sunit Ghosh published an article in the *ABP* which targeted the Muslims as the sole culprit of two-nation theory. He also wrote that the Mosque originated only 500 years back while the emotion for Lord Ram dated back to centuries. His article naturally spurred a great repercussion, and letters poured in both in support and against.<sup>93</sup> The Muslim readers accused Mr. Ghosh of being a Sanghi while they also tried to uphold their secular life choices and re-affirmed their trust in secular India. Some, however, pointed at the superstitions and obscurantism in Hindu rituals and accused the Hindus of bigotry. While only a handful of Hindu opposed Sunit Ghosh’s view, the Hindu readers applauded him for having the ‘courage’ to speak the unpleasant truth. In another letter to the editor, one Sobhanlal Bakshi said that though the BJP and the RSS did not deserve support for what it did, the Muslims too must acknowledge the importance of Lord Rama and the intense emotions of the Hindus associated with it. This is what

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<sup>92</sup> “Supta Samprodayikota Sobcheye Bhoyonkor”, *ABP*, 10.12.92, p4

<sup>93</sup> The letters were printed on 14.12.92

Sunil Ganguly had called ‘clandestine communalism’ (*Supto Samprodayikota*) which tacitly provided support for Hindu extremism.<sup>94</sup>

Another reader, Anjana Chakravarty, wrote something very relevant to this work. She said, when she used to watch the VHP sadhus and their followers, she lamented, “Alas! Only if my nation was not so poor, not so illiterate...” She felt pity for the ‘imbecile’ citizens who could not choose between right and wrong because of their abject poverty and illiteracy. Soon, she found out that people who belonged to her status, or may be even higher, who were ‘suited and booted’ in their corporate attire, too clamored for a temple! At the same time, her letter’s concern echoed with many other letters that spoke of appeasement of the Muslims in India and persecution of the Hindus in Bangladesh as the major cause behind the growth of the BJP and the RSS.

Many of my Hindu interlocutors also talked about how they felt a sort of excitement during those violent days. The Hindu middle-class localities of Ballygunge created a voluntary fund and bought ammunition overnight. Ms. Aritra Sengupta, one of my interlocutors, who lived at Ballygunge Circular Road at that time, told me quite proudly how the roof of their house literally became an armory in a few hours. The news of Metiabruz violence soon reached the other parts of the city. “*Muslim-ra khub Baar Bereche*/the Muslims have crossed their limits” was reiterated time and again. Though in most cases violence was limited to the slum areas, the adjoining middle-class localities too faced curfew hours and witnessed route marches of army. Once again, the city was divided into ‘Us/Them’ and anything violent, inhuman, and cruel was ascribed to ‘Them’.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The bunch of the letters were printed under the title ‘Ayodhyakanda’ for consecutive days since 17.12.92 in the fourth pag of the *ABP*.

<sup>95</sup> Sandip Bandyopadhyay. “Kolkatar Jibone Danga”, p25

A riot changes the texture of the city in many ways. Apart from the mere calculations of casualty, the media reports can be an excellent source of understanding the city-life and its people. In the places where the brunt of violence was not directly felt, the citizens found it hard to suppress their excitement and curiosity once they saw the army trucks in their neighborhoods. Many of them were curious about what it meant to be ‘under curfew’. Hence, they came out of their homes and peeped through the street corners, only to be nabbed by the army officers. When they were asked why were they on the roads, they simply replied, “We are out to watch the curfew”/ *Amra Curfew dekhte beriyechi!!* However, for those who were pavement-dwellers, curfew hours were a great predicament to them. They did not have the warmth of a closed enclosure which they could call home. They were shifted by the police from one footpath to another; the march of the heavy army boots simply terrified them beyond limits.<sup>96</sup> The meaning of curfew was different to the elite *bhadralok* as well. They lamented how the bustling city lost its playfulness during the curfew hours, especially in the day times.<sup>97</sup>

The situation was different in the localities where violence was felt terribly. In the temporary relief shelters, insecurities and anxieties among the victims were felt even after a week. Yet in those places too, life was becoming routinized. The reporters found how in the camps of Metiabruz, the men were trimming their hair and beard at the local barber’s. One of the Muslim women went out to buy a pair of shoe. This perhaps gave the army officers who were posted there a sigh of relief as they commented, “Caring to buy a shoe at this hour? Then may be the situation is becoming normal!”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Beckbagan er Pothe Sanghorsho, Sampriti Footpather Dhare”, *ABP*, 13.12.92, p5, similar report was covered by *The Statesman* on December 11.

<sup>97</sup> Both Sunil Ganguly and Gour Kishor Ghosh said that curfew in day hours is a ‘blow to the heart’/ *Chot laage* .*ABP*, 12.12.92

<sup>98</sup> “Tran shibir e Ar Mon Tikchena”, *ABP*, 13.12.92,p1

Indrani Bagchi, a journalist in *The Statesman* wrote an article on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1992. She gave a humorous description of how the city reacted during the riot. Since the Great Calcutta Killing had been wiped away from the collective memory, this ‘culture-ridden’ metropolis did not quite know how to tackle this phenomenon. When the army trucks came and staged flag marches, she wrote: “The young Calcutta *bhadralok* was new to this role. Unsure of how to respond to this alien presence, some saluted, some merely threw up their hands...in fact walking around with hands high in the air became almost instinctive. Milkmen cycled down empty roads with one hand held up, maneuvering uncertainty with the other....” Bagchi gave a fascinating eye-witness account during the riots and brought up lesser known anecdotes. For example she wrote,

On one of our visits there (Kalighat), we were hard put to believe that it was part of the same riot-torn city we all lived in. The prostitutes were at work, the policemen were peacefully munching *phuchkas*. The Goddess Kali was in her temple and all was right with the world!

However, more importantly, Calcutta’s propensity to violence means that it has hardly learnt anything from its past. Sandip Bandyopadhyay remembers that back in 1964, he saw one of his very close relatives collecting candies from a shop which had been looted. His relative was not a communal person, neither did he take part in the riots. But he knew that such violence was common in these times and taking such opportunities was not immoral. However, this man had witnessed the Great Calcutta Killing in 1946, he knew what riots could do to the social fabric of a city, yet at that moment, he enjoyed picking up free candies from a looted shop.

On 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1992, in Bagmari in North Calcutta, a Muslim called Nur Muhammad was killed. He was simply passing by the canal in the morning. Some Hindu youth were sitting nearby at a tea stall. They suddenly found a Muslim walking by and decided to murder him. Such blind hatred and violence seemed impossible and unbelievable even a few days before and

few days after. But in those moments they seemed normal, they were real. On 7<sup>th</sup> December, young women students of a college in Metiabruz told their professor that they would jump to the well if they were hunted by Hindu men.<sup>99</sup>

The riots live on reminiscences of violence and rarely in regrets. A poem which was written by Amritalal Basu in 1926 when Thantania Kalibari was guarded by the Hindu youth, was reprinted in the newspapers in 1946. This was an effort to remind the Hindus of their duties and take inspiration from the past acts of 'bravery'. Sandip Bandyopadhyay thus claims that if Calcutta is about the Swadesi Movement of 1905, about revolutionary patriotism of Binoy-Badol-Dinesh in 1930, the food movement of the 1950s and about Naxalbari Romanticism in the 1970s, it is also about the riots. Riots have formed an archetype in the popular conscience of the city. Perhaps this is why, an old man of Sagar Dutta Lane told him how he was saved by a Muslim in 1946, but even then, living with Muslims did not seem possible: '*Oder sathe thaka jayna*'. Some went even further, they remarked how 'Kalabagan bustee' remained 'intact' even after the riots of 1992, pointing to not enough violence this time!<sup>100</sup>

In the last chapter, I talked about Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay's memoir in which she repeatedly recounted the memories of the riots which her ancestors had witnessed. Her father, Subhendusekhar, was 13 years old when the 1946 riots broke out in the city. After a prolonged episode of intense violence, his neighborhood Nikashipara became relatively peaceful for some time. Young Subhendusekhar for some reason went out for a walk once the tension subsided. Suddenly a small hen appeared from a hidden place followed by a little girl of around ten years old. She ran behind her pet bird calling out its name, "*Meri Chunni...Meri Chunni*" (My

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<sup>99</sup> Replicating what the women did in '*Tamas*', a novel by Bhisam Sahni which was televised in 1988. It was based on Hindu Muslim violence in 1947 in the western border and portrayed the horror successfully in the screen.

<sup>100</sup> Sandip Bandyopadhyay, "Kollkatar Jeebone Danga", p27

Chunni) to get it back to its hiding place. Suddenly a group of rioters appeared, they first killed the bird and then, the girl. Subhendusekhar was numb by this brutal incident. The next day, he enlisted his name in *Shanti Sena* (a peace keeping voluntary organization) and decided to turn a vegetarian and renounced all kinds of violence.

Much later in his life, when his daughter asked him why he stopped eating meat after witnessing what was essentially an incident of communal violence, he replied, “A helpless bird and a young girl....they shared so much love that they forgot about the danger lurking around them...she came out from their hiding...yet a bunch of senseless men killed them in a mindless spree..if this is not violence...then what is it...?”

His example demonstrates that it is indeed difficult to categorize memories and experiences of violence. In 1992 after the Babri Riots, a rally against communal forces and sensibilities took place in late December. Subhendusekhar, now in his fifties, encountered Gourishankar Bandyopadhyay, a veteran leftist leader, at the end of the rally at Park Circus Maidan. Back in 1946, he had enlisted his name in the *Shanti Sena* under Bandyopadhyay’s supervision. He went to greet him and exclaimed excitedly, “We walked after the ’46 riots under your guidance...”

However Bandyopadhyay did not let him finish his sentence. Instead, he said with deep regret in a distant voice of sordid frustration, “Can’t you see we haven’t made any progress since those days?”

This brings back the question: what then was the fruits of 34 years long Left rule? How did the Left negotiate with the domain of participatory religious practices? In this connection, a thesis titled *Hinduism and the Left: Searching for the Secular in Post-Communist Kolkata* by James Samuel Bradbury also talks about the ideological inconsistencies of the Left Front especially in

the matters of religion.<sup>101</sup> A number of the party members told the researcher that since the majority of the voters were not atheists, how could they openly speak and preach against religion? It is true that the CPI(M) had curbed the grass-root presence of the Hindu Nationalism in organizational forms but the party never disregarded social imaginaries around religion. In fact, the cadre approached Hinduism along a spectrum from “atheism to belief, avoidance to participation, without rejecting the social importance of religion itself.” The most interesting evidence of it is how the party cadre arranged Durga Puja involving the local clubs. On one hand, the local club members who were also the party members arranged sponsors and celebrated the autumn festival with much pomp and glory. On the other hand, every Pandal was accompanied by a make-shift book stall built with red cover and decorated with red chairs. The book stalls kept several Marxist books on political praxis, Marxist theories, critical volumes on Post-Marxist ideology along with Bengali classics. They made a small profit from these stalls, and also created an important social space that was (unlike the party office with its closed meetings) very much public, visible and accessible. The stalls not only enabled the party to interact with local supporters but gave a chance for residents to meet party leaders and elected representatives. It must be remembered that the bookstalls were a tradition in their own right, but they depended on the pandals and thus only added to the importance of the event. The book stalls at best can be seen as another *bhadralok* production of communist culture. In many ways, it seems that Hinduism and communist politics have served to moderate each other and advanced a particular idea of secular culture that does not lead to a total rejection of religion in public life. This is to say that the party has operated within and through a Hindu cultural milieu, rather than against it. No authoritative discourse was formulated by the Left against the hegemony of Hindu hegemonic practices. The left-leaning interlocutors in my thesis also accepted that many of their

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<sup>101</sup> It was submitted to the School of Social Sciences in the University of Manchester, UK in 2019. Retrieved online.

comrades secretly nourished communal sentiments though they refrained from any public expression. Bradbury also quotes one communist cultural activist, “Scratch a communist – find a communalist.” His ethnography is based on South Kolkata which developed as East Bengali *bhadralok* refugee colonies. In the 1950s and 1960s, these lands were reclaimed by the migrants by driving the local Muslims away. The refugees had active support from the leftist parties in their movement for rehabilitation. Bradbury writes, the party could neither stem the flow of Muslims out of these areas, nor could they eradicate the deeper communal resentment which some refugees and their children carried as a collective memory.

### **Renewed Hierarchies:**

The much talked about land grabbing affair during this time was not accidental. Kolkata’s entry into the global economy primarily took place through real estate.<sup>102</sup> Because of the high demand for and limited supply of land, commonly due to geographic limitations and political restrictions, prices have ‘skyrocketed’ enabling developers to make fortunes. This, in turn, has fueled land speculations, driving up land values further as the speculators bid for parcels. With the advent of liberalization, the KMDA has shifted from its traditional roles of slum improvement programs and infrastructure provision by engaging in building housing, new area development, and commercial projects through joint ventures with the private sector. The modification in the KMDA’s role began in the early 1990s with its involvement in the central government’s Mega

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<sup>102</sup> Siddhartha Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata*, (Amsterdam:Amsterdam University Press,2015).p218

City Programme.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, the Left Front also assumed a more cosmopolitan and business-friendly attitude, geared towards attracting entrepreneurs, mainly through educational and trading incentives. Long-term plans for urban restructuring designed to support these efforts directed significant funds towards middle-class consumers and their interests. Since the mid-1990s, the Government of West Bengal and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) undertook urban 'renewal' and 'regeneration' initiatives to foster an investor-friendly image of the city by improving its cleanliness and infrastructure. Among them was the 'euphemistically titled' "Operation Sunshine" in 1996 which aimed to remove the hawkers and pavement dwellers out of central areas of the city, relocating them to the urban fringes. The same Marxist regime that had settled squatters, sharecroppers, and slum dwellers in the eastern fringes of the city through land invasions or extra-judicial process, began evicting them in the late 1990s to create townships and housing complexes. This was a new political move through which the Left Front attempted to establish alliances with the *bhadralok* class that longs for a city of hygiene and order.<sup>104</sup> Processes of gentrification, including the forced and imposed displacement, are often represented in conceptualized terms as 'cleaning up' of the city and coping up with the 'decay'.<sup>105</sup> Kolkata's own 'lower classes' throughout the city – rural commuters, hawkers, domestic workers, agricultural labourers, workers in the informal economy, squatters, and refugees – are all obstacles to be removed on the road to recovering the city's greatness. Their existence was the living sign of something in direct opposition to middle-class sensibilities and aspirations. Gentrification has also taken on increasingly diverse forms – discrete and enclosed gated communities have emerged not only on the suburban fringes of the city but also within

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p220

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p205

<sup>105</sup> Pablo S. Bose, *Urban Development in India Global Indians in the remaking of Kolkata*, (New York:Routledge, 2015). pp85-91

established neighborhoods, displacing longtime residents. Thus, driven by confidence and optimism about the future of the Bengali middle-class, electoral politics promoted the idea of a new Kolkata that emerged from the neoliberal economic, political, and cultural redrafting of the urban imaginary.

On the other hand, an unholy nexus was carried out in certain parts of the cities: Illegal construction of multi-storeyed buildings in bustees had become common by the early 1990s. *Thika* tenants were allowed to add additional floors to their properties. Promoters continued to construct new buildings illegally with substandard materials. The Left Front ignored the issue because it did not want to alienate its bustee constituencies. Thus, the belligerent urbanism in Kolkata was in sync with the contemporary Indian urban policy which rested on an aggressive strategy of politico-economic restructuring of space. Through 'creative destruction' at multiple levels, the upscale governance became an essential component of neo-liberal capitalist expansion.<sup>106</sup> The city therefore, is simultaneously a venue and a vehicle for deciding what is saved versus what is discarded, what is built and in what style, and what is commemorated and what is best forgotten. The process of answering these questions also defines categories of social relations and power.<sup>107</sup>

In this new milieu, older schisms get re-enacted daily. The neighborhoods that we have talked about in the thesis are not exceptions to these changes. But being predominantly Muslim quarters, it did not attract ultra-gentrified US styled gated complexes initially. However two interconnected changes can be located in these areas: the rise of Promoter-Raj often took control

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<sup>106</sup>Swapna Banerjee-Guha, "Neoliberalising the 'Urban': New Geographies of Power and Injustice in Indian Cities," , *Economic and Political Weekly* , May 30 - Jun. 5, 2009, Vol. 44, No. 22 (May 30 - Jun. 5, 2009), pp. 95-107

<sup>107</sup> Alexander C. Diener ed. *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place, and National Identity*, (London:Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). p14

of squatter colonies, built illegal multi-storied apartments which have a variety of flats for different purposes like shoe workshops, tailoring factory, residential plots, brokers' offices and so on. This led to the search for 'cleaner' and 'safer' areas among the middle-class elites from both the communities.

The Hindus found it easier to move out due to obvious reasons. This coincided with coming up of new apartments in other parts of the city. The concurrent boom in the real estate, in fact, gave it greater impetus and many old Hindu houses in these areas could be easily sold off for new ventures. New buildings sprung up in abandoned industrial sites and government factories. The middle-class Hindus by choice would never have lived in those areas in the new residential plots. Naturally, many of these apartments were bought by the Muslims who preferred to stay within these enclaves. My respondents told me repeatedly how these properties were sold to Muslims who paid far greater prices than the Hindus. Many Hindus moved away from these places quite voluntarily, and continue to do so. In these neighborhoods, the Hindus lament how their old acquaintances are constantly moving out, making those areas not fit for '*bhadralok*' anymore. This is simply because the Muslims who are replacing the earlier population are not at all 'civilized' and 'cultured'; they show naked display of wealth and have 'unsophisticated taste'. Since the Muslims prefer to remain in these enclaves, the Hindus are becoming more conscious of their identities as neighbors. For example, Mondol Para in Picnic Garden region has been traditionally a neighborhood of Mondals. But the older families are now selling away their land to real estate promoters who are building up medium sized apartments. Being very close to Tiljala, Topsia and Park Circus, most of the new entrants are now Muslims. This makes the residents of Mondolpara think, "See, how they are occupying our old neighborhood/ *Dekhecho Ora kemon sob jaigay dhuke porche.*" Therefore, claiming a rightful place in the city has always

been a contested terrain for the Muslim citizens in Calcutta. Hence, the contestation over and through urban landscapes constitutes a formidable force shaping the negotiation of national identity, citizenship, and belonging. The political geographies of urban space and place derive from power; the city simultaneously produces, concentrates, distributes, and consumes power. That power, in its varied tangible and intangible forms, shapes the spatiality of the urban landscape, structures social relations, and conveys meanings and senses of collective belonging. Urban landscapes, in both their material, symbolic, and mental forms, are therefore constitutive and symbolic of the shifting contours of social relations and national identity.<sup>108</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Bigger Scam**

Collective memory can be compared with the idea of a palimpsest: it originally means a type of medieval manuscript in which new text was written over previous text that had been partly erased. Hence, a palimpsest is something that has been reused, redesigned, and revised while still retaining visible traces of its previous condition. By invoking changing social relations of power, identities coalesce around collective memories of the past, experiences of the present, and aspirations for the future. The processes of determining what is remembered and what is forgotten are highly contingent on contemporary socio-political dynamics, imagined national histories and social relationships in a given space. In this context, something fundamental has changed in popular consciousness of the majority population. I have talked about the insecurities and inhibitions of the Hindu neighbors living in the Muslim majority areas. This is quite understandable as in general the Muslims and the Hindus hardly have been brothers in arms. They have lived together separately without intimacy. Living in close quarters with each other and sharing physical spaces within an urban neighborhood, in fact, have invited more dislike for

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<sup>108</sup> Deiner ed. *The City as Power*, p 21

the Muslims from the Hindus. Often, such communal antagonism has not been that common among others who do not live in Muslim majority neighborhoods. However, this has changed now. One can easily decipher a strong dislike, dissatisfaction and displeasure towards the minorities in general, spilling outside the neighborhood dynamics. Simultaneously one can witness among the Hindus a psychological acceptance for majoritarian and authoritarian democracy that has been forming in India since 2014. In contrast to the earlier era of *mandir* (temple) politics, new Hindutva is a governmental formation with considerable institutional heft that converges with wider global currents and enjoys an unprecedented level of mainstream acceptance.<sup>109</sup> With government backing, the organizations and individuals who previously were peripheral and considered outlandish, now have a seat at the table: whether deciding educational policy and running universities, or through appointments to cultural institutions, economic bodies, and even the judiciary.<sup>110</sup> It has proliferated in the media and educational spaces in manners that are difficult to disaggregate. Articulations of Hindutva-inspired Islamophobia are commonplace in domestic and public spheres where earlier it was aberrant. This makes the existence of collective memory as a palimpsest in crisis. The agenda of neo-Hindutva with its massive resources to obliterate the pluralist past is relevant for Kolkata also. While the older citizens majorly speak about a peaceful co-existence with their Muslim neighbors, the younger generation talks about a sort of permanent cleavage in social relationship. One of my Muslim interlocutors narrated his view on this issue in a direct way:

We always thought that the Hindu Bengalis were very cultured. We often aspired to be like them. In their leisure time, we have seen them discussing about Satyajit and Ritwick Ghatak, or having a passionate debate about the budget proposals over a cup of tea...they were belligerent about cricket teams and football matches. What has

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<sup>109</sup> Hansen and Roy ed., *Saffron Republic*, p1

<sup>110</sup> Anderson, E & Longkumer, "Neo-Hindutva': Evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu Nationalism", *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2018. pp. 371-377 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1548576>

happened to them? All I can hear now is about Modi Magic and Ram Mandir. If we are the victims of this new regime...so are you..Scam to Aap logon ki Saath Bhi Huya/you too have been scammed.

This is indeed true to some extent, because in general, I can locate a sense of collective amnesia to the events that had precipitated the demolition of the mosque. The way the Supreme Court judgment was publicized followed by the announcement of building of a new temple, and eventually the way the consecration ceremony was televised—unless someone has been a keen follower of Indian politics, December 1992 is no more relevant to them. Who are these people whose collective past has been robbed? For a moment, let's talk about the middle-class urban youth who have been major respondents in my ethnographic studies. They belong to those who call themselves as '90s kids' or the 'millennial' with a fond nostalgia, they claim that they have enjoyed the fruits of both the old analog world and the new digital age. They are the one who have fixed the TV antenna on the roof, waited eagerly to watch weekly shows on Doordarshan, felt triumphant when a colour TV and the satellite channels reached their drawing rooms, slowly discovered teenage romance through pretty greetings cards and soft toys, got euphoric about band performances and so on. They are also the one who got smart phones as soon as they reached college or landed with a job offer, enjoyed the unbridled privileges of unlimited data packs, bought new-age home gadgets with EMI, some of them settled in the global north and many moved out of their native cities and found new homes in other Indian states. They got all the fruits of digital age when they were in their prime, in their youth, unlike the older generation who has to learn how to use the smart phone from their offspring or juniors. These 90s kids have not seen the riots and communal mobilizations of the 1980s and 1992. They were either too young or not born yet. Unless they keep a track on the political history of the subcontinent, they do not know much about these events. This is the fun part. They have all the tools to know what

happened 32 years before. A mobile click would bring back memories in seconds. Yet they are the ones who have heartily supported the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on 22nd January in Ayodhya. They uploaded images of the Ram Lalla in their social media profiles, shared short video reels and burnt *diyas* and crackers in the evening. They became the active participants of collective schizophrenia by investing themselves around the symbols of ethno-nationalism and thus, alienated their Muslim friends and colleagues from their social circles, often unknowingly. This is by no means an isolated process. The minority/Othered is now officially reconfigured as an impediment to development, a drain on resources, an alien and socially divisive element that weakens cultural cohesion. They are rendered as a primitive, non-modern and un-assailable remnant of the past.<sup>111</sup> New Hindutva advances through a contingent, decentralized, and flexible series of actions and events that are shaped by localized contexts and imperatives and produces an overall Hindu majoritarian social order. What implications it holds for Bengal is a matter of different inquiry to which we would return in the conclusion of the thesis.

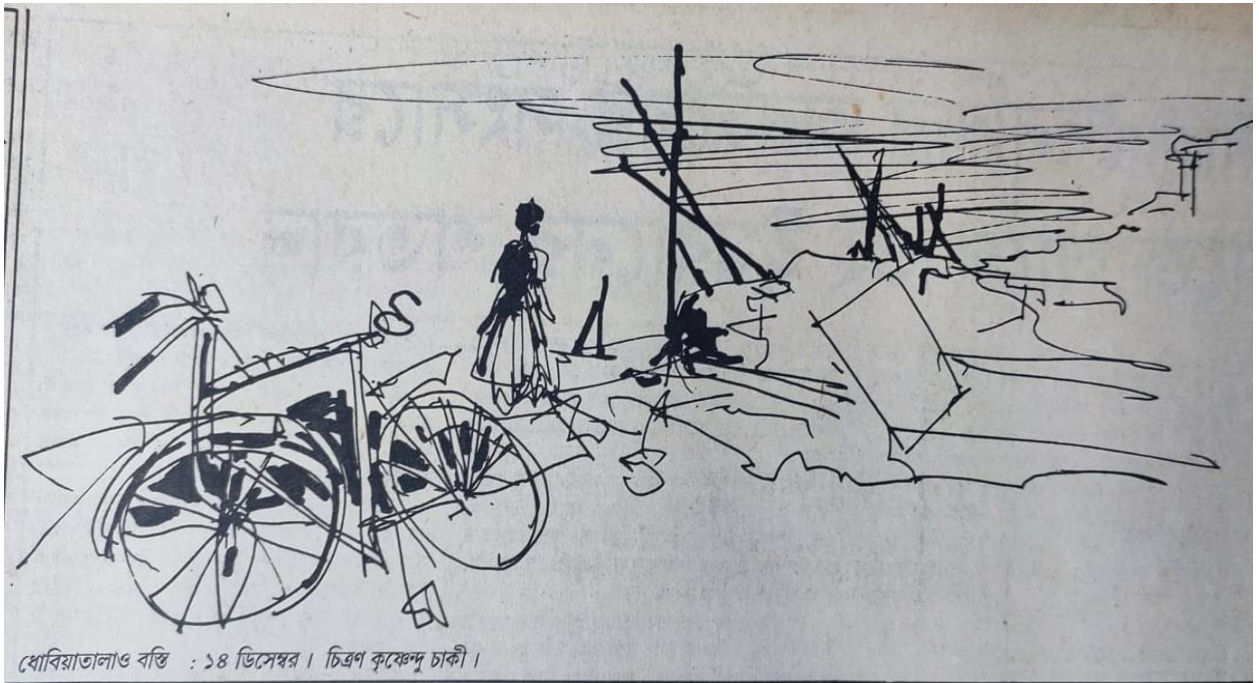
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<sup>111</sup>Angana P. Chatterjee et.al. *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, (Oxford: OUP, 2019).p12

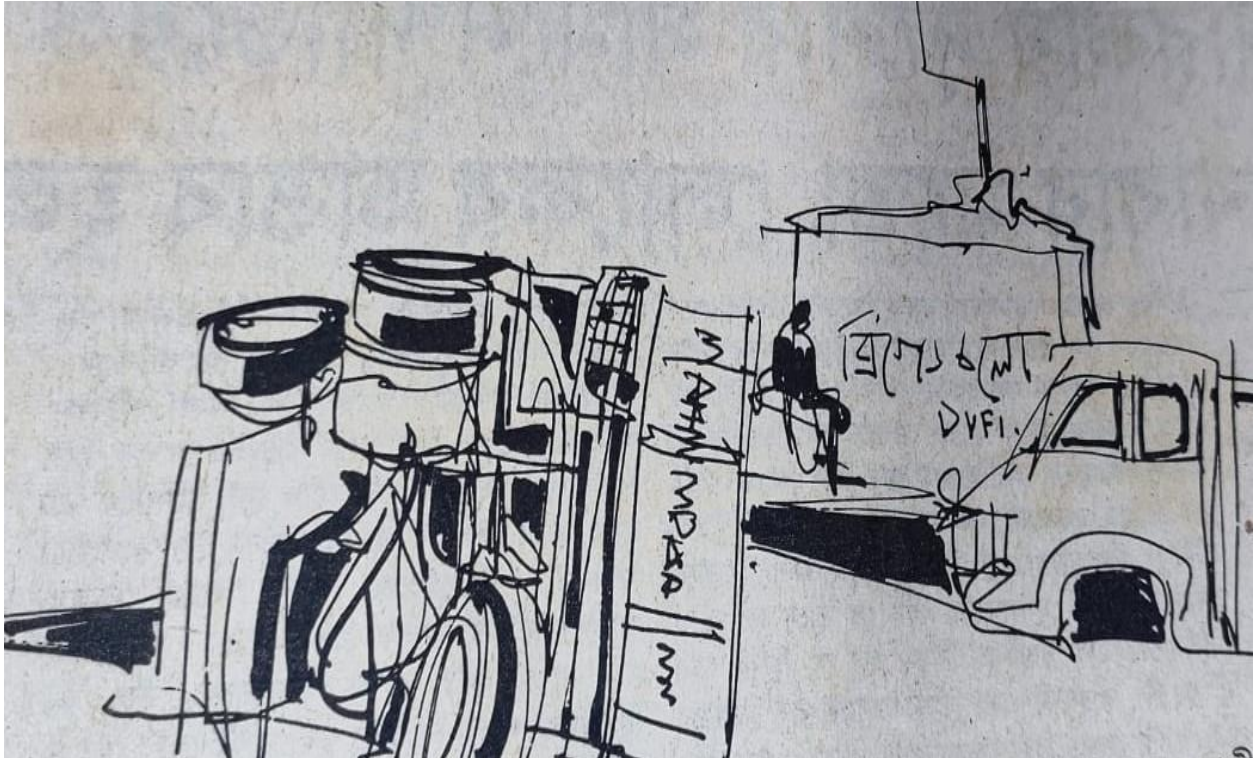
## IMAGES



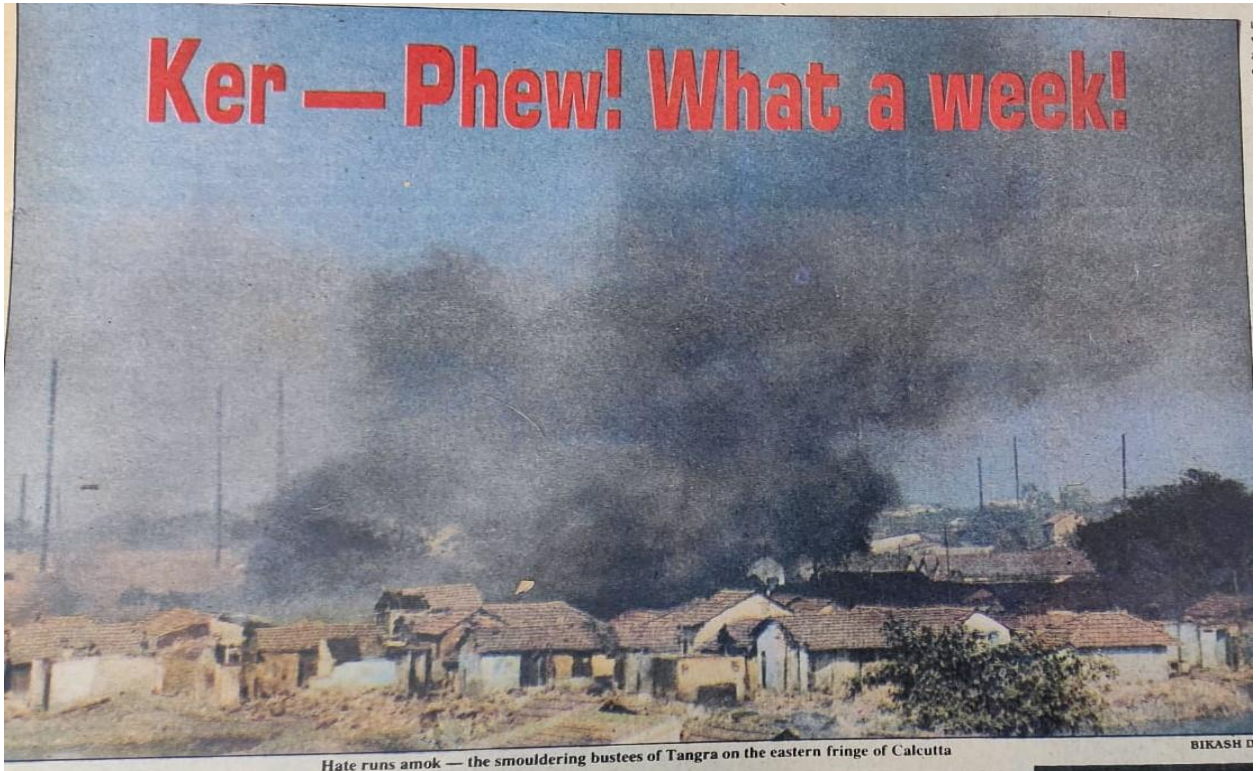
Demolition of the Babri Mosque, Source: 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1992, ABP



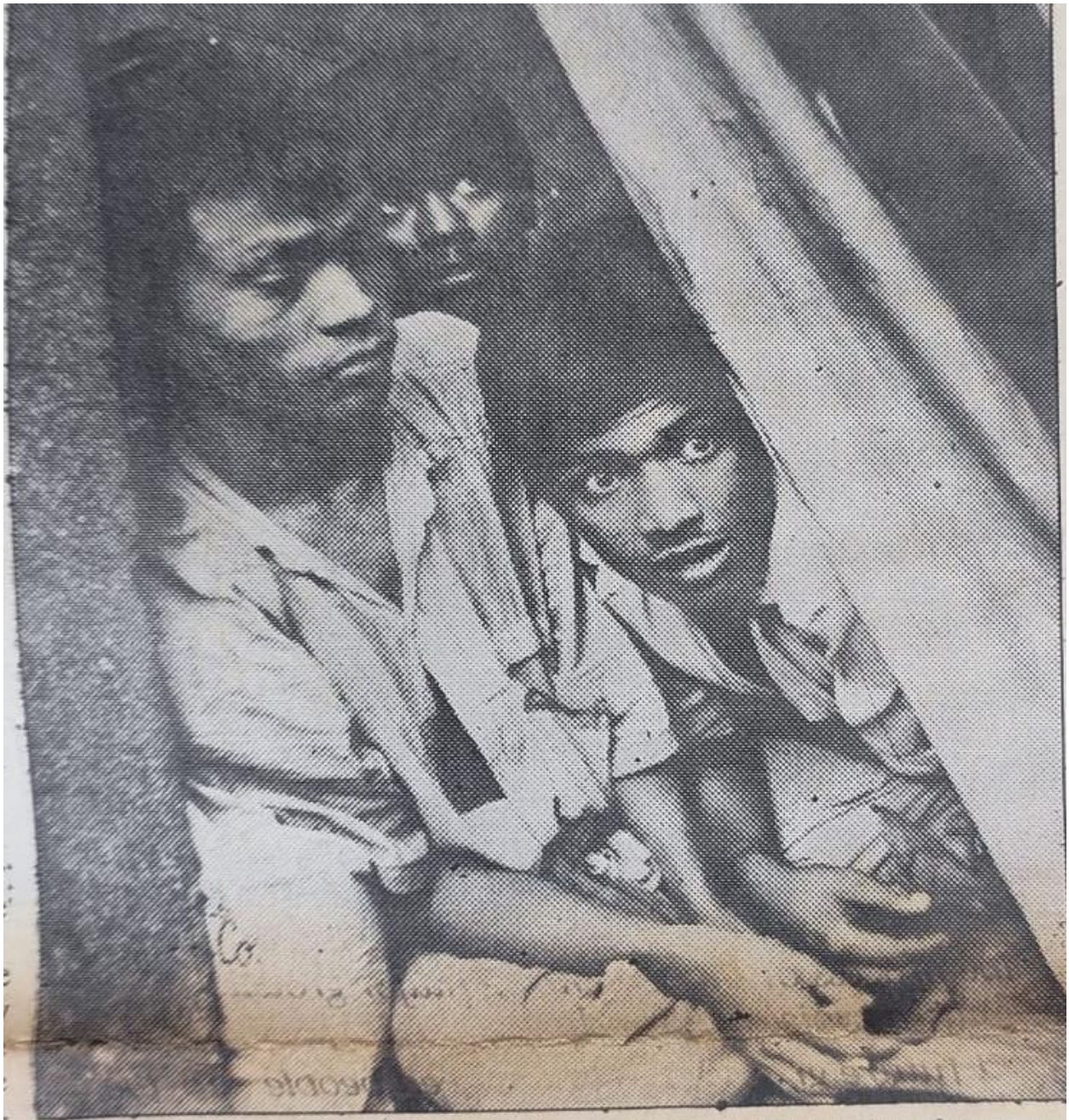
Artistic Representation of riot affected Dhobitala Camp, Source: 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1992. ABP



Artistic Representation of riot affected Kashyap Para, Source: 15<sup>th</sup> December, 1992, ABP



. Burning Slums at Tangra, Source: 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1992, The Statesman



**Pavement-dwellers on Madan Street, witnesses to the disturbances on Wednesday night, in Central Calcutta. — The Statesman.**

Pavement Dwellers during the Curfew Hours, Source: 14<sup>th</sup> December 1992, The Statesman



Rebuilding the Dhobitala Slums, Source: 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1992, The Statesman

## CONCLUSION

The thesis has broadly explored how middle-class Hindus and Muslims perceive each other and position their identities within the complex landscape of relationships in specific socio-political conjectures embedded in the politics of spatiality. This makes the scope of inquiry challenging, the findings are also difficult to quantify. It consistently highlights the structural hierarchies and systemic inequalities inherent in urban life, observable both in times of peace and during episodes of riot violence. Inequalities became more pronounced after the 1990s with the advent of a predatory neoliberal regime impacting the urban spaces. This can be understood better with real-life examples, which I have tried to provide throughout the thesis.

Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay depicted the advent of the '90s in the latter parts of her memoir. First, she talked about how many of her Hindu middle-class acquaintances became busy preparing for the Joint Entrance Examinations (JEE) to secure admissions to engineering colleges, which was a gateway to a stable livelihood.<sup>1</sup> The English tutor of her neighborhood suddenly became very busy attending to an increasing number of students. Many young adults enrolled in the Moulali Youth Computer Training Center, as their parents thought that a basic knowledge in computer application would be indispensable in the job market. One of the most meritorious students, Raju, opted for Computer Science after he cleared the JEE instead of electronics. Initially, people were surprised, but Raju soon became the poster-boy of the neighborhood. He was the first to arrive at the office in corporate attire with a tie and he was also the first to use the pager when it

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<sup>1</sup> There were remarkably few advances in Engineering and Technological education in Bengal from the 1960s to 1994 as the number of the colleges remained at only 12. During the 8<sup>th</sup> Financial Plan Period, two additional colleges were established by 1996. But it received momentum in the subsequent financial periods with a significant increase in the number of the government and the private colleges affiliated to West Bengal University of Technology (later renamed as Moulana Abul Kalam Ajad University of Technology) with expanded seat capacities. [https://banglaruchchashiksha.wb.gov.in/technical\\_education](https://banglaruchchashiksha.wb.gov.in/technical_education)

became available in the market. Interestingly, he was also the first person to receive a beautiful red Maruti car as dowry when he got married. Mukhopadhyay writes poignantly<sup>2</sup>,

By the end of the 1990s, everyone was somehow convinced that machines would be the new divine in the upcoming millennium. Only technology can save us now. The ordinary clerk who used to feel content after buying a modest sofa-cum-bed for his family, suddenly felt inadequate, unable to meet the new standards of success.

As Mukhopadhyay resided in a mixed neighborhood, she could distinguish how ‘being settled’ meant different things to different communities. While the middle-class Hindu Bengali families aimed for success in exams like the JEE and bagging high salaries in the private sector, the lower-class Muslims in Addibagan responded to the changes in a different manner. The new conspicuous consumer culture attracted them equally but they lacked the cultural and social capital to materialize their aspirations. Hence, they started travelling to the Gulf countries, and also to Mumbai. Some adolescent boys ventured there even without informing their guardians. After a year, they returned in flashy new attire like trendy sunglasses and sneakers. Their new appearance influenced many others, leading to a noticeable absence of teenage boys in Addibagan over time (*kishore-shunyo*). In their place, a number of STD booths sprang up in the localities which were the sole connection between the young migrant labourers and their hometown. They returned to their home occasionally, with fancy gifts for their family. Cheap versions of the latest gadgets now adorned their modest houses. A few among them, however, returned to Calcutta permanently due to extremely exploitative working conditions in the distant cities, but they were the exceptions.

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<sup>2</sup> U. Mukhopadhyay, *Kolkata 46*, (Kolkata:Gangchil), 2019. p.200

Obviously, not all Muslims responded to the changing scenario in the same way. For example, Mainul Islam (now in his early forties), a Bengali Muslim, grew up in a small one BHK flat in Topsia. Both his parents were highly educated, and taught him liberal values. He attended South Point High School, one of the most well-known English medium schools in South Calcutta. Eventually, he pursued a lucrative career in the IT industry, working in various Indian metro cities and spending a significant period in the USA. In a picturesque coffee-shop in Hindustan Park, indulging over a cup of coffee, he told me about his ordeal when he tried to find an accommodation for himself in the more ‘gentrified’ parts of Kolkata. As he ‘did not look like a Muslim’, and spoke fluent English, the sellers often used to get confused. While initially they agreed to sell or rent out their property to him, once they knew his name, they withdrew their offer. After much deliberation, he bought a spacious apartment in Golpark. There too, he faced non-cooperation and discrimination from his immediate neighbors, all of whom were extremely well-placed in their lives. I asked him, why he did not opt for an accommodation in Topsia or in other Muslim dominated neighborhoods. He explained, “I love visiting my old flat in Topsia occasionally. I have many friends there. My parents still celebrate the festivals in the old neighborhood. They feel more at home, more connected to their culture when they are in Topsia. But I have outgrown that environment. I no longer find complete solace in any of those neighborhoods.”

Just like decolonization, thus, privatization and globalization meant different things to different people. I could locate a fundamental shift in the ways the economic transformation, ushered with global enterprises, impacted especially the Muslim youth. As demonstrated by the Sachar Committee reports (2006), the state-controlled hierarchical enterprises stymied their participation in the economic workforce. Despite opening a Pandora’s box of inequalities in context of

neoliberal regime, the new economic initiatives, also offered a bunch of fresh opportunities to the Muslim youth. It has also led to unprecedented connectivity between different Eastern cultures. Often this culminates in a conscious amalgamation of Western consumerist modernity with new ascriptions to Islamic cultures and lifestyles.<sup>3</sup> This, in turn, generates a sense of insecurity and anxiety among the Hindus in general who feel uncomfortable with the increased presence of Muslims in the social space. This has been shown in the fifth chapter of this thesis which discussed the narratives of the Hindu middle-class. The pattern of connecting fears of ‘Muslim takeover’ to acts of transmigration and globalization is resonated throughout Indian cities having mixed domicile. For example, in the ethnographic work by Catarina Kinnvall, she met a Hindu businessman from Ahmedabad, who told her<sup>4</sup>:

There is a rise in Muslims in India. They are spreading and migrating from abroad because of Gulf money, the breaking up of the Soviet Union, the Talibans. What is happening is that while Hindus have small families, Muslims have large ones which affect the rise in Muslims in this country.

In this connection, Kinnvall harps upon the idea of ‘chosen trauma’, which revolves around a notion of a unified Muslim ‘enemy-other’ against whom ‘the Hindus’ can unite and project their anger and hate. Chosen traumas are more likely to resonate with their audiences in cases of rapid change and uncertain structural realities – in times of increased existential anxiety and ontological insecurity. The chapters in the thesis argue that such chosen trauma also rests in the generational and collective memory of the citizens. Thus, during every riot, violence on the other

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<sup>3</sup> Surinder S. Jodha et. Al. ed. *Marginalities and Motilities among India’s Muslims: Elusive Citizenship*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2024). This volume discusses the multifarious impact of globalization among the Muslim citizens including some case studies on different Indian states. see Chapter 6 on “The Old and the New Muslim Middle Class: Classificatory Practices and Social Mobility” by Tanweer Fazal for more details. Also, see *Beyond Hybridity and Fundamentalism: Emerging Muslim Identity in Globalized India* by Tabassum Ruhi Khan (New Delhi: Oxford, 2015) which particularly focuses on the Muslim youth as competent consumer citizens.

<sup>4</sup> C. Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security*, (New York: Routledge, 2006). p158

party is legitimized on the basis of actual as well as imagined trauma the latter have inflicted on the perpetrator. To understand this better, along with the events of violence, I also focused on the everyday as the primary site of inquiry. For, it was in the ordinary, in the mundane, and in the routine that the most resilient forms of prejudice and ways of navigating them remained etched.

Generally, academic volumes have a unidirectional research question which they try to answer through various methodological approaches. In contrast, the present thesis attempted to bring up the complex issue of co-habitation in a mixed neighborhood during a long span of almost six decades. Rather than concentrating solely on Muslim marginalization or Hindu dominance, I offer a comprehensive perspective on what it means to live together separately. This approach has made the task more challenging on the one hand, and on the other, it has opened up new possibilities for understanding community dynamics. Finally, the thesis demonstrated how the urban landscapes, in both their material, symbolic, and mental forms, play a crucial role in shaping and representing evolving social relations and national identity.<sup>5</sup> By making legible social relations of power, identities coalesce around collective memories of the past, experiences of the present, and aspirations for the future. This is a continuous process which happens against a constantly evolving backdrop of construction, destruction, and renewal shaped by complex politics of identity and place.

Therefore, the thesis, apart from talking about the communal schisms, also seeks to understand Calcutta's urban dynamics through the lens of its inner boundaries, both physical and social, and how these have evolved and influenced its socio-spatial fabric over time. During the 1940s, Calcutta experienced profound upheaval: it endured the impact of World War II, witnessed the

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<sup>5</sup>A.C Diener and J. Hagen ed. *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place and National Identity* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). Introduction pp1-22

severest famine in the subcontinent's history, suffered through intense communal violence resembling civil war, saw the rise of massive anti-colonial and leftist movements, and was gripped by widespread labor strikes. Decolonization and Partition resulted in a massive influx of refugees and internal migration of religious minorities. These events collectively led to significant urban disorganization, countless deaths, and ultimately, the birth of a new nation state with a democratic government. The profound transformation of the city during this decade continued to have lasting effects in the years that followed. On the one hand, Hindu migrants from East Bengal faced challenges such as the quest for security, struggles with rehabilitation, and battles for citizenship rights. The general population grappled with food crises, unemployment, inflation, and social upheavals. After independence, the spatial divisions of the colonial city persisted. The indigenous upper classes, comprising capitalists, landowners, political leaders, and senior government officials, took over the areas previously reserved for the British. On the fringes of South Calcutta, the *bhadralok* refugee squatters were constructed often by driving away the lower-class Muslims, who in turn, fled to the well-designated Muslim neighborhoods for greater security. Each event of communal outbreak led to re-ordering of physical space within the cityscape which gerrymandered the imagined boundaries among the communities. Thus issues of homeland and religion became crucial in articulating everyday forms of identity for both the Hindus and Muslims in the transitory phase.

I have also argued how various forms of violence in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s culminated in the riots around this time. It also carefully investigates the responsibilities of the Hindu right wing parties in spreading rumors and fueling communal violence. The routinized form of soft violence towards the Muslim minorities (in terms of discrimination in employment opportunities, or taking away their customary rights or diminishing of cultural symbols in the

city) made Calcutta emerge as a 'majoritarian city' in this period.<sup>6</sup> Hence it is important to examine violence not as an isolated act, or a series of isolated acts, but rather as a total social phenomenon. The study of violence must consider the antecedents and the enabling conditions of initiating an act of violence, the forms that it takes, the wide sections of society that it involves, and the consequences it has both near and far. Therefore, there is violence involved in the unrelenting construction of enemies of the nation, and the concomitant denial of equal rights or respect to the latter. In this analytical prism, the violence is unceasing, partly unconscious and often disguised. At this point, the thesis also provides a probable explanation for absence of major communal riots after 1964 until 1992. The historical sources suddenly fall silent at this point on the issue of Hindu-Muslim communal disturbances. From the tertiary sources available on this period, it seems that the frequent lock-outs, gheraos, labour insurgency, food movement, strikes and rallies were slowly changing the political climate of the city. Throughout the period, the communists were successful in bringing up certain issues which touched *ghatis* and *bangals* (terms used to refer to people of West and East Bengal respectively), Hindus and Muslims alike. Their ability to combine, formulate and implement a joint programme of action, and their capacity to mobilize effectively different sections of the people gained them remarkable popularity. The oral interviews that form the most important part of the thesis also corroborate this explanation. The interlocutors, almost unanimously, commented that after the Hazratbal incident, they could not recall significant moments of communal insurgency.

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<sup>6</sup> Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, "The Making of a Majoritarian Metropolis: Crowd Action, Public Order, and Communal Zoning in Calcutta", in T.B. Hansen and S.Roy ed *Saffron Republic*, pp,130-157

This is precisely the moment from where the thesis looked beyond the conventional sources of historiography. The oral narratives of the middle-class Hindus and the Muslims help to move beyond the binary of 'riots' and 'absence of riots'. Instead, their candid stories emphasize the significance of neighborly interactions that are both voluntary and involuntary, and require necessary adjustments in mutual relationship. These chapters on ethnographic evidence evoke a sense of 'in-between-ness' in multiple dimensions. For instance, the Muslims, irrespective of their heterogeneity in terms of linguistic, ethnic and class positions in the city, complain about various modalities through which they have been rendered as 'second-class' citizens in the city. Yet, at the same time, they demonstrate their confidence in the present TMC regime in Bengal in matters of providing safety and security. Also, many of them remember the three decades of the Left rule as a golden period of Hindu-Muslim amity. Hence, while they feel jittery about the nation-wide rising tides of Hindutva, they do not think anything of that kind of aggressive violence towards the minority would ever be possible in Kolkata. Yet, on the one hand, they feel organically connected with the typical Muslim neighborhoods, on the other, they sense a sort of estrangement once they step out of their familiar zones. Despite having a strong preference to live in the enclosed *mahallas*, many of them wish to find another accommodation in other parts of the city, which are not dubbed as 'mini-Pakistan'. Most importantly, almost all of the interlocutors are devout Muslims; they follow the Islamic mandates religiously. At the same time, demolishing the popular myth of practicing orthodoxy in all spheres of life, each of them agree that achieving secular education and securing a respectable profession are their priorities.

The Hindu middle-classes perceive that their privilege is diminishing over time. What comes up from their interviews is an intense urge to prevent the Hindu private sphere from becoming profane due to proximity with the Muslims. While they cannot but notice the rising trend of

education among the Muslims, they also feel that obtaining mere academic degrees would not make the Muslims equal to them. Again, in numerous instances, certain sections of the Muslim community possess greater wealth than the middle-class Hindus. This aggravates Hindu insecurity; they feel a sense of minority-ism within their neighborhood. When many of their acquaintances move or plan to move to other neighborhoods, the sense of deprivation and lamentation increase manifold times among the interlocutors. Many of them directly accuse the TMC regime for such 'aggrandizement' of power among the religious minorities. A 'politics of distinction' play a central role in shaping the identity and politics of the Hindu middle-classes which is manifested through maintaining socio-spatial distance from not only Muslims, but also from the urban poor in general. Discursive representations of new middle-class lifestyles have been increasingly interwoven into creation of an urban aesthetic based on the middle-class desire for the management of urban space on the basis of strict class-based separations.

Such processes of spatial purification also represent a political project that centrally involves the exercise of state power within an emerging civic culture of the new middle-class. The politics of urban development reflects the ways in which the state shapes middle-class identity and consequently helps consolidate a base of support for economic restructuring. The last chapter of the thesis has demonstrated how this process was aided by a sudden boom in the sphere of real-estate investment in Calcutta, which is usually taken to be the safest form of capital expenditure. This is also comparable to what was happening around the same time in Bombay and Delhi. "Operation Pushback," a government campaign in Delhi in the 1990s was designed to forcibly return alleged illegal immigrants to Bangladesh. Such immigrants, living primarily as slum dwellers in Delhi were characterized as threatening infiltrators invading the Indian nation-state. In Mumbai, the Shiv Sena has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to use the political

rhetoric of Bangladeshi immigrants to further its long-term anti-migrant/anti-Muslim agenda. This campaign, based on the politicization of religion and ethnicity, has merged with local state strategies that have targeted working class squatters. In such cases, since the urban poor usually do not have formal documents for identification, many of the targeted individuals in Delhi and Mumbai had been Indian (rather than Bangladeshi) Muslims (especially from West Bengal).<sup>7</sup>

The increasing psychological as well as physical segregation of the Hindu and Muslim residents in the mixed neighborhoods can also be explained by the concept of ‘predatory identities’ as theorized by Arjun Appadurai.<sup>8</sup> He thinks that predatory identities emerge out of pairs of identities, which have long histories of close contact, inter-mixing and some degree of mutual stereotyping. Occasional violence may or may not be part of these histories, but some degree of contrastive identification must always be involved. One of these pairs often turns predatory by portraying itself as a threatened majority; which is defined as a ‘we’. This kind of mobilization is the key step in turning a benign social identity into a predatory identity. Predatory identities are almost always majoritarian identities. They emerge mostly in those circumstances in which majorities and the minorities can plausibly be seen as being in danger of trading places. Majority identities, in this context, successfully mobilize the ‘anxiety of incompleteness’ about their sovereignty. Incompleteness is not only about effective control or practical sovereignty but more importantly, about its purity and its relationship to identity. It makes the minority an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole. Hence, the very idea of being a majority is a frustration because the minorities remind them of this small and frustrating deficit, and thus

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<sup>7</sup> Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an era of Economic Reform*, (London:University of Minnesota Press, 2006). pp139, also pp167-170 for specific discussion on urban space, Hindu Nationalism and the middle-class

<sup>8</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, (USA: Duke University Press, 2006).chapter 4, pp49-88

unleash the urge to purify. This is why, many Hindu enclaves within mixed neighborhood areas do not allow Muslim tenants or buyers to own property in their designated areas. Those who have the requisite capital, simply relocate to other more ‘gentrified’ localities to cope up with the ‘anxiety of incompleteness’.

However, beyond the micro-spatial politics of communal otherization, the phenomenal growth of the BJP in the electoral scene over the last decade also deserves some attention. The BJP’s increased vote share in Bengal is not an isolated process. The thesis has adequately demonstrated how permanent fault-lines between the communities have always existed, and how the communist government, in spite of having a three decade long rule, did not have a counter authoritative discourse to combat inner communal sensibilities. The crushing defeat of the Left by Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress in the 2011 assembly elections, and subsequent political upheavals in the post-Communist Bengal, has offered an immense opportunity to the Hindu nationalists. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP not only bagged two seats, Darjeeling and Asansol, it also emerged second in three other seats— Kolkata South, Kolkata North and Maldaha Dakshin. Above all, the party secured 17.02 per cent vote share raising its 2009 score of 6.14 per cent. This performance far exceeded its previous record of 1991, which occurred in the context of the Ayodhya movement. While in the assembly elections of 2016, the BJP won three seats, in 2021, the number increased to 77 seats. The Left front did not manage to win a single seat this time. Competitive communal politics polarized the electorate further. While Mamata Banerjee got the maximum advantage of this polarization, the Left became the

major casualty, and the BJP definitely benefitted as pro-Hindutva, pro-Modi and anti-Mamata votes got consolidated behind the party.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, an ultra-Hindu group, the Hindu Sahmati (2008) emerged in West Bengal, talking of Hindu resistance and spreading hard-line anti-Muslim message. For example, on 16 August, it celebrates Gopal Chandra Mukherjee, who ‘saved’ many Bengali Hindu families during the ‘Great Calcutta Killings’. For Sahmati, Gopal Mukherjee was a devout ‘patriot and a nationalist’. Hindu Sahmati renamed Mamata Banerjee as Mumtaz Bano and accused her of Trinamool’s connection with Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. Unlike the Sangh Parivar that insists on maintaining a pure vegetarian diet especially during the Navratri festivals, Hindu Samhati does not indulge in this debate. They strive to gain support specifically from the Bengali Hindus, who, to some extent, have different priorities than their North-Indian co-religionists. For example, Durga Puja for the Bengalis is more than a Hindu ritual, it embodies a carnivalesque spirit, and consuming non-vegetarian food especially on Navami (which is celebrated as Navratri in rest of India) is widely encouraged. In fact, the Hindu Samhati members openly endorsed a start-up called ‘JhatkaByte’ which specializes in ‘traditional meat cutting techniques by the Sanatan Hindus.’<sup>10</sup>

The rise of the BJP also owes to the persona of Narendra Modi. A number of recent academic volumes are dedicated to finding sociological roots of the stellar performances of the BJP in

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<sup>9</sup>Snigdhendru Bhattacharya, *Mission Bengal: A Saffron Experiment*, (India: Harper Collins, 2020). pp7-10. Also see Sambit Pal. *The Bengal Conundrum: The Rise of the BJP and the Future Of the TMC* (India: Bloomsbury, 2021). Suman Nath, *Democracy and Social Cleavage In India : Ethnography of Riots, Everyday Politics and Communalism in West Bengal c. 2012–2021*( New York:Routledge, 2022) for more nuanced work on how the political scene in Bengal has been changing rapidly with the BJP’s historic win in 2014.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/JhatkaOnline/>. This is an attempt of the Hindu nationalists to counter the Islamic preference on ‘halal’ food.

2014 and 2019 national elections.<sup>11</sup> Before 2014, never had the Hindu nationalist movement won an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, and never had this movement, known for its hostility to the personalization of power and for its collegial governance, been so influenced by one politician. Over all, the scholars suggest a number of factors behind this phenomenon. Banking on his image as an efficient administrator and a powerful and compelling orator, Modi ran a high-voltage campaign focusing on the failures of the UPA II government and attacking the dynastic leadership of Congress. The backing of influential sections of corporate India for his pro-business leadership, his proximity with the RSS and with religious heads, and already established presence in the social media embraced by the new middle-class, provided Modi a considerable lead over other candidates having prime-ministerial ambitions.<sup>12</sup> For those who longed for some elite revenge and for restoration of a socially conservative status quo, national populism was a very useful instrument: it conveyed the idea that the relevant unit of society was neither caste nor class, but the ethnic nation, a nation made of the ethnic majority which could rally around a common cultural identity against the internal enemies that are the minorities. In India, Narendra Modi could mobilize not only the middle-class, but the ‘neo’ middle-class, a social category that had emerged from two decades of growth. These were mostly OBCs, like himself, who had migrated from the countryside and hoped to get a good job in the city—not a job in the public sector where the reservations had reached the saturation point, but in the industry that Modi was supposed to promote like he had allegedly done in Gujarat. It can also be argued that the new dispensation combined four features that have also emerged in other

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<sup>11</sup> T. B. Hansen and S. Roy ed *Saffron Republic* (2022); Paul Wallace ed. *India's 2019 Elections* (2020), Edward Anderson and A. Longkumer ed. *Neo-Hindutva: Evolving Form, Spaces and Expressions of Hindu Nationalism* (2020) Angana P. Chatterjee, T. B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot ed. *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India* (2019), C. Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (2019)

<sup>12</sup> Nagesh Prabhu, *Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Politics*. (New Delhi: Sage, 2020). see chapter 5, “Middle Class and Narendra Modi”

countries in recent years, including in Donald J. Trump's America: populism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and majoritarianism.<sup>13</sup> The four 'isms' resonate with the notion of 'sultanism', which Max Weber introduced a century ago to describe situations when power 'operates primarily on the basis of discretion' under the aegis of a strong man. Majoritarian national-populists are authoritarian by definition, since they claim that they embody the people and as the people can only be one/singular, there is no room for pluralism. This explains their tendency to disqualify their adversaries as 'anti-national' or even traitors, and also reject the multiparty system of democracy. Conjuring a constant political, social, and demographic threat from Muslims, whether in Pakistan, Kashmir or as India's Muslim minority, is the constitutive feature of the ideology of Hindutva. The strength of the BJP, here, rests in its capacity to allow ultra-nationalists into the mainstream and frontline positions in national and state government while permitting non-state actors to implement militant cultural policing and other forms of vigilantism.

Modern Hindutva now partakes in many forms of assemblage politics which advances through a contingent, decentralized, and flexible series of actions and events that are shaped by localized contexts and imperatives and yet (re-)produce a Hindu majoritarian social order. This can also be demonstrated through two 'categories' of neo-Hindutva, to be found outside those connected with the Sangh: 'hard' – not reticent about being connected with Hindu nationalism, but, for various reasons, often departing from the positioning and praxis of the Sangh; and 'soft' – often more concealed and prone to avoid explicit linkages with Hindu majoritarian politics.<sup>14</sup> But neo-

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<sup>13</sup> Angana P. Chatterjee, T. B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot ed. *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India* (Oxford: OUP, 2019). see introduction

<sup>14</sup> Under the hard neo-Hindutva label, one might put groups like the Hindu Yuva Vahini, the Hindu Janjagruti Samiti, Voice of India, the Forum for Hindu Awakening, Shri Ram Sena, and various other militant and vigilante

Hindutva is not exactly a schema or framework for categorization, nor is it a typology or taxonomy. The ideology clearly transcends institutions and it has proliferated in the media and educational spaces in ways that are difficult to disaggregate. These trends can be simultaneously global, local and hybridized; they are increasingly expressed and negotiated in online spaces, and are manifested frequently through the language of blasphemy and offence.

The years of Neo-Hindutva maneuvers are not part of the thesis, but it is next to impossible to maintain a strict chronological framework when oral narratives are involved. As demonstrated in the fourth and fifth chapters, all the Hindu and Muslim interlocutors unanimously agree that since 2014, they perceive that their mutual fault-lines have increased in many ways. Bengal did not witness any repercussion of the Gujarat carnage (2002) and Muzaffarnagar riots (2013). But small scale violence has been a regular issue in the last decade. One of the most significant of them was the Dhulagarh riots in 2016-2017. Dhulagarh is a sleepy town, barely 30 kilometers away from Kolkata in Howrah district. The BJP and the RSS had been reportedly active in its rural constituencies. The disturbances began in December 2016 when a group of 200-250 Muslims took out a procession on the Prophet's Birthday. The rally was confronted by the members of Annapurna club, a local club dominated by the RSS members. It is unofficially also known as 'Bajrangi' club. The club members demanded that the procession must be cancelled as the Muslims allegedly carried the 'flag of Pakistan'. The Muslims clarified that it was not a Pakistani flag but a green flag commonly associated with Islam. This initiated skirmish and

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oufits. The soft neo-Hindutva category is inherently more nebulous, and could include the India Foundation think tank, and various international groups such as the Hindu Forum of Britain, the National Council for Hindu Temples (UK), and the Vedic Foundation in America. Soft neo-Hindutva groups are often found in the diaspora, regularly appearing superficially to be mainstream representatives of 'the Hindu community' in multiculturalist settings, but avoiding overt associations with the Hindutva network for diplomatic and pragmatic reasons, out of principle and to be, ostensibly, more inclusive. See, A. Longkumer *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020). Also:

[https://www.academia.edu/37897485/Neo\\_Hindutva\\_Evolving\\_forms\\_spaces\\_and\\_expressions\\_of\\_Hindu\\_nationalism](https://www.academia.edu/37897485/Neo_Hindutva_Evolving_forms_spaces_and_expressions_of_Hindu_nationalism)

rumor spread with great velocity. The following day, many Muslims from neighboring areas destroyed some Hindu property including homes and shops. It is generally held that the Muslims were the major perpetrators, though a few embroidery workshops owned by the Muslims were also burnt down to ashes. This incident serves as a significant example of the escalating politics influenced by Islamic and Hindutva ideologies. Similar patterns have been observed in other riots, especially in the Basirhat violence (July 2017). Clashes on Ram Navami or Milad-un-Nabi, which were unheard before, now are a regularized affair.<sup>15</sup>

The Pew survey reports on tolerance and segregation in India emerged with interesting statistics which greatly confirm the overall finding of the thesis.<sup>16</sup> Firstly, the great majority of the nation's adults—84%—have regarded religion as “very important” in their lives. Around 80% Hindus and 79% Muslims also said that respecting the religion of others is a very essential part of their religious belief. So far, this points to a spontaneous adherence to secularist practice in everyday living by the general population. But this is just one part of the story. The same report suggests that the majority of Hindus see themselves as very different from Muslims (66%), and most Muslims return the sentiment, saying they are very different from Hindus (64%). Religious conversions, and marriages across religious lines, are “exceedingly rare,” for example, with about two-thirds of Hindus and nearly 80% of Muslims saying it is “very important to stop people in their community from marrying into other religious groups.” More than one-in-three Hindus (36%) said they did not want a Muslim as a neighbor. The number is significantly higher for the Jains as 54% of the Jains said that they would not accept a Muslim neighbor. Indians also

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<sup>15</sup> Suman Nath, *Democracy and Social Cleavage In India : Ethnography of Riots, Everyday Politics and Communalism in West Bengal c. 2012–2021*( New York:Routledge, 2022) p132

<sup>16</sup> Pew Research Center conducted nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews of adults in 17 languages between late 2019 and early 2020 (before the [COVID-19 pandemic](https://www.cdc.gov/covid19/)).  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/#:~:text=A%20major%20new%20Pew%20Research,are%20over%20free%20to%20practice>

tend to socialize with members of their own religious group. Significantly, the survey found that despite Indians' acute sense of religious difference, complaints of religious discrimination were relatively low. Only 24% of the nation's nearly 98 million Muslim adults report facing "a lot" of discrimination, although the numbers are notably higher—about 40%—among Muslims living in the north of the country.

In other words, Indians' concept of religious tolerance does not necessarily involve the mixing of religious communities. While people in some countries may aspire to create a "melting pot" of different religious identities, many Indians seem to prefer a country more like a patchwork fabric, with clear lines between groups.<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that between the Hindu and Muslim communities since the pre-modern era, the rules of political game and commercial transactions were strictly restricted to the outside domain. In the familial domestic space which is more intimate, sacred and fundamental for self-identity, it remained entirely exclusive in the manner of the dominant logic of caste society. He regards the external domain as 'mundane' and the inner domain as 'sacred'. The mundane has always been less important in the formation of group identity and hence, the significance of such mutual transaction has been meager. The 'sacred' for both the communities remained exclusive and unmatched and intolerant of excessive contact despite the occasional efforts of the Bhakti and Sufi mystics. Because the sacred was higher than the mundane, the temple and the mosque, the household *Pooja* and *Namaz* remained more significant than the market and the court.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, the best ideology for living together in harmony that Hindus and Muslims of India have been able to attain is a kind of multiculturalism that Amartya Sen calls 'plural monoculturalism'.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>

<sup>18</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Religion. Politics and Modernity", *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Nr. 11, <https://ojs.ruc.dk/index.php/ocpa/article/view/3610>

He means by this phrase, ‘having two styles or traditions coexisting side by side without the twine meeting’; and asks, ‘Does the existence of a diversity of cultures, which might pass each other like ships in the night, count as a successful case of multiculturalism?’<sup>19</sup> This kind of multiculturalism denies cultural freedom and demands unwavering support for staying steadfastly within one’s inherited cultural tradition. He adds, ‘There would be serious problems with the moral and social claims of multiculturalism if it were taken to insist that a person’s identity must be defined by his or her community or religion, overlooking all the other affiliations a person has (varying from language, class and social regulations, social relations to political views and civil rules).’ The inter-communal relationship depicted in the thesis range from ‘plural monoculturalism’ at best to deep-seated suspicion and hatred at worst, that can escalate to violence under certain conditions.

Thus, this thesis is structured around the stories of Muslims and Hindus in mixed neighborhoods in Calcutta, which serve as a repertoire for understanding dynamics of identity formation. My thesis corroborates the generic data and arguments presented by a number of scholars, further; it also shows the nuance shifts one might find in specific contexts. It also offers unique human stories that highlight the unpredictability of human emotions— sometimes conforming to expectations, and sometimes diverging from them.

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<sup>19</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: Illusion of Destiny*, (New York: Norton, 2006) chapter 8 “Monoculturalism and Freedom”, p156

## APPENDIX I

### ***Shaktibad: A Discursive Input into Communal Xenophobia in Early Post-Colonial Bengal***

In the early 1950s, a 200-page book titled *Shaktibadi Samaj* created an uproar in the Home and Political Department of both the West Bengal state government and the central government. It was written by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, published by Harisadhan Chakraborty and printed at 117, Dharmatala Street, Calcutta. The book had lengthy passages on Hindu revivalist philosophies and contained staunch criticism of Nehruvian democracy. Further, it had a dedicated section of pointed and sacrilegious attacks on Islam and its followers in its third part. It also hinted at expulsion of Muslims from India and the need for a strong militaristic government to ensure the survival of 'Vedic Hindus'. This provoked an enraged reaction from the intellectual Muslim citizens of Calcutta, multiple letters of discontent and complaint also arrived from the Pakistan Government. The matter was finally brought before the Calcutta High Court demanding the forfeiture of the book. The publication in question was a product of a philosophical school known as *Shaktibad* based in Chunar, UP, founded by Satyananda Saraswati.<sup>1</sup>

The present piece is an attempt to locate the major tenets of *Shaktibadi* philosophy through the book *Shaktibadi Samaj* in the early years after independence which was a period filled with vulnerabilities in terms of re-ordering of communal consciousness within a tension-ridden inter-Dominion relationship. Amidst the Partition riots and refugee exodus, the philosophy reflected majoritarian Hindu Nationalist anxieties and doubts about the future of the post-colonial nation. More importantly, this brief piece critically evaluates the role of the government authorities in

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<sup>1</sup> The organization Shaktibad Mahamandal (Registered under Act 21 of 1860) had head office at 2, Royal Exchange Place, Calcutta 700001.

how they dealt with the publication of *Shaktibadi Samaj*, which had a potential risk of causing communal trouble.

### **Locating *Shaktibadi* in Janus-Faced Modernity**

The publication of the book *Shaktibadi Samaj* must be seen within the matrix of rising cultural nationalism since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its growth into Hindu orthodoxy, which ultimately led to mobilization of Hindutva politics during the first part of twentieth century (refer to chapter 1). When India achieved independence, the All India Hindu Mahasabha (AIHM), as a political party, held the banner of Hindu nationalism. The other notable organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), preferred to function more as a cultural body, avoiding any direct participation in politics. Yet, the majority Hindu support went towards the Congress, which, however, despite its secularist image, always had a Hindu ‘traditionalist’ strand within it.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the entire discourse of cultural resistance against colonial rule, its political manifestations in the rise of the National Congress, the emergence of the Hindu Revivalist organizations (Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, RSS, and many others) and the constitutional along with extra-constitutional methods of political struggle for independence is complex, dialogic, and never offer any clear differences with each other.

In this context, the publication of *Shaktibadi Samaj* in 1951 was a continuation and modification of the existing philosophy of the Hindu Right Wingers. However, the conditions created by decolonization made matters more complex (see chapter 2). It led to reconfiguring of national

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<sup>2</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Modernity, Citizenship and Hindu Nationalism” in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay ed. *Religion and Modernity in India*. (Oxford Scholarship Online. January 2017).

space—how it was to be perceived, understood, and utilized.<sup>3</sup> Now it was the responsibility of the sovereign Indian state either to justify its secular tenets or to protect and nurture majoritarianism at the cost of insecurities of its Muslim inhabitants.

As freedom was the opposite of subjecthood, it was expected that all the problems associated with the latter condition of life would be resolved in the former, and when it did not, it created frustration and led to a search for new enemies of freedom. The situation was ripe to spread the Hindu nationalist propaganda. In some areas such as West Bengal, which was more directly affected by Partition, local Mahasabha organizers could find many Hindus feeling attracted to the Hindu Mahasabha. In places like Delhi too, which received thousands of battered refugees from Pakistan, the response was overwhelming.<sup>4</sup> The declared path of following ‘democratic and secular statehood’ led to anxieties among the Hindu nationalist groups. Interrogating this model of modernity, where religion would be separated from politics and relegated to a private sphere of the individual, a circular of Hindu Mahasabha raised several pertinent questions:

Will a Secular Democratic State adequately satisfy the aspiration of the Indian masses? Will the new Free State of India solely concern itself with the material happiness and prosperity of the people or will it endeavor to develop the spiritual urge of her people and to subordinate their purely material interests to considerations of higher culture and spiritual evolution?<sup>5</sup>

If viewed critically, these questions are echoed in the pamphlets of *Shaktibad* as well. However, it seems, it’s proponents never wished to rise to power through electoral methods. It called the democratic regime as rule of the weak and nothing but a channel to establish an Islamic

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Masselos, “Decolonized Space: The Reconfiguring of National and Public Space in India”, in E. Bogaerts and Remco Raben ed. *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian societies, 1930s-1970s*, Brill, 2012, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h2zm.11>

<sup>4</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Modernity, Citizenship and Hindu Nationalism”, pp158-160

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

statehood. *Shaktibad* is an out and out offensive doctrine threatening to destabilize all major pillars of modern statehood and administration. The thick archival files maintained by the government officials on *Shaktibadi Samaj* containing meticulous collection of pamphlets and books on *Shaktibadi philosophy* point towards its significance in the early 1950s. Banning of the RSS after Gandhi's death and re-orientation of the Hindu Mahasabha to face this national crisis towards a more conciliatory approach perhaps led to a vacuum in the aggressive Hindu nationalist discourse. The sudden publicity of the book *Shaktishali Samaj* might have been a response to it.

### **Shaktibad: The Philosophy**

*Swami Satyanand Saraswati: The Founder*

Swami Satyananda Saraswati hailing from a wealthy landholding family in Bikrampur was born on Makar Sankranti in 1900.<sup>6</sup> He left home at the age of 14, in search of a *guru*, after the loss of his mother. He pursued the course of *sadhana* in the tradition of 'Ananda Math', around the hills of Chunar. He mastered various yogas and ultimately became the 142nd guru of Ananda Math, following the lineage of Adi Sankara. He started putting his thoughts to paper by the 1930s and gradually gathered more disciples. The prominent ones among them were Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, Arvind Ghosh and Murari Mohan Mukherjee.<sup>7</sup> He focused on public dissemination of *Shaktibad* among the populace, particularly targeting the school and college students. During the Emergency, he was imprisoned by the order of Indira Gandhi. A few years before his death

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.shaktibad.net> This is the official website. It contains the biography of the founder. One can also find several volumes on its philosophy uploaded in this site. <https://www.shaktibad.net/welcome.html> for more details.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.shaktibad.net/biography.html>.

in 1990, he formed the ‘Shaktibad Central Ishavadi Association’ and the ‘Shaktibad Mahamandal’ to continue dissemination of *Shaktibad*.

### *Major tenets of Shaktibad*<sup>8</sup>

As upheld by its proponents, *Shaktibad* presents the truth of human development based on ‘philosophical and scientific pillars’. These pillars bind religion, practices, politics, education and society together—it seems *Shaktibad* directs towards a theological statehood. *Shaktibad* cannot be understood in isolation. Doctrines of *Shaktibad*, *Asurbad* and *Durbalbad* are intrinsically linked to each other. They contain oppositional dynamics. According to *Shaktibad*, Power must be exercised against the devils/*pisacha* and against the *Durbal* (*weaklings*). Power is required to achieve Hindu sovereignty and also to maintain and discipline an ideal society. Such ‘Power’ would be consensual, non-discriminatory and totalizing. This is because trampling of others’ rights and resorting to ‘propaganda’ based on ‘lies, deception and trickery’ are epitome of *Asurbad* or Doctrine of Evils, which has to be powerfully countered. However, *Durbalbad* has the most precarious standing among all of them: it does not directly wish to oppress others, but, indirectly approves a wrongdoer by not opposing his wrong action. These are not merely theoretical doctrines. Once they are applied practically in the context of contemporary Indian situation, their discriminatory and communal colour shows itself evidently. According to *Shaktibad*, India was being ruled by *Durbalbadis*, who were the ‘slaves of the *asuric* (Devils) and the unjust’. This, of course, accused the Nehruvian Congress which could not resist the

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<sup>8</sup> This section attempts to summarize the philosophical preachings of the school. For the sake of uninterrupted flow, it might use direct narrative sentences about the tenets. This, by no means, are my views. Please refer to <http://www.shaktibad.net/booklet.html>. <https://www.shaktibad.net/downloads.html> check these URLs to access the books.

Partition Riots. The devils were the Muslims, who were allegedly responsible for the bloodshed in communal disturbances.

*Shaktibad* has five *Daivi sampads* (*satya, prem, abhay, shanti* and *tejah*) or divine qualities which make it different from other doctrines. These qualities are nonetheless deeply strategic with their political agenda. However, the presence of *tejah/ vigour* determines the possession of true *Shaktibad*. Without *tejah*, the other four divine endowments by themselves cannot lead one to *Shaktibad*. *Tejah* is not anger, because anger is evil, “which comes when *merely* one’s personal ambitions are frustrated... *tejah* is the natural reaction to injustice in humans.” Therefore, *tejah* provides legitimacy to the exercise of offensive methods towards the quintessential ‘Other’ by phrases such as: “cherish vengeance” and “nourish hatred”. Democracy in a land of misinformed public brings nothing but corruption, instability, disruption and an augment in misery for the common man. Similarly, despite high ideals on paper, in practice Communism originates from cultivation of hatred between persons pursuing different jobs. *Shaktibad* must respect “rich people, who contribute generously to the worthy causes of society.” Also, appeasement of Muslims, like allowing polygamy, subsidy for their pilgrimage to Mecca, omission of the ‘true history of Islamic havoc’ from text books, replacing *Vande Mataram* as national anthem due to Muslim antipathy to idol worship and so on, cumulatively lead to championing of *Asurik* Doctrine over *Durbalbadi* Hindu ideologies. Hence secularism is nothing but an Islamic agenda in disguise.

*Shaktibadi Samaj: The Book in Question*

The book in question is divided in three parts. The first two parts describes do's and don'ts of an ideal 'Hindu' way of life. The third part is out and out discriminatory towards Islam and Christianity with sacrilegious accusations to these religious philosophies and their founders. For example, Allah has been repeatedly mentioned as Allah *Mian* who intentionally misdirects people into wrongdoing. Worshipping him is equivalent to *Tamasik* worship which is patent to the people having lower IQ. It also gives out a porno-sexual depiction of sexual passion of Muslim men and women. The intention was to present stories of incest and lustful myths abundantly popular among the Islamophobes. Such a 'porno-nationalist' imagination of the 'Muslim Other' performs two moves at the same time. It assures the Hindu nationalist self of its moral superiority; yet, at the same time, it instills an anxiety about the threatening masculine Other.<sup>9</sup> The imagination of the Muslim as a hyper-sexualized overpopulating Other allows Hindutva to frame itself in a defensive legitimate reaction. This warfare is seen as a product of high fertility sanctioned by religion, culture, and sexual behavior of Muslims.<sup>10</sup> Further, the book describes Islam as a religion of loot and plunder to maintain polygamy. Conquering women and making them sex slaves are also permitted.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As Tanika Sarkar rightly points out in the context of anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002, "There is also the perpetual fear of a more virile Muslim male body that lures away Hindu girls, a kind of penis envy and anxiety about emasculation that can only be overcome by doing violent deeds" Quoted in Dibyesh Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear* ( New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). p80

<sup>10</sup> D. Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear*, (New York: Palgrave Mcmilan), 2011. P.53

<sup>11</sup> The motif of rape performs an important function in Hindu nationalism—it represents a dangerous act indulged in by inimical Muslims throughout Islam's history, it represents the vulnerability of Hindu women, and it represents an always present security threat to the body as well as honor of individual Hindus and the collective Hindu community.

## **Protest from the Muslims: Role of the Government**

Apart from the book, the leaflets of *Shaktibadi Samaj* had immense potential for causing disturbances and encouraging existing schisms. The Muslim intellectuals repeatedly noted its outrageous contents and registered protests with caution. The central and the state government too followed up with enquiries with a view to keeping these within limits. Repeated appeals from East Pakistan against *Shaktibadi Samaj* also embarrassed the government in this context.

The first news of the publication of the book was published in *Paigam* under the heading of “Birat Murkhota” or ‘Great folly’ by A. K. M. Munsef Ali on 10th June, 1952.<sup>12</sup> He ended his piece saying that the low remarks on Islam were too shameful to quote; discussing them was not even an option. Similar matter was reported by *Azad* from Dacca six days after, which had a threatening tone. It said, “India still has considerable number of Muslims living there....the government must ensure that their religious sentiments remain unharmed.”

This book was not received passively by the Central government. The first letter of concern asking for enquiry about the publication arrived from Home Affairs, Delhi to Mr. R K Gupta, ICS, Secretary to the Home Department, West Bengal on July 4, 1952. East Pakistan, meanwhile, sent mails asking for clarification mail to the Home and Political Department about the book on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1952. International pressure mounted on the Indian government when a letter arrived from K. M. Kaiser, Ministry of External Affairs, Pakistan to D. M. Gupta, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, (Ministry of External Affairs, Branch Kolkata) on July 15<sup>th</sup>. It clearly quoted the ‘scurrilous’ passages and asked the Indian government to impose penal measures against the book, its author and its publisher. The Indian government sent the matter to the Legal

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<sup>12</sup> These letters are kept in the archival files.

Section for their inputs. What followed was a long trail of paperwork on whether the book could be prosecuted and forfeited.

The law officer appointed by West Bengal was not very convinced of Islam being the target of the book. He opined that the book was about a certain form of political philosophy and had criticized other religions too, including Hindu priests and even Mahatma Gandhi. Secondly, one must take into consideration its limited reach. The Muslims would not find its copies until they had vested interest in looking for such publications. This too, should not be a matter of concern because the Muslims themselves brought out several booklets against Hindu religion, that too in Urdu which almost made them inaccessible to Hindus. Moreover, every citizen should have confidence in her/his religion and maintain an overall atmosphere of tolerance. He also could not find any problem in describing Allah as Allah *Mian*. As for him, the dictionary meaning of *Mian* is master or Lord, hence it was not disrespectful at all. Also the term '*Asurbad*' was used in generalist terms in a philosophical context, not solely for describing Islam. The language might seem 'eccentric' but should not be charged as offensive. More interestingly, the Legal Remembrancer said that, describing Islam as a religion of plunderers and murderers had been done by Vivekananda as well, but no one asked for legal action against him, why so in this case. Further, the book had controversial remarks against Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi. So it did not fall under the category of religious hatred exclusively against Islam. He finally summed up his statement on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1952, saying that the language of the book undoubtedly was 'crude' but 'law does not punish bad language'. The Indian government forwarded these comments to Pakistan on 15<sup>th</sup> October. It said that the government did not want to trigger fresh controversies by launching a case against the book. The commotion among the Muslims had long died down and it would be best for all to ignore the matter. It is indeed noteworthy *how the psyche of post-*

*colonial government remained very much Hindu* in its attitude. Not a single sympathetic word was used in the official documents about how the Muslims, residing as a minority in a country overtly populated by Hindus, might feel when such hateful tracts prevail on the markets.

Pakistan was not happy with the answers. With repeated nudges from Pakistan, the center finally appointed a law officer to look into the legal affairs. He strongly differed in opinions from the state-appointed officer. For him, the book was chargeable under both sections of Press Objectionable Matter Act, 1951 and under the IPC. Further, he stated, it is not right to ‘die down feelings of minority’ as any Muslim would have been seriously offended by such matter and might harbor feelings of ‘enmity to Hindus’. The book was liable to be drawn to court as ‘criticism for religious propaganda should be in reasonable limits.’ Yet, the West Bengal government did not opt for legal recourse. In a letter addressed to the Deputy Secretary of the Government of East Pakistan on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1953, N. N. Chatterjee, IAS, the Deputy Secretary of West Bengal, gave counter examples of malicious words used against Lord Krishna in a Pakistani publication *Jawab*. He admitted that the author of *Shaktibadi Samaj* did not have ‘happy gift of expression’ in stating his philosophies but that alone should not be reason enough for forfeiture of the book. Also forfeiture would lead to fresh controversies and undue publicity. In fact, the state government’s adamant attitude led to intervention of Advocate General in this matter. The case was far from being over.

Meanwhile criticism against the book kept on appearing in the Muslim Press. A protest was launched by *Imroz* on 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1953, which declared a *satyagraha* to be organized by Muslim Jamat from May 10<sup>th</sup>, if the book was not forfeited. This was publicized by Janab H. R. Chowdhury, the Propaganda Secretary of a certain ‘Muslim Party’. Despite such protests, Calcutta police did not give permission to the Satyagraha to be launched by Jamat. Now from a

diplomatic issue, it reached the sphere of law and order. The Calcutta Special Branch of Police Force wrote to the Deputy Commissioner on 29<sup>th</sup> April giving all the updates. It also asked for prosecution of the book under IPC and Press (O.M) Act if the agitation was 'really strong'. On a separate note titled 'Muslim Affairs' on 22.4.54, it covered the news about the Provincial Momin Conference held on 20<sup>th</sup> April at 29/30 Phulbagan Road. Before launching Satyagraha, the participants thought it would be prudent to ask for the support from other political parties, or else, isolated protests might lead to communal riots. Hence, all the members including heads from bodies such as the Muslim Rehabilitation Society and the Backward Muslim Federation made a plea to the CM on April 29<sup>th</sup>. This was forwarded by Hemanta Kumar Basu, who was an MLA. Evidently, the appeal from the Muslim intelligentsia needed legitimacy from a Hindu politician to make their appeal worthy of consideration.

The repeated appeals from several Muslim groups finally brought positive results. The government declared the copies of the book illegal and forfeited them on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1954. The Home (Press) Department said that the text was deliberately and 'maliciously intended to outrage religious feelings of a class of citizens in India by insulting their religious beliefs...the publication is punishable under 295A and 153A of IPC.'" With this, the harassment of the Muslim minority was acknowledged as harassment done to the Indian citizens, citizens who are most valuable resource in a sovereign democratic nation.

In retaliation, the Shaktibad Mahamandal launched a case against the government regarding the decision of forfeiture of the copies on the basis of infringement of freedom to practise religion. Interestingly, the High Court had to nullify the decision of forfeiture and the books were back to the market. This was yet not the end of it. The state government kept on finding more methods to put a ban on them while the organization tried its best to stay updated on government activities.

## Conclusion

The *Shaktishali Samaj* appeared at a time when an early post-colonial nation state was yet to comprehend and produce strategies of diplomatic maneuvers. The initial official letters trying to justify the publication produced innovative sites of confrontation and contestation among different stakeholders of the state in a newly acquired geo-political space. The Hindu orthodox groups similarly had a daunting task to keep their relevance alive by pushing their notion of homogeneous national culture as strongly as possible. *Shaktibad* echoes Hindutva's collective fantasy of a resurgent Hindu nation embodying violence, pride, and a strong sense of affirmation. However, its choice of terminology is novel. It's proponents never claim to seek Hindu Rashtra per se, instead, they try to aspire to build a *Shaktibadi* society. This could however only be done by getting rid of the Devils/Muslims and Weaklings/Democrats. *Shaktibad* can be compared with a sort of 'schizophrenic nationalism': one that brings together politics of imagination, insecurity, cultural transformation, and social mobilization in a manner that generates violence and fear while at the same time allows for the myth of tolerant Hindus to go unchallenged.<sup>13</sup>

If the book *Shaktishali Samaj* was an attempt of exercising their democratic privilege at the 'pedagogic' level of the educated elites, its propagandist pamphlets tried to do so through the 'performative' level of the masses.<sup>14</sup> The latter campaigned for direct onslaughts on Muslims and asked for complete exchange of population with East Pakistan. Though *Shaktibad* as a school of philosophy is not in the forefront of the contemporary Hindutva matrix anymore, its essences remain unfettered in this domain, couched in more 'secular' coinage. The Hindu right in India

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<sup>13</sup> D. Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear*, p15

<sup>14</sup> One such leaflet 'Saktibadiya Durga Puja' said that worship of Durga would be baseless until the Hindus in Bengal rose against their Muslim neighbours. This leaflet was highlighted by Dhaka headquarters to West Bengal Home and Political Department. But surprisingly no enquiry could be made against the association as their 'office could not be found'. More details: Alleged circulation of Objectionable Leaflet entitled Saktivadiya Durga Puja' in West Bengal, CR 1784/50; B April 1952, 372-385

was by no means a political monolith— not everyone was a communalist in the same way. But by treating all Muslims with the same Islamophobic brush, Hindutva plays a game of fear with many strands.

## APPENDIX II

### CONFLICT AND ACCOMODATION IN CREATIVE LITERATURE

The Partition of India in 1947 does not have many parallels in world history, as it affected so many people when it occurred and has continued to affect uncountable lives ever since. The event had a long, complicated pre-history, as well as a prolonged aftermath.<sup>1</sup> This vast historical literature on Partition primarily engaged with the ‘event’, as historians asked why it happened and whether such an event could have been avoided, and most importantly, who was to blame for it. But then, the focus of Partition studies moved from event to process, or to its long aftermath, and, most importantly, to memories of violence and pain and sense of loss of those who lost their loved ones and ancestral homes. The experiences of other minorities like women and Dalits also came under intersectional analytical scrutiny. The newer histories have been credited for reclaiming individual experiences of violence and displacement. The Partition is indeed remembered in myriad ways by those who suffered, those who watched from the sideline, and those who did not witness it first-hand but heard about it. There are also walls of silence, which are difficult to penetrate.

As a form of representation and construction, memory is deeply implicated with imagination and history. So an engagement with literary archive can be an important and significant way to enter the hidden and diffused narratives of the Partition. The literature becomes sites of resistance and enunciation that challenges hegemonic narratives of identity, power and belongingness. In these

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<sup>1</sup> Sekhar Banerjee, J.Sengupta and R. Roy eds. *The Long History of Partition in Bengal: Event, Memory, Representations*, (New York: Routledge, 2024).see “Introduction”

alternative voices, one can seek to find what the real legacies of 1947 have been through successive generations.<sup>2</sup>

In the sphere of Bengali literature, the collective denial of Partition violence and displacement (in comparison to literary narratives on experiences of the western border) has been a prominent theme examined by both scholars and litterateurs. Silence emerged as a primary psychological defense mechanism, particularly noticeable in the literary representations of the eastern border regions. Sandip Bandyopadhyay's *Deshbhag: Smriti ar Satta* demonstrated how Bengali authors attempted to downplay communal violence and present a sanitized portrayal of trauma. Achintya Kumar Sengupta's *Sakkhor*, Narayan Ganguly's *Ijjat*, and Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Khatiyan* portray a hopeful vision where the protagonists, belonging to the laboring class, transcend religious and caste divisions. Despite depicting violence, the characters ultimately share a moment of reflection, acknowledging the senselessness of it all. These narratives are termed 'banano golpo' (constructed stories), where silence might have conveyed a more sincere message than the stories themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The major anthologies on Partition literature in Bengal are Debesh Roy's *Raktamanir Haar-e* (2018); *Bhed Bibhed* (2004) edited by Manabendra Bandyopadhyay, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* by Basabi Fraser (2008) and Debjani Sengupta's *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengal* (2003) along with *Partition Literature: An Anthology* (2018) by the

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<sup>2</sup> Debjani Sengupta ed, *Partition Literature: An Anthology* ( Delhi: Worldview, 2018). see "Introduction" by the editor

<sup>3</sup> Ashrukumar Sikdar *Bhanga Bangla O Banga Sahitya*, (Kolkata: Dey's, 2005). p28

same editor. Though not collections of stories, critical analysis can be found in Ashrakumar Sikdar's *Bhanga Bangla O Bangla Sahitya* and Manan Kumar Mandal's edited volume titled, *Partition Sahitya- Desh-Kal-Smriti*.(2014).

Overall, however, if seen critically, the horrific reality of the Partition experienced in riots, arson, looting, murder, rape, abduction and hairbreadth escape, is evident in many of the stories. The stories encapsulate the universal themes of love, matrimony, birth, and the meaning of land and property which acquire a new poignancy in times like these. The tales also explore the sense of loss, separation, migration, rehabilitation, rootlessness, identity, belonging, dislocation, relocation, nostalgia and longing felt by communities facing the upheaval of a divided nation.

I am not an expert in this field. In fact, the gamut of partition literature is so wide, encompassing stories, novels and poetry from both Bengals, it is difficult to sum them up in a few pages. Rather, I feel that the beauty of creative literature lies in its non-generalizing and non-essentializing tendencies, they portray that each human emotion is unique in its own way. In this small piece, I have chosen a few short stories which are relevant to the essence of this thesis. They depict events in different time periods and have entirely different plots than one another. Yet, all of them are based on the predicaments of an urban life and evoke the theme of *Ajantei bibhajan hoe jay*— something the ethnographic chapters in this thesis also pointed out consistently.

## 1. Shada Ghora by Rameshchandra Sen

The story is set in a Calcutta neighborhood which had just become relatively peaceful after the (1946) August riots. Suddenly, a magnificent white horse appeared at the local horse-carriage stand. It searched for food, but found only litter and filth. The local people speculated that its owner or coachman (*Sahish*) might have been killed. The young boys in that *para* were thrilled by the unexpected appearance of a horse. They petted it, they were fascinated imagining that the horse must belong to an elite wealthy family.

Meanwhile Jamunaprasad, a 22-23 years old dark-skinned youth managed to ride the horse. He was known in the locality for black-marketing movie tickets. During the riots, he had led his men, guarded the local Hindu temples and gained popularity. The young boys and Jamuna named the horse Chand (Moon). However, soon it was discovered that Chand had an injury in one of his legs and it started refusing food, growing sicker by the day. Everyone feared that his days were numbered. At this point, a new character appeared: A bearded burly man in a soiled lungi and a fez cap. Being visibly Muslim, he surely drew attention towards him in the Hindu *para*. More so, after the riots, he was clearly unwelcome. Suddenly, he noticed the horse which was languishing, he approached him with tender care and called him "Sohrab", which ironically is another name for Chand. He revealed himself as the former owner of Chand. Chand used to draw his coach. His business had been jeopardized during the riots and he lost Sohrab amidst the turmoil. Sohrab immediately recognized his master. He even took water and food from him. Suddenly, they could hear a commotion and correctly guessed that a Hindu riotous mob was approaching.

The old *Sahish* looked frantically at the boys. Sohrab too seemed to sense the threat his master faced...Nante (one of the boys) assured the old man, "You must not worry."...The mob drew closer....Jamuna, Nante, Habul and others shielded the coachman by forming a circle. Hrishikesh (he was elder than the rest) tried to pacify the mobs, "He is innocent. Please don't harm him."

Several voices sprang up from the mob....He is not a human, He is a Satan...How could you forget Metiabruz?.....A tooth for a Tooth...

Hrishikesh tried to defend, "Don't you know how many times, they have also saved us?"

The discussions abruptly halted as a skirmish broke out between them. Suddenly, the military arrived, they started to fire causing everyone to scatter and seek shelter wherever they could. Jamuna and the old Muslim coachman hid together in Hrishikesh's house. The military conducted flag-march and soon silence descended over the area. After an hour, when the boys, Hrishikesh, Jamuna and the coachman came out from their hiding, they were horrified to discover that the horse had been shot. The majestic white horse had met a tragic death but his eyes remained serene as they gazed towards the sky.

The story explores the dynamics of a neighborhood grappling with heightened animosities and fear after the riots. The unexpected arrival of a horse creates a stir and briefly fosters a sense of unity among the local residents. The sudden appearance of a Muslim figure initially raises suspicion, but soon, they find a common ground and bond over their shared love for an animal. Despite these moments of empathy, the story illustrates that amidst on-going conflict, the most innocent can suffer most horribly. The horse symbolizing peace and perhaps a hope for harmony tragically meets its end. The horse's death demonstrates the inability to sustain peace in the face of deep-seated divisions and external threats.

## 2. Jaha Jay by Gour Kishore Ghosh

The second story brings together two people during a riot into a forced intimacy which would not have happened in normal times.<sup>4</sup> Ranu, a 36 year old house-wife, went shopping at a busy marketplace when violence broke out.

Soon, two processions came in from opposite directions, blocking the whole place. There were buses, taxis, rickshaws, lorries, hand-carts, tempos, and men....like overflowing water from a clogged basin. Musical bands, honking cars and screaming people created such a cacophony that Ranu felt helpless and completely paralysed..... Then all of a sudden there was a big bang-as if a bomb had exploded right in the depths of her heart....Then another. And another. Everything around reverberated from the impact... Some panic-stricken female voices moaned into Ranu's ears, 'Oh, my God! What's happening!' A deep voice complained, 'there they go again. This is impossible.' People ran in all directions. Ranu ran too, with her heavy body and her heavy bags.<sup>5</sup>

Suddenly, she noticed the falling shutters of a nearby shop. She made a dash for it, crawled underneath the shutters, pushed past the man in front and hurled herself into the shop. Incidentally her host was a Muslim man. Her host's initial irritation at being landed with the 'nuisance' of Ranu's unwanted presence, slowly turned to sympathy for Ranu's disturbed state and physical weakness.

There was hardly any empty space in the room. On the floor on one side there was a heap of woollen clothes....Her eyes stopped on the lock. There was absolutely no way to escape. A chill ran down her spine. Couldn't she get him to open the lock? What was the harm if she left

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<sup>4</sup> The story was published in the well-known periodical *Desh* in 1969. The riot mentioned in the story does not seem to be the riot of 1964, but rather any sort of communal trouble that might arise when two religious processions meet each other.

<sup>5</sup> Translation by Sarika Chaudhury in Basabi Frazer ed. *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. (Delhi: Anthem, 2008).

now? Hesitantly, the man explained that he would be happy to open the locks for her if she wanted to leave. Otherwise it was best to keep them on. It was difficult to know what intentions the rampaging mob had.

The Muslim shopkeeper was equally nervous like Ranu. He kept thinking if anyone found him sharing a locked space with a Hindu woman, he would land in grave danger. Although ‘they’ knew him and his shop for 23 years now, ‘a hot head and a suspicious mind’ could obstruct reason anytime. Moreover, the police could make life difficult for him too. Meanwhile Ranu asked for some water and he obliged. After some time, when she regained her calm, she felt drowsy and started having bad dreams.

She seemed to be drugged. Her hands and feet were heavy. Was it only tiredness? Suddenly something flashed in her mind. That man. He must have drugged the water. So, that was his sweet water from the deep tube well. He was smiling. He had revealed his true colours finally.

She soon realized it was a dream, but somehow she was convinced that she needed to be cautious. The shop had a lots of Diwali insects which bothered them both. But none of them dared to switch off the lights to save themselves. Destiny had brought them together under the same roof, and a specific geographical boundary had forced them to be neighbors as they were bound to each other by an indispensable chord of inter-dependence. Yet, it was clear that they had no confidence in each other. Hence despite increasing discomfort from the insect bites, they could not switch off the lights. And these insects kept nibbling at them. “Nibbling away, nibbling away ...”

On one hand, the story shows how proximity has potentials to turn suspicion and anxiety to mutual trust and respect as both Ranu and the shopkeeper stay in this cramped safe zone while

they wait for the city to be calm again for them to return to their diverse destinations. Despite their shared space and dependence on each other for safety, there remains a lingering distrust between them due to cultural and communal (and gender) differences exacerbated by the tense situation. The insects symbolize the external threats of the riots. Also, it symbolizes the underlying mistrust and unease between Ranu, a Hindu woman, and the Muslim shopkeeper, stemming from societal divisions and historical tensions.

### **3. Alam er Nijer Bari by Dibyendu Palit**

Alam's father, a doctor by profession, built a spacious three-storyed house in Park Circus. But around 1970, he decided to retire from medical practice. The reason for this decision can be found in his letter to his elder son who went to Glasgow to study engineering. He wrote, "If possible, try to settle there. You would manage to get a job in India also. Practically there would not be any problem. But you might find yourself unemployed in matters of the heart (*Moner Dik Theke Bekar Hoe Jete Paro*)." In Alam's father's case, in spite of his belief in Gandhi, whose memorial service he arranged on his terrace after Gandhi's assassination, he gave up his medical practice as the 'Rams, Jadus and Kanais' went to Dr. Anantasekhar Gupta's surgery while the 'Rahims, Jamals and Karims' reverted to his, but with time, they too migrated across the border.

Around this time, the Liberation War began. Dr. Gupta, originally from Dhanmondi in East Pakistan, proposed an exchange of property with Alam's father. With an increasing feeling of estrangement, Alam's father accepted the offer.

But Alam was in his final year of his Master's degree. He decided not to leave. When his father asked him to find a hostel for himself, Mr. Gupta cordially requested Alam to stay in his 'own' house. In this context, what Dr. Gupta told Alam's father is important to note:

The desperation was mine, *doctorbabu*, not yours. (*Daay amar chhilo..apnar noy*). You gave us an opportunity to find shelter, and in return can we not give shelter to your son? I have a son too. They'll stay together as friends.'

Alam's father agreed to the proposal but also reminded him that, in spite of absence of violence, there was a continuous discomfort which could not be ignored. Otherwise, why would have he thought of leaving Calcutta?

Thus, Alam stayed with Anantasekhar for a few years. Meanwhile he had formed a romantic relationship with Anantasekhar's daughter Raka. Alam found lecturership in a college in Calcutta but with the news of his father's death, he migrated to Bangladesh and found an employment there. Three years passed. Finally, he got an opportunity to visit Calcutta as a delegate in a conference on harmony. He had already informed Raka and her parents about his arrival through letters. He even declined accommodation provided by the conference organizers. In Calcutta, which was his birth place, he would obviously stay in his own house.

However, when he finally reached the house in Park Circus, he found many physical changes to the building. Further, he could sense a distance in communication with Anantasekhar and his wife. He was treated more like a guest and Raka was absent also. Finally at the end of the story, Raka's mother revealed to Alam that he should not harbor hopes of having a future with Raka and handed him a letter written by Raka herself. Raka wrote,

When I asked myself, I found that I had been asking you to come because I knew that you couldn't! Your intentions are noble. You want to take me up to where you are. I am eternally grateful to you for that! But, Alam, I lack the mental strength required of me. There's a kind of

resistance, a kind of hesitation—something, somewhere. I cannot explain what it is. And I don't have the strength to break that wall. So there's need to make the wall higher. It was because of this hesitation that our addresses had changed —yours and mine. And many people's before us....

With this letter, Alam decided to leave the house, his 'own house' which was finally not his anymore.

Dibynedu Palit's *Alam's Own House* is a narrative that is complex and subtle in what it chooses not to say. The non-meeting of Alam and Raka seems to symbolize the inability of two communities' to meet, in spite of sharing a language and culture. This indirect allusive relationship of Alam, with Raka and to the city of Calcutta that he had to leave behind, manages to bring out the pain of exile and belongingness that is dependent on religion. The story is about the impossibility of togetherness for the two communities, yet hard to tear asunder. Raka's mother also lamented in the end that in spite of living in Calcutta for a long time, she always felt like a refugee. At least, Alam still had the option to visit Calcutta when he wished. But Sneha Mashima, Raka's mother, had no choice. Thus the short story evocatively deals with transcendental homelessness pervasive among the second generation of Partition victims. The story's depth lies in its ability to evoke empathy and introspection, resonating with anyone who has experienced displacement or nurtured a longing for a sense of home and belonging.

#### **4.Din-i-Ilahi by Swapnamoy Chakraborty**

Jiban Patra was a retired army officer and at present, was entrusted with the responsibility to organize government radio programmes. Against the backdrop of Babri Dispute, the major themes of the programme were decided to be communal harmony. This was easy for him, he used to pick up one or two oft-repeated well-known poems by Tagore and Nazrul, made them

rendered by a famous artiste and add a talk by the local politicians. After running the programme in the same format thrice, his boss ordered him to innovate. He chanced upon a magazine in which he found a lot of stories on Hindu-Muslim amity, which would help him to create more content. The short story *Din-i-Ilahi* has another story within it, the one which is read by Jiban Patra. It is also marked with his own remarks. Jiban patra is like any other Bengali middle-class Hindu, who deemed himself cultural, not communal and yet nurtured communal sensibilities as he read through the story.

Let me narrate the story within the story first. Nurul is its main protagonist who is a central government officer in the Telecom department. He is married to Swati, a Hindu girl, who is a researcher in Jadavpur University. He wants to find a rented house for both of them but with no luck. Either, they are too costly to afford or simply not available because they are an inter-faith couple. Till now, Swati stays in her paternal house in which Nurul has no entry because the house has a Narayan idol, ritual worship to the deity is offered regularly. Nurul faces soft versions of communal othering even in his office. For example, in the office canteen, he is given a dinner plate which has a picture of a rose in its center.<sup>6</sup> It can be seen as a subtle symbol of exclusion and othering. It reflects the office environment's insensitivity towards Nurul's religious identity and cultural preferences, showcasing how even seemingly innocuous actions can reinforce communal stereotypes. Or, for example, a woman colleague jokingly tells another colleague why she is wearing a saree which has an unsophisticated bright colour, 'like the Muslims prefer to wear'. In fact, Swati herself refuses to stay in Khidirpur or Park Circus because these places have 'Mushalman musalman Gondho'. Even Nurul himself would not be comfortable in staying in his ancestral house as his other relatives are not liberal and like-

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<sup>6</sup> Objects with pictures of flowers, especially rose is generally taken to be favoured by the Muslims.

mind. Would it be possible for him to find a *Gitobitan* if he needed one, from his neighbors? Finally, out of desperation, he decides to adopt a fake Hindu name and manages an accommodation in Naktala. He portrays himself as Narayan Majumdar and his wife Swati manages all the communication. The landlord is very impressed to know that the couple was highly educated and that too, in the science stream. But this façade soon collapses. During Saraswati Puja, somehow Nurul's identity is revealed and he is badly beaten by the locals.

Jiban Patra, honestly, did not like the story. He detested the fact that Nurul was married to a Hindu Bengali woman and did not choose to stay in the Muslim dominated neighborhoods. His majoritarian biases were readable at the critical junctures. It challenges the notion of cultural tolerance and exposes the fragility of identities in a polarized society where individuals are often forced to conceal or alter their identities to secure basic rights and accommodations. Jiban Patra's character serves as a reminder of the nuanced layers of prejudice that persist within ostensibly inclusive societies, highlighting the need for genuine dialogue and understanding across religious and cultural divides.

### **Convergence and Divergence:**

I have used the four short stories situated at different points in the time-line, yet they share a few common traits and converge around a central theme. Instead of mono-dimensional narratives focused on riots and reconciliation or migration and trauma, the stories delve into more intricate psychological dilemmas. The stories are situated within a small, specific geographical setting—whether in a *para*, or in a cramped shop, a private house or even confined to a few pages of a

fictional magazine. But all of them encapsulate the enduring crisis which plagued a wide geographical expanse in South Asia.

It is also interesting to note, how the role of women has also changed in the arc of the stories. In *Shada Ghora*, situated in the backdrop of the August riots, women could hardly be noticed in the public spaces in the neighborhood. *Jaha Jay*, though not explicitly dated, seems to be set in the 1960s and it was also published in 1969. Here, Ranu, the female protagonist could go shopping alone. Despite having the privilege to go shopping alone and buy things as per her wish, time and again, the author depicted her as an insecure housewife. She was aware of her dwindling beauty about which she was made conscious by her sarcastic husband. She sometimes felt that the Muslim shopkeeper would not spare a second thought if he wanted to attack her. Even when she could overcome her initial fear, she never trusted him. The author uses the words *Sangshay*, *Abiswas*, *Asastwi* (or suspicion and discomfort) to narrate her feelings. Are these not the same words, my interlocutors used, regularly in all the interviews? The cramped shop and unintended proximity can be the potent symbols of the mixed neighborhoods in which the Hindu and Muslim residents navigate through their complex relationships.

In the third plot, *Alamer Nijer Bari*, Raka is a strong and independent woman, settled in Delhi for higher studies. Yet, she shifted to Delhi from Calcutta to avoid Alam, for not having enough courage to break the social barriers. Finally, Swati in *Din-i-Ilahi*, seemed to be the strongest of all. She defied the social norms and accepted Nurul as her life partner. She was honest as well. While she accepted Nurul because of his liberal outlook, she categorically stated that she did not want to stay in a Muslim *para*. In the same way, she could not bring Nurul to her parental house

to preserve the purity of her household shrine. Thus, the inter-faith couple find themselves disconnected from their traditional ties, navigating a sense of rootlessness and estrangement. Thus, they symbolize what it means to be a minority in a totally different context.

The stories mentioned above, find their places in the anthologies on partition literature and in the volumes on stories dedicated to communal harmony. One can locate in them several breaks and continuities within the inter-relationship of Hindus and Muslims since the Partition. Instead of stories focused only on Partition and refugees and riot in the 1950s, these short stories help to bring the narrative forwards and point at continuous schisms within. Yet, except the first one, they also refer to certain historical decades which are generally marked as peaceful in terms of communal riots. In fact in all of the stories, potential for violence rather than actual violence, predominates. Hence they complement the present thesis in understanding communal dynamics in micro-spatial settings, influenced by critical macro-historical events.

## LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Name of the Interviewee	Address	Place of Interview	Date
Dipika Bhattacharya	Hindustan Park	Residence	16-July-2016
Dipak Roy	Gariahut	Residence	12-Nov-2018
Debjani Basu	Mukundapur	Residence	14-Nov-2018
Khurshed Anwar	Park Circus	Telephonic	02-Jun-2021
Swarup Saha	Khidirpur	Telephonic	03-Jun-2021
Manoj Mishra	Khidirpur	Telephonic	05-Jun-2021
Manish Bera	Khidirpur	Telephonic	01-Jul-2021
Md. Taher Zurus Beg	Bowbazar	Telephonic	07-Jul-2021
Mr. Ahmed	Dargah Road	Telephonic	24-Jul-2021
Deashree D.	Tiljala	Telephonic	30-Oct-2021
Mina Nandy	Park Circus	Telephonic	20-Nov-2021
Saramma	Khidirpur	Residence	25-Nov-2021
Zenab	Topsia	Telephonic	05-Apr-2022
Benazir Salma	Mominpur	Residence	05-Apr-2022
Aftab Hussain	Topsia	Neighborhood open space	07-Apr-2022
Mr. Halder	Park Circus	Residence	10-Apr-2022
Mrs Halder	Park Circus	Residence	10-Apr-2022
Minati Dutta	Park Circus	Residence	11-Apr-2022
Nibedita Mitra	Mollapara	Residence	12-Apr-2022
Partha Banerjee	Kasba	Residence	26-June-2022
Abhinanda	Khidirpur	Telephonic	15-Jul-2022
Tahamima	Alimuddin street	Telephonic	07-Sep-2022
Jamaluddin	Zakaria Street	Attar Shop, Zakaria Street	15-Sep-2022
Israr Ahmed	Zakaria Street	His Shop	15-Sep-2022
Izaz Ahmed	Zakaria Street	His Shop	15-Sep-2022
Mansur Alam	Ekbapur	Residence	18-Sep-2022
Anwari Begum	Ekbapur	Residence	18-Sep-2022
Ashok Mullick	Santoshpur	Residence	23-Sep-2022
Shoeb Ahmed Khan	Khidirpur	Neighborhood open space	08-Oct-2022
Mr. M. Zameel	Entally	Residence	12-Oct-2022

Mrs. Zameel	Entally	Residence	12-Oct-2022
Ms. Elia Zameel	Entally	Residence	12-Oct-2022
Saptarshi Bhowmick	Tiljala	Residence	30-Oct-2022
Reza	Zakaria Street	Residence	19-Dec-2022
Arijit Guha	Beckbagan	Residence	22-Mar-2023
Prasad Guha	Beckbagan	Residence	22-Mar-2023
Sahida Husain	CIT Road	Residence	13-Apr-2023
Arpita Sutradhar	Picnic Garden	Telephonic	13-Apr-2023
Itu	Picnic Garden	Residence	16-Apr-2023
Shankar Mondol	Picnic Garden	Residence	16-Apr-2023
Maidul Islam	Golpark, originally from Topsia	Coffee-Shop	17-Apr-2023
Anindya Mitra	Beleghata	Residence	23-Apr-2023
Shubha Bhattacharrya	Garia	Residence	28-Apr-2023
Safrulla	Metiabruz	His office at Beckbagan	20-May-2023
Samsuddin Purkait and his team of employees	Santoshpur	The school owned by him	29-Dec-2023
Ayan Kundu	Howrah	Jadavpur University Campus	4-Jan-2024
Aritra Sengupta	Beckbagan	Residence	25-Jan-2024
Manjushree Sengupta	Hatiara	Residence	25-Jan-2024
Mehzabi	Park Circus	Residence	27-Jan-2024
Md. Irfan	Park Circus	Park Circus Maidan	28-Jan-2024
Arafat	Park Circus	Park Circus Maidan	28-Jan-2024
Shabnam Ahmed	Park Circus	Residence	29-Jan-2024
Areeba Ahmed	Park Circus	Residence	29-Jan-2024
Samsa Khatun	Park Circus	Residence	29-Jan-2024
Sabir Ahmed	Khidirpur	On several occasions	NA

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