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## Noakhali and After: History, Memory and Representations

*Only the poisoned tree will bear fruit, till generations last.*

*Noakhali survivor<sup>1</sup>*

*Memory and History have a long but ambiguous relationship. History reduces memory to a status of a source, a means to civilized existence. Materialized, externalized and archived, living memory is not valued as an art to a civilized existence... It is assumed that history begins where memory ends... However today... the relationship between memory and history appears to have taken a dramatic turn in the reversal of fortune. When history ceases to be an art of memory it loses its meaning and purpose, though reconciled with memory history can draw on the wellspring of imagination, discover 'lost worlds' by a reconnection with the memories of groups excluded from the consciousness of historians.*

*Then perhaps we will realize that memory begins where history ends.<sup>2</sup>*

Literature and history serve the same God and have a close interdependence on each other in that they both 'narrate' events. The empiricist and the constructionist theories of history have come under challenge and there is now an increased recognition that history's invented, discursive narratives have a close relationship with the figurative codes of literature as both depend on language and narrative forms. Both are, in particular ways, creations of the human imagination, although with differing objectives. Nowhere is this closeness revealed more than in the historically embedded women's autobiographical mode of writing where the author is both a narrator and a witness to her times. A memoir or an autobiography then becomes a valuable form of historical testimony especially as it intertwines personal experiences with political and cultural contexts and underlines the autonomous struggles by women for themselves and for others. Although an autobiography depicts a world of interiority, it is also a self-reflexive appraisal of the past and a

testimonial to the subject's self-fashioning. In many cases, an autobiographical narration centred within a historical 'event' can come into play with certain aspects of memory to configure such an event as a 'myth' just as it may see its own relationship to that event as creating, in turn, the self. A myth, independent of space and time, can carry traces of the teleological crack between event and meaning and allow one to interpret certain facets of the past not as a search for authenticity but as a way to read it in a more complex way. For example the communal conflagration that took place in a remote corner of undivided Bengal named Noakhali shows how an event that comprised a set of violent incidents may have turned 'abduction' of women into a myth/metaphor to become a part of the larger discourse of violence that marked India's struggle for Independence. The trope's relationship to the Hindu-Muslim question assumes increasing importance when we understand how Noakhali's name became a mythological marker to function as a set of formulations regarding women as the subject of the nation. In 1946 Bengal, the Noakhali communal carnage formed the narrative core of an autobiography, Ashoka Gupta's *Noakhali Durjoger Diney*, which is an example of a nationalist feminist narrative in Bengal that creates a discursive field within which women's experiences of rape and abduction critique the nation's incorporation of her as subject. This question of the subject-hood of the violated women is ambivalently connected to Gupta's own distinct voice as an activist and a Gandhian who worked to bring relief to the victims of the communal carnage. This memoir underlines, to a certain extent, how political participation was in essence 'a special form of sacrifice in an essentially religious process' where it 'remained steeped in tradition and religion as self-conscious alternatives to alien western norms.'<sup>3</sup> The Gandhian intervention in Noakhali can be seen as a 'subtle symbiosis' of religion and politics that enabled women like Gupta to join his anti-communal efforts as a part of nationalist duty and mission to eradicate that canker from the polity. However, Gupta's memoir of the tumultuous (another translation may be calamitous) days in Noakhali shows no passive acceptance of dominant ideologies: she exhibits both an ability to negotiate dangerous communal situations and a critical agency that brings into play the ordinary and the extraordinary worlds of the personal and the political to fashion a self that in extension radicalizes other spheres of her life. Second, the affective and ethical gendered responses to the communal carnage help us assess how Noakhali was talked about, disseminated and written about in contemporary eye witness accounts and assume a critical energy that makes visible the power of representation that resides at the heart of national imaginings and histories. The metaphor of Noakhali performed multiple functions and was used by writers and activists to explore subjectivity, gender and citizenship in the

postcolonial nation. As history, Noakhali is governed by norms of temporality and space but in many representations, it is also a temporality marked by disjuncture (the partition) and replication (other communal violences). In history, Noakhali is 'event', in memory, it has been enshrined as a 'myth'. Memory and myth thus become the underbelly of history.

Ashoka Gupta's testimony of the riots in Noakhali renders a time marked by brutality and violence to become 'human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode' and because our lives are 'enacted narratives'.<sup>4</sup> Other memoirs by women political activists of the period throw up the many dualities of their participation in public life that seek to strike a balance between the personal and the social/political, between the home and the world.<sup>5</sup> Gupta's memoir, which is a voluntary witness account of Noakhali, is different from the other autobiographies of women political workers of the times. Instead of raising questions about women's survival in the essential duality of 'home' and the 'world' she sets out a form of what can be seen as a 'participatory' mode of nationalist feminist praxis and ideology, a form of do or die ideal in the face of communal carnage. Born to the well-known novelist Jyotirmoyee Devi (of the novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* fame) in 1912, Ashoka Gupta was the wife of Saibal Kumar Gupta, a respected Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer whose social orientation and philanthropic interests symbiotically marked her own involvement as an active member of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, founded in 1927). As an AIWC worker, Gupta was part of the rapid changes that nationalist modernity brought to women's lives. The choices she made in her own life were also part of the new formulations of class subjectivities opening up for women in India. Ashoka Gupta learnt many things in Noakhali that she later honed as the chairperson of the State Welfare Board. Her 'people skills' and organizational abilities found supportive soil in Noakhali and that period of her life enabled her to assume later responsibilities as President of AIWC or carry on other welfare work among women and children. The memoir based on Noakhali thus assumes an importance not only as a part of her life of social service and of her efforts to rehabilitate and rescue abducted women under the close supervision of Gandhi but also as a text that indirectly records her own self-fashioning and evolution. It is both a social and historical document as well as a testimony to her self-realization. This memoir should be read along with her hitherto unpublished diary where she gives detailed descriptions of her tour in Noakhali villages and lists several victims of sexual assault by name. Although the diary has no date it can be assumed that the entries were done just after the riots broke out in October 1946. This difference in representation begs the question about what this information had symbolized for someone working for and with

women. The discussions and representations of the assault, abduction and recovery of women, especially in the diary, can be read as documents that 'are charged with constructing an imagined community and sculpting the new citizen' just as they engage 'with the elusive nature of an identity that emerges at the margins' both vis-à-vis the writer and the subject of her scrutiny, the abducted woman.<sup>6</sup> At the very least, they document the ways in which the emergent nation ventriloquized women's experiences both as victims and as witnesses by writing them into the nation, although the 'notion of voice is fraught with epistemological, ethical and literary problems.'<sup>7</sup> By masking these names in her memoir, Gupta's 'class selected act' of emplotting her memoir, displaced the violated women (through their anonymity), choosing not to insert them into the historiography of the nation. Noakhali gained notoriety because of the large scale reportage of abductions of Hindu women and forced conversions of Hindu villagers of various castes. The ugly face of religious oppression made these riots leave a peculiar trace in writings on and about it where the question of 'abducted' women became a singular prism through which a national imaginary could be constructed. This memoir as well as some literary texts, though written later, take up the leitmotif of 'abduction' and use it to explore the relationship of the centre to the periphery in displacing the figure of the abducted woman from the hailing aura of the nation/citizen ideology. Writings on Noakhali that took up the question of 'abducted women' engaged in rewriting the nation's history by prefiguring the 'absent-present' abducted women as the centre of their narrative ideology by retrieving their experiences through memoirs left by activists and social workers. Benedict Anderson suggests that literature serves a major function in the idealization and contestation of the nation; it can be useful to see how these writings play upon women's experiences as part of national imaginations to create or negate margins in the concepts of citizenship and belonging. The middle class women activists who write about other women (who had faced sexual violence) are thus engaged in an uncertain project of retrieval and disremembering the silence of the violated women.

Noakhali is situated in an inaccessible far-flung part of Bengal, geographically marginal to the metropolitan centres of Calcutta or Dhaka. Yet when its name became a household word, it also metamorphosed into a symbol and came to occupy a place in Bengal's collective imagination. The name Noakhali evoked tales of Muslim atrocity on hapless Hindus and had a cascading effect elsewhere in India resulting in the communal clashes in Bihar on the eve of the country's Independence. The writings on and about that time show us that Noakhali was not just a series of communal clashes with reported violence against women, but a *longue durée*, not just of the events but the larger shadows of them that soured

the already worsening relationship between the two communities.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi's well-documented interventions in Noakhali also contributed to this mythification of Noakhali: the riot-torn place was to be a living laboratory where an experiment could be carried out to see how Gandhi's physical presence could act as a deterrent to communal/religious bigotry. Given that Noakhali gained such emotional and political currency amongst not only famous political figures but also among the ordinary activists on the ground, it is important to configure how the practice of self-conscious narrations and lived experiences became sites of meaning productions and refigured popular ways of remembrance tinged with new emotions. As the author juxtaposes the memoir written around Noakhali with a few literary texts, it clearly emerges how the literary production in and around Noakhali focuses on an unprecedented fracturing of intercommunity relations because at the centre of this memoir as well as the imaginative texts we have 'a historically evolved self consciousness' that interlocks 'larger events in political history and micro events from the everyday' to question and refigure the secular nation.<sup>9</sup> Evidence of this interlocking can be seen in the way many of these texts are engaged in structures of representation that offers a continuous engagement with the trope of 'abduction' seen in the wider context of Hindu-Muslim relationship. The accounts of rape and abduction that followed in the wake of the Noakhali riots create a force-field in which the later literary narratives move and take shape. If the memoirs are important instruments of recuperation, a moment of representation of the past as well as of self-making a new feminine national identity, then the literary texts focus on moments of rupture, especially in the figure of abducted women, to show how memory survives not in monolithic ways but through heterogonous fluid avatars, through myths, metaphors and testimonies. Literary texts then become narratives of resistance because they become declarations of the un-accommodated subject, the abducted woman who cannot be contained into the folds of community or nation.

The Noakhali communal violence began on 10 October 1946 and can be seen as an indirect fall-out of the Calcutta Riots. At that time, Ashoka Gupta, an active member of AIWC, and her husband Saibal Kumar Gupta were living in Chittagong where he was posted in governmental service. When the news of the 'riots'<sup>10</sup> were reported in the local newspapers from 17 October onwards,<sup>11</sup> the AIWC workers, under the leadership of Nellie Sengupta, the Chittagong member of legislative assembly (MLA), started relief operations among the abducted Hindu women. East Bengal had a number of women's political organizations that had significant grassroots presence during the 1943 famine and notable among them were the MARS (*Mahila Atmaraksha Samity*) that was established in 1942 (affiliated to the Communist Party of India) and the AIWC (affiliated to the Indian National

Congress). In Noakhali, Jyoti Debi, called Kakima by all, ran relief operations on behalf of MARS during the famine.<sup>12</sup>

One such activist was Ashoka Gupta whose book *Noakhali's Durjoger Diney* (Those Tumultuous Days in Noakhali, 1999) and some other writings give an account of riot-torn Noakhali. They are an important historical source of how we may contextualize Noakhali. Most accounts of the Noakhali riots have looked at communal relations or seen it in terms of economic and social configurations.<sup>13</sup> Few have seen this as an ideological arena where important aspects of nationalist feminist ideologies had a free play and a certain recreation of the women's question in terms of the emerging secular nation took place. Recent questions raised by historians, about how 'such events are recorded and by whom'<sup>14</sup> bring up important issues about the place of eye witness account, where memory of a tragedy can present an alternative construction of an event although that may be necessarily incomplete and indirect. The memoirs around Noakhali are not predictable eye witness accounts of actual riot violence; rather they are accounts of the aftermath and therefore go beyond the act of witnessing. The riots are experienced (at a later duration of time) through the lens of relief to the victims and recovery of abducted women and the writers were not just passive witnesses but active participants who intervened either directly or indirectly that left markers on themselves and those around them. In turn, these narrativizations also shape and reconfigure certain aspects of Gandhian *sewa* or service that enabled the activists, a large number of them women, to construct a nationalist discourse through 'repetition' (of a metaphor) and 'displacement' (silence displaces speech) especially as the activists themselves 'have been the *silent* spectators to the brutal events that are taking place all over the country over the past decades (*italics mine*).'<sup>15</sup> The memoirs then are attempts to 'recover' violated women and the 'speaking self' in more ways than one: by placing both at the heart of the narrative the attempt is at once to question women's marginality in the nationalist discourse; yet the memoir is also an act of 'silence' because it can speak of only some things that have happened and not others. For instance, it can remain silent to the fates of women who were raped, abducted and molested at the hands of their neighbours and acquaintances. Thus the phenomenological association of a time of violence and a re-figuration of the women's question within the nation is very apparent in Gupta's writings that oscillate between nationalist agency (constituted) and subaltern agency (lost).<sup>16</sup> Although Gupta's memoir begins with the rejoinder that her text does not provide 'any solution, any advice, or any other inner gesture towards meaning: it is what I have done and seen, a dairy of everyday events' it does talk of a history not as a 'history of explanations' but simply recollects things by being and memory:

Maybe the memoir contains some errors, I have not been able to organize my thoughts. Maybe because in those tumultuous riot filled days, the neat sites of family, society and our history was turning into a messy untidy reality; our familiar country was becoming unfamiliar and strange. I have only tried to say my words in my own way in these pages.<sup>17</sup>

The memoir provides a complex understanding of the manner in which the conflagration were playing out as a 'political phenomenon (with economic underpinnings and cultural consequences)' with far-reaching consequences on the gendered spheres of experience.<sup>18</sup> Apart from Gupta, the witnesses to the devastation of the riots (which is already an 'after') in Noakhali and Tippera were many: from Mahatma Gandhi to the grassroots workers of MARS, the women workers of the undivided Communist Party of India, the Indian Red Cross and the AIWC were engaged in relief operations. Many of them have left accounts of what they saw and the circumstances in which they worked. Ashoka Gupta's memoir, for example, is an important testimony not only because it is the reminiscence of someone who was present in the area, but because she worked under the close supervision of Gandhi. I juxtapose the writings of a notable public figure (Mahatma Gandhi) with the writings and other unpublished materials of Ashoka Gupta and Renu Chakravartty (Communist Party of India member of parliament or MP and author of *Communists in Indian Women's Movements*, 1980). The 'truth' of what they saw and heard and recorded are certainly coloured by their class and gender as well as their political ideologies as an AIWC or Communist party worker yet their accounts testify to the actual material fallout of the riots and document a well-known historical event as they saw, experienced and lived it. Their accounts show how communalism was a process of long antagonistic sets of identity formation and how it was implicated in the economic imperatives of two different social locations of Hindus and Muslims. Lastly, they construct a 'political history of partition' by throwing light on a specific historical practice of recovery of memory. They bring to the surface a certain subterranean politics of refiguring the 'woman' as an activist/political worker within the nation just as it historicizes that discourse in a certain socio-historical context of a 'riot' seeped with gender violence. The figure of the abducted woman so prominent in these accounts suggests why Noakhali is accorded a special place in the 'last era of armed and organized communal hostilities'<sup>19</sup> that marked the years before the country was partitioned in 1947. Apart from these first person accounts, three literary texts, Ateen Bandopadhyay's *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* (1967–71), Prafulla Roy's

*Keyapatar Nouka* (1965), Pratibha Basu's *Shamudro Hridoy* (1970) investigate the remembered texture of culture in pre-partition Bengal and the representation of Hindu-Muslim relation in the modern Bangla novel. The trope of 'abduction' in these texts helps us see how the two communities created boundaries in reality and how they broke them within these representations. In the background, Noakhali's carnage provides the historical meta-code to the narratives.

### The place

Noakhali (1,658 sq. miles) and Tippera (2,531 sq. miles) were both in the Chittagong Division; Tippera had 3 towns and 4,007 villages while Noakhali had 2 towns and 1,738 villages. Thus, the area under consideration was largely rural, with a population predominantly Muslim.<sup>20</sup> The Noakhali District Gazetteer found the Hindu population divided into different castes and sub-castes like Brahman, Kayastha, Sudra, Sunri, Sutradhar, Teli, Jugi, Barui, Kumhar, Napit, Kaibartta, Namasudra and Bhumali while the Muslims were divided into Sheikhs, Pathans, Saiyads with Nikari (fishdealers), Nagarchi (drummers) and Dai who were all Sunnis of the Hanafi sect. Apart from these main divisions there were some Christians, Jains and Buddhists, as well as tribal people in the two areas.<sup>21</sup> The region was 'a vast rice plain dotted over with numerous villages, where rich groves of areca-nut and coconut palms rising out from a dense undergrowth of *Mandar* trees and other shrubs, make every village look like a forest' while south of the mainland lay a number of sandbank islands or *chars* 'that are constantly changing their positions and boundaries.'<sup>22</sup>

Studies of this part of agrarian Bengal have indicated some significant reasons why the two districts were engulfed in riots: high prices of food-grains in the post-war years, the demobilization of military men and the abandonment of the rationing system were some economic features that formed the background to a rapidly deteriorating communal situation.<sup>23</sup> The emergence of communalism became a pervasive political force, especially for the dominating Muslim cultivating families in East Bengal who wanted to wrest control of local administrative boards from high caste Hindus who had customarily dominated them. The economic interests of foreign colonial capital had long ruled out the development of healthy democratic institutions in Bengal. Educated Bengali Hindus were in the throes of an economic discontent due to rising prices and falling standard of living that in turn increased racial antipathy and dislike of foreign rule. They distrusted the cooperation of Muslim politicians with the government that had brought about



a rapid expansion of their social bases and a greater Muslim share in services and professions ate into their traditional privileges. Long before the onset of the economic crisis brought about by the Inter-War depression, Hindus and Muslims had become aware of their communal identities and often found themselves in opposite camps over questions like the earlier partition of Bengal (1905), the foundation of the University at Dhaka, the Bengal Pact, the Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1928 and a host of other issues.<sup>24</sup> This dimension of social conflict went on expanding and the 'politics of the province came to be increasingly vitiated by racism, communalism, casteism, provincialism and factionalism.'<sup>25</sup> In the 1940s, the hardening of Muslim communal identity largely came about during the battle for the control of the predominantly Muslim peasantry of East Bengal by the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML) who aggressively used Muslim symbols to win peasant support for the Pakistan movement. Rather than challenging the League by taking up the agrarian cause, the Bengal Congress mirrored the League by identifying itself with Hindu landed interests.<sup>26</sup> Within the violent episodes of communal aggression, the various actors would play out their fears and anxieties. The image of Hindu women, abducted and raped by an external enemy, was often deployed in political mobilization through the early years of India's freedom struggle. Earlier, it was deployed against British managers of tea gardens and jute mills. Later, an anti-Muslim strain crept in, especially in 1873, when it was used against the *raiyyat* uprising in Pabna where the anti-landlord movement was projected as an anti-Hindu one. The campaign swept Bengal in the 1920s leading to a negation of the Bengal Pact and reports of abductions became points of mobilization for Hindu communalists.<sup>27</sup> From the 1920s, the running campaign by the Women's Protection League (WPL) (involving prominent Hindu *bhadralok* figures) against abductions by Muslims vitiated the communal atmosphere and although this tapered off temporarily after 1926, the mutual distrust between the two communities remained and was aggravated after the proposals of the Nehru Report of 1928 which Hindu communalists saw as granting concessions to Muslims.<sup>28</sup> From 1939, the Hindu Mahasabha launched its campaign towards the mobilization of the scheduled castes in Bengal. In eastern Bengal, in the districts of Mymensingh, Barisal and Noakhali, mobilization drives were carried out that led to heightened communal feelings as lower caste peasants were inflamed particularly during the 1941 census operations. Both the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha traded charges of trying to influence enumeration by swelling their respective numbers against each other. The situation was particularly sensitive in the two Noakhali villages of Dattapara and Raipur that were later to witness horrific violence in 1946.<sup>29</sup> Apart from these underlying frictions and tensions that

marked the social and political life in Bengal, the immediate cause of the Noakhali riots was an outcome of the August carnage in Calcutta. Ashoka Gupta stated in an interview in 1997 that the riots started in Noakhali as a result of rumours brought by 'the people who had come from Calcutta and told the stories...that had infuriated the Muslims...there was a lot of arson and loot and abduction and conversion...when it started it snowballed...' <sup>30</sup> Unlike previous instances of Hindu/ Muslim aggressions in East Bengal that had pitted each other over Muslim's 'religious rights' versus the Hindus 'civil rights' in the case of playing of music in front of mosques, the Noakhali riots had distinct linkages to organized politics with underpinings of economic and class aspirations. <sup>31</sup> Its manifestations were religious intolerance and conversion.

### The mahatma

The riots began at Noakhali's Sahapur Bazar and engulfed the most inaccessible villages in the district. Almost soon after, it spread to the adjoining areas of Chandpur and Tiperra. <sup>32</sup> The scale of violence was unprecedented and took everyone by surprise. By 22 October, *The Times* in London was reporting 30,000 refugees in government relief camps and *The Daily Mail* on 18 October stated that 'Eastern Bengal was aflame...with the worst Hindu-Muslim riots India has ever known.' *Hindustan Standard* first reported the riots on 17 October and the headline announced that the Calcutta riots paled into insignificance beside the carnage in Noakhali. On 30 October, in a secret letter from Lord Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, the former expressed anxiety about the situation in Bengal:

The events in Eastern Bengal could not have been more unfortunate....I see no prospect of securing a return of confidence in Eastern Bengal for a very long time, and I doubt whether many Hindus will be prepared to remain in their homes there. <sup>33</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi had seen in the Calcutta riots a potential for greater violence; when the Noakhali riots broke out he decided that the East Bengal conflagration needed his personal touch. He was repeatedly questioned about why he was coming to Bengal when riots in Bombay and neighbouring Bihar were killing many more; and even after he arrived in East Bengal, he faced hostile queries from Muslim League functionaries about his presence there. <sup>34</sup> None of his close associates could predict what, if any good, would come of his trip to Noakhali. 'All that I know', Gandhi admitted, 'is that I won't be at peace unless I go.' <sup>35</sup> He arrived on 7 November to that part of East Bengal, which required many days

of travel and was 'one of the least accessible flatlands of India,' but it was a land green and enticing:

All around us I find huge coconut and betel-nut palms, and a large variety of greens grow in their shade. The rivers are all [big] like the Indus, the Ganges, the Jumna and the Brahmaputra. They empty their waters into the Bay of Bengal.<sup>36</sup>

It was a land in which the writer of these lines was to find 'incredible peace in the natural scenery around him' but that peace was 'missing on the faces of men and women.'<sup>37</sup> The lovely verdant landscape and the horrors that unfolded all around was brought together in a contemporary perception of Noakhali: the place that was hitherto the periphery had suddenly come centre-stage:

I had been ashamed of the insignificance of Noakhali...in the newspapers I often saw Dhaka, Barisal, Bankura, Shilchar being discussed.....but Noakhali – was that a place and was it ever newsworthy?...But now Noakhali had taken its revenge, a terrible revenge. Its name is now known all over in big bold letters, not only in Bengal or in India but everywhere else, in the newspapers of London and New York; its name is etched in blood in the heartbeats of women, in the pulse of mothers.....God knows, one can't feel envy for this fortune. Gandhi is living there now, and in today's world what can be more necessary than Gandhi?<sup>38</sup>

Gandhi's sojourn in Noakhali was accompanied by much public attention and his frugal way of life was a cynosure of many eyes:

The house where we had put up consisted of a few detached huts made of wooden frames, with walls as well as thatches of galvanized iron sheets. The floor was mud...Gandhiji occupied a spacious hut in the centre of a courtyard, surrounded on all sides by thick groves of areca and coconut. There were other huts nearby, only one having been completely destroyed and burnt during disturbances. Several large ponds also existed within the compound of the houses... During the disturbances, most of the inmates had taken refuge elsewhere; but when Gandhiji came and settled down in their home, they began to return in small numbers. Suspicion and a feeling of insecurity had gone too deep ....to be eradicated at one stroke even it were under the magic spell of Gandhiji's presence.<sup>39</sup>

At great personal risk, Gandhi lived in Noakhali for seven weeks (from 7 November 1946 to 2 March 1947), often walking miles to villages affected by the riots, driven by a sense of a possible failure of his teachings of *ahimsa*. Noakhali was to be an acid test of his principles because Gandhi wanted to search and find new ways of applying the principles he knew were true. This unfamiliar part of Bengal was the ground where his ideas of non-violence and *ahimsa* were to be tried and tested under the most difficult circumstances. Historians see these last months of his life as Gandhi's 'finest hour' when he displayed 'his passionate anti-communalism' that was in many ways shaped by his unique personal qualities.<sup>40</sup> Phillips Talbot, an American reporter who met Gandhi in Noakhali, gives a few answers as to why Gandhi chose to stay in East Bengal.

Politically, Gandhi has concluded that Hindu-Muslim bitterness threatens to postpone Indian freedom, and perhaps undercuts the role India might otherwise play in Asia. Having failed to bring the two communities together through high-level negotiation, he is testing his nonviolence and seeking a solution at the familiar village level. As a Hindu, moreover, he is incapable of ignoring the threat to his culture that arises from forced conversions. Wherever they occur, he must stamp them out. The first objective, obviously, can be attained, only by winning the support of Muslims. As the primary step, he is working to lift Hindu-Muslim relations from a religious to a political plane.<sup>41</sup>

Gandhi was not simply interested in providing temporary relief to people; he had resolved to find a more permanent solution to the communal tensions that had rent the fabric of social and political life of the country at the fag end of his life.<sup>42</sup> Noakhali was a test case for him: if he failed there, all his teachings would be a lie. Obstinate, in the face of all opposition, Gandhiji refused to leave Noakhali.

How did Gandhi choose to give form to his teachings in Noakhali? To bring about a turnaround to what he saw as India's most pressing political and social problem he used himself and his band of *satyagrahis* as 'exemplars,' who by choosing the non-violent way, would instill in the fear stricken victims and their aggressors the courage to act differently. He impressed by simply being there, by being authentic he hoped to find a solution to communalism with practical urgency.<sup>43</sup> He directed the workers to disperse to every village and live there without fear for 'we must live in these villages with our small children and be prepared to face

any situation even if it is dangerous. If you are not prepared for this, then you cannot ask the villagers to return.’<sup>44</sup> Gandhi’s idea was to test, in a spontaneous way because the riots presented him an opportunity to do so, his vision of a ‘moral man’ in a political and cultural circumstance that was most inimical to his philosophy: communal violence and religious intolerance. This notion, of being physical exemplars, to bring hope to the oppressed and the aggressive alike and to set an example through one’s action, was part of Gandhi’s larger philosophical and political method of keeping open, at all cost, a dialogue between Hindus and Muslims, even in the face of communal rioting. For that end, he proposed to establish peace committees in each of the affected villages where one good man, from each community, would work selflessly towards that goal. He also exhorted his workers to ‘go to villages where the inhabitants are all Harijans. They are still living there with broken spirits. You will have to save them from fear and despair that has enveloped their lives.’

Gandhi’s arrival electrified the relief workers who were living among the affected people; Ashoka Gupta was one of them. Driven by an urge that she could scarcely understand, she went to meet the Mahatma.

At the news of Gandhiji’s arrival in Noakhali, I was excited and reached Chandpur. Before that we had been engaged in relief work from 20 October. At Chandpur station, we received the news that Gandhiji had arrived on 7 November by special steamer but it won’t dock and will remain midstream. I had my son and daughter with me as well as 2–3 colleagues. Even now I wonder what attraction made me take a small boat and row to the steamer. There, among the faces peering over the railings, I recognized an acquaintance Arunangshubabu who, after obtaining permission from Satish Dasgupta, allowed me to board the steamer and take part in the prayer meeting with my son Partho.<sup>45</sup>

When Gandhi arrived in Choumuhani, many others came from all over the countryside to see him and take his advice: Sucheta Kripalini from Dattapara, Renuka Ray from Calcutta and other workers from many districts of Bengal.<sup>46</sup> On 13 November, early in the morning, Gandhi announced to his party the important decision that he would live alone in a village to instill in its terror-stricken inhabitants the courage to return to their homes. By this act he also wanted to inspire other workers in his party to go and live in riot affected places so that their examples would inspire confidence and drive away fear. He decided to disperse each member, including the women, to settle down in one affected

village and hold himself /herself hostage for the safety and security of the Hindu minority of that village. He insisted that they must pledge to protect with their lives, if necessary, the Hindu population of that village. Creating a field of praxis whereby his disciples would endorse through their bodies Gandhi's own preparation of living among the riot victims, he announced that he was going to bury himself in East Bengal till the warring Hindus and Muslims learnt to live together in harmony and peace. He was distraught and confused but also determined to do right:

I find myself in the midst of exaggeration and falsity. I am unable to discover the truth. There is terrible mutual distrust. Oldest friendships have snapped. Truth and ahimsa by which I swear, and which have, to my knowledge, sustained me for sixty years, seem to fail to show the attributes I have ascribed to them.

To test them, or better to test myself, I am going to a village called Srirampur, cutting myself away from those who have been with me all these years, and who have made life easy for me.

...How long this suspense will last is more than I can say. This much, however, I can say. I do not propose to leave East Bengal till I am satisfied that mutual trust has been established between the two communities and the two have resumed the even tenor of their life in their villages. Without this there is neither Pakistan or Hindustan – only slavery awaits India, torn asunder by mutual strife and engrossed in barbarity.<sup>47</sup>

The presence of Gandhi, his exhortations for passive resistance to violence and constructive approach to mend Hindu-Muslim relations were embodied in the way he walked through the villages, meeting people in their homes, visiting the ailing and the poor. For many, it was an incredible sight to see the frail old man putting his body to danger walking through places that had seen such terrible violation of bodies:

The Gandhi march is an astonishing sight. With a staff in one hand and the other on his granddaughter's shoulder, the old man briskly takes the lead as the sun breaks over the horizon. He usually wraps himself in a hand-woven shawl, as the January mornings are cold enough for him to see his breadth. But he walks barefooted despite chilblains. ... As the sun begins to climb, villagers from places along the way join the trek. They come by twos and fours or by dozens and

scores, swelling the crowd as the snows swell India's rivers in spring. They press in on the old man, while their children dance around the edges of the moving body. Here, if I ever saw one, is a pilgrimage.<sup>48</sup>

Walking for Gandhi embodied his protest at the most elemental level: at one stroke he could get to know the affected people as well as the aggressors and draw them into dialogue with himself as an interlocutor; in another way he wanted to bring to light the innate configuration between locality and walking because 'walking creates the spirit of Swadeshi as caring'.<sup>49</sup> Innumerable eye witnesses to Gandhi's stay in Noakhali described the absolute ease with which he interacted with people he met, just as he remembered the children ill in the neighbourhood and prescribed remedies for common diseases. In the months that he lived in Noakhali, Gandhi covered 49 villages, walking barefoot, trying to wean the people of both communities away from violence and hatred. Gandhi's appeal for peace in Bengal was totally self-abnegating. He went there as a servant of the people and he met Hindus and Muslims alike and appealed for unity.<sup>50</sup> To borrow Vinoba Bhave's term, Gandhi's work in Noakhali was 'an experiment in applied *ahimsa*.'

Nirmal Kumar Bose, an anthropologist and Gandhi's Bangla interpreter who stayed with him in Noakhali, testifies to the extent Bapu tried to come to the heart of the problem in Noakhali. Gandhi ascribed the forcible conversions as a 'sin' and held the Muslim leadership as responsible for the conflagration. Bose describes a conversation between Gandhiji and Sarat Bose when

Saratbabu ... spoke about the panic from which Hindus were suffering, and described some of the things he had learnt...the crime against women as well as the monstrous cruelty to which people had degraded themselves. Gandhiji corrected him by saying that we must look at the original fault and need not be concerned so much about consequential developments. These lay, firstly, in the declaration of the 16 August 1946 as a holiday, and secondly, in the forcible conversion of non-Muslims. Forcible conversion was the worst thing imaginable; and all that had taken place in Noakhali could be traced to this original sin.<sup>51</sup>

That the deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relation had wider economic causes, Gandhi was well aware. To quote Bose again, one evening while on a walk, they begin talking...

Gandhiji enquired about the local economic situation. I told him

how the Hindus are financially the stronger community. In course of the Second World War, the Muslim peasant had earned some money, while a new Muslim middle class had also come into being under the patronage of the Muslim League government. The latter were trying to step into the shoes of the Hindu middle class. It was not a simple case of an exploited class trying to oust another, through an alliance with the exploited on the score of religious and cultural unity. If the Hindus have to live here, the fundamental economic relation has to be set right. Gandhiji agreed....<sup>52</sup>

Gandhi's work in Noakhali was unimarginably brave but it also contained the seeds of failure: the communal distrust between the two warring factions had cut too deep; the resurgent Muslim self identity necessitated a sea change from the existing economic and political dominance of the upper caste Hindus and partition was visualized as the only possible way out by influential sections within both the factions. Gandhi knew that the carnage at Noakhali 'has surpassed.... imagination' and only a miracle would achieve the desired stability and communal harmony but he was filled with hope that 'this terrifying situation will change soon.' It was a formidable task but he was determined to carry on and do the best he could. As Mushirul Hasan states:

In Noakhali, a weary Mahatma, leaning against his *lathi* that had stood him in good stead in his political journeys, had to prove to the world that personal courage, moral fervour, and commitment, more than formalistic ideologies, could sooth violent tempers.... Never before had a political leader taken so bold an initiative to provide the healing touch not just to the people of Noakhali but to the warring groups across the vast subcontinent. And yet, never before did so earnest an effort achieve so little.<sup>53</sup>

### The workers

Gandhi's presence in Noakhali and his heroic anti-communal efforts bestow 'epic' dimensions to any representation of 1946.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the epic hero though, Gandhi's lone yet mammoth efforts were buttressed both by individuals and organizations. The Communist party workers undertook anti-communal as well as relief operations in Noakhali. *People's Age* reported (on 27 October 1946) that on receipt of the news of the outbreak, the veteran Communist leader Muzaffar Ahmed



left for Noakhali accompanied by other party workers. The Bengal Committee of the Communist Party of India issued an urgent directive to party members in the affected districts to help in rescue and relief works. The directive also urged party workers in every locality to 'form united Hindu-Muslim volunteer corps for peace and defence of the villages.'<sup>55</sup> In these dark times of lawlessness and despair, Muzaffar Ahmed, in an appeal to the people of the riot affected villages, stated that he was convinced that there were hundreds of ordinary Muslim peasants 'who have the courage and the eagerness to render help to their Hindu brothers and to rescue all men and women in distress.' His words seemed to have united some Hindu and Muslim hearts amidst the conflagration. *People's Age* reported on 3 November 1946 that in a belt of villages, stretching round Hasnabad, Barura and Galimpur in Tippera district, 80,000 Hindu and Muslim *kisans* were united 'under the Red Flag,' to give shelter to fleeing villagers who arrived from Noakhali. They organized relief kitchens and fed and sheltered 5000 people.<sup>56</sup> Abani Lahiri, a member of the Communist Party of India, recorded in his memoirs that hundreds of volunteers, under the Communist-led Kisan Sabhas had by blocking the road between Noakhali and Comilla stopped the riot from spreading, while Muslim volunteers looked after Hindu riot victims who came from Raigunj and Lakshimpur.<sup>57</sup> These anti-communal efforts however remained disparate and scattered while reports of daily harassments of Hindus continued to make headlines. For his part, Gandhi was clear that the anti-communal efforts in Noakhali could have far reaching repercussions in the rest of India. In a letter from Srirampur (27 December 1946) to Shri Hamiduddin Chaudhury, (Parliamentary Secretary of the Muslim League Ministry), he indicated this belief: 'Believe me, I have not come to East Bengal for the purpose of finding fault with the League.... For I believe that if you and I can produce in Bengal the right atmosphere, the whole of India will follow.'<sup>58</sup> Gandhi was determined to give the League government another chance to prove that they were honourable men who would not remain silent witnesses to shameful deeds. This was part of his ideological appeal to Muslims. On the other hand, to his own band of women workers Gandhi laid down an uncompromisingly strict line of action couched in openly religious terms of sacrifice and duty. He often addressed the women relief workers to urge them on: 'If your minds are turned towards your homes, then you must return there. The work that you have chosen demands your dedication and love... Like the love that Meera had for her Lord, Giridharilal... All you women should be like Meera...' The exhortation to be like Meera elided a deeper truth: Meera's spiritual *bhakti* was to be transformed into political *nishtha* or commitment to a cause, the power of womanhood, *stri shakti* evoked to augment and strengthen national work. The fashioning of a nationalist

feminine self can only be possible if like the devotee Meera, the notion of service can be attributed to the every day life to forge a new social order with true equality and development for all (*sarvodaya*). It was also a call for middle class women to show the way through *satyagraha* to work for communal harmony even if their menfolk were averse to it. Emancipation of women was to be the emancipation of the nation. This attempt to broaden the traditional role of women was factored in through Gandhi's ideal of *sacrifice* (to remain in the world and act in it) and the comment that Gandhi's idealization of the image of woman as the 'embodiment of sacrifice and extolling the strength that comes from suffering helped strengthen the prevailing oppressive stereotypes of woman as selfless companions and contributors to a social cause' is a trifle unfair.<sup>59</sup> Gandhi's exhortation was to concretize and interweave individual development and social action, both in the private and public domains. He therefore advised his workers to turn themselves into 'sevaks' or servants rather than protectors, both to the riot affected and their aggressors. Gupta's memoir echoes Gandhi's idea but gives it an added twist: she reiterates that Gandhi had taken Indian women out from the narrow self-centred world of family and domestic obligations to the outer world of service to the people and showed

us women how our responsibility to our family and duty to our society can work together...and if there were a conflict between the two then on the path to duty we must remain true to our duty and win over the obstacles to leave a real mark of our commitment.<sup>60</sup>

The rejection of a compromise between the public/political role and the private role of a woman marks this memoir as a radical departure from other autobiographies of the times. It can also be seen as an effort to negotiate and reformulate the ideology and institution of the family not as a site of oppression but as personal growth and bound integrally to the community.

These ideals of duty and service were widespread markers of a socially oriented feminine self during the nationalist era when questions regarding women's rights were sometimes subsumed within their political work. Yet another memoir of a young Communist Party of India worker named Renu Chakravartty, just like Ashoka Gupta's memoir, shows how women had to refashion and negotiate their 'natural' roles as mothers or wives to their political roles as party grassroots workers.<sup>61</sup> Chakravartty had a one year old child whom she had to leave behind when riots broke out but 'although I felt the wrench, the call of Noakhali's suffering sisters would not let me sit back at home. Manikunatala Sen, Kamala Chatterjee, Bela Lahiri, Maya Lahiri, Ira Sanyal, Manorama Bose, Biva Sen and myself went for relief work.'<sup>62</sup> An untitled, unpublished article amongst Chakravartty's private

papers (written on the occasion of the fiftieth year of the Communist Party of India) gives some ideas of these ground realities and the desire to serve the riot affected that enabled them to overcome factionalism and animosity even within the grassroots workers:

The steadfastness of purpose was strong in our hearts, but our resources for relief were scarce. A group of us went to Choumuhani, Noakhali and another group went through South Calcutta branch of the AIWC to the Chandpur branch of AIWC, whose secretary was Pankajini Singha Roy. I was in the latter group. Pankajinidi put us up in her house, but it soon became clear that our presence and work were not very much to their liking. After waiting for a few days, I and another decided to take some packages of milk to the interior areas which were badly affected.....<sup>63</sup>

Early on, Chakravartty realized that the relief and rehabilitation work needed government help or 'it had to be coordinated work with the Congress organization of which Sucheta Kripalini was the officer commanding. Even government relief was being distributed through her. The Muslim League government hardly gave any direct help.' (106) The tension between Congress workers and Communists working in Noakhali often erupted in strange ways. In her biography *Shediner Katha* (About Those Days, 1982), Manikuntala Sen who was in Chandpur working in a camp for women described an accident where Renuka Ray, a prominent AIWC member, was injured in a jeep accident. Sen nursed her for three days and 'Renuka Ray saw what I was doing and became a little softer in her attitude to me. Probably she was surprised that Communist women could also nurse Congress workers so selflessly.'<sup>64</sup>

Ashoka Gupta's private papers are a rich source for a glimpse into the life of a relief worker in Noakhali, along with Renu Chakravartty and Manikuntala Sen's accounts although with substantial differences in emphasis. Gupta's memoir demonstrates how the semantics of action is transformed into narrative with comic details (in one such incident she describes how she accompanied two goats along a long country road so that Gandhi could have his milk) and her travails to touch Hindu and Muslim hearts for reconciliation. The numerous villages she visits, warm recollections of her co-workers, as well as the official efforts that the AIWC undertook for communal harmony, create a mood of a narrated story. Her choice of events is couched in a journalistic spare style, detached and unsentimental. However, the objectivity of her discourse is often destabilized by ruminations and

questions about the effectiveness of the relief efforts and the attempts towards recovery of abducted women. Thus Gupta's voice as an AIWC worker and her consciousness of the gendered experience of violence often interplays to create a heterogeneous history of the self at a time that is both 'tumultuous' and subjectively temporal. This interplay of the suffering that she saw all around her and her own commitment to the ideals of *sewa* mark her memoir: it makes the text uneven and creates gaps in an otherwise poised rendering of everyday experiences. The larger force field of Gandhian ideals of democracy and humanity are severely tested by what she saw all around her; at the same time her own personal trajectory as an activist allowed her to put rescued, molested, and abducted women at the centre-stage in her memoir.

Dr Phulrenu Guha, Mrs Phullarani Das and myself of the AIWC, Calcutta and Chittagong Branches did seven days of intensive touring from 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> instant (November 1946) with headquarters at Lakhimpur, visiting Bejoynagar, Ahladinagar, Ahmedpur, Parbatinagar, Jahanabad, some portions of Ramchandi, Hasnabad, Hasandi, Hetampur, DalalBazar, Char Mandal, Tumchar, Charruhita, Kalirchar, Abdullapur, Piyarapur, Banchanagar, Charlamchi, Sanaurabad and Lamchari all inhabited mostly by Namasudras, Jugis and....(indecipherable). Everywhere we saw a large number of houses including handlooms belonging to the Jugis burnt to ashes, and houses that escaped destruction by fire were thoroughly and efficiently pillaged. Many have left the villages, but those who could not do so lived under improvised sheds constructed with burnt C.I. sheets. In Tumchar alone fifty families have been rendered homeless by arson..... We collected statistics of crimes committed against women from the women victims themselves. We saw more than twenty forcibly married girls whose parents brought them back after the disturbances was (sic) over. Some are far too young to be married at all and their parents do not consider such forcible marriages as valid though they are afraid of the future. We came across a number of women who were raped or molested.....<sup>65</sup>

Gandhi was clear that the girls forcibly abducted had committed no wrong, 'nor incurred any odium. They deserve the pity and active help of every right-minded man. Such girls should be received back in their homes with open arms and affection, and should have no difficulty in being suitably matched.'<sup>66</sup> The

rehabilitation and recuperation of women raped, molested and kidnapped was therefore not simply a political act by the state but a social act of sympathy and pity by every man and woman. In setting out this parameter of acceptance, Gandhi was again acting in character: his attempt to reform the practice of unacceptability of abducted women was to enable a simultaneous effacement and recuperation of women's experiences that one has seen in Gupta's autobiography. This discourse around abductions enabled both Gandhi and his workers to focus once again on the dynamics of Hindu upper caste monopoly over local resources that had resulted in Muslim class and communal aggression. Gandhi's directions to the workers to keep in mind that their work was not only to help rehabilitate Hindus but remain in close contact with the Muslim villagers is a recognition of this idea:

While on our work we had felt that the first requirement of rehabilitation of the two communities – the re-establishment of communal harmony – was indeed an impossible task. If some of us, for some time, lived with the villagers may be then... the refugee Hindus may get back their self-confidence and trust. Our first task will be to eradicate terror from the minds of the Hindus and banish the desire to attack or torture from among the Muslims.<sup>67</sup>

Both Gandhi and workers like Ashoka Gupta saw clearly the internal undercurrents between the oppressor and the oppressed. They were linked together in a vicious cycle for it was a chain of social and economic injustices that made communalism an easy alternative.

Gandhiji's advice to the Hindus uniformly was that they should purify their own hearts of fear and prejudice, and also set right their social and economic relations with others; for only could this internal purification give them adequate courage, as well as the moral right, to live amidst a people who now considered them to be their exploiters and enemies.<sup>68</sup>

Even for affected women who were scared to join his prayer meetings for fear of violence, Gandhi's advice was to be fearless. When certain instances of abductions were brought to his notice he said that a written complaint must be made with names of the women so that he could send it to Premier Suhrawardy immediately.<sup>69</sup>

From the many bits of papers that Ashoka Gupta has left behind, one can piece together the enormous relief efforts that lay before the workers, the huge odds they worked against as well as the daily obstacles and acts of faith they had to perform.<sup>70</sup> Years later, Gupta remembered that the most pressing needs

in her mind at that time were to organize search parties for abducted women and to form volunteer corps for patrolling the area along with the military. She was not loathe to take the help of the colonial government either through the Royal Women's Auxiliary Corps (RWAC), the army or the Red Cross. In this she differed from what Gandhi had been advocating in his prayer meetings. In Madhupur, Gandhi had said

that he for one was not enamoured of the police or the military and that he (the Prime Minister) could withdraw it at any time. The Hindus and Muslims should be free to break each other's heads if they wanted to. He would put up with that. But if they continued to look to the police and the military for help, they would remain slaves forever to their fear.<sup>71</sup>

Later on, Gupta would remember those months in Noakhali as

the most rewarding and memorable period of my working life... this was memorable for me not because we were providing relief, or setting up hospitals and schools or helping in the planning and construction of roads. The work was fulfilling because we were trying to bring human beings closer to each other. We were trying to build bridges between people, between communities.<sup>72</sup>

However the clash between the ideal and the real is all too palpable in Gupta's writings and brings out how her 'time' in Noakhali is both a continuity and a disruption: 'Between November 1946 to 14 June 1947, I stayed in Noakhali villages; saw what happened and had first hand knowledge of the psychology both of the oppressed minority and the aggressive majority and the reasons for it.'<sup>73</sup> In another earlier tour undertaken from 30 October to 4 November 1946 through Noakhali and some portion of Tippera, Ashoka Gupta saw indescribable suffering but some instances of love amongst Hindu and Muslim neighbours: In Raipur,

the market, which is very big, was almost deserted, as a high percentage of shops and stalls belonged to Hindus....Two huge dwellings consisting of several semi-detached houses, within a few yards of the police station, have been completely burnt down. One of these families was given shelter by a Muslim neighbour at the risk of their own safety for three days.....<sup>74</sup>

In a later interview she gave to Andrew Whitehead, a BBC correspondent in

1997, she expressed the horror of what she saw especially in regard to the women:

I personally feel that raping was done more afterwards than at the time of the riots.... Cold-blooded rapes took place after the riots were over....I found that Hindu men were cowards, and Muslims, who were raping and torturing, they were bigger cowards than these Hindus...taking advantage of a woman who is so helpless, so terribly helpless, and so terribly scared; she couldn't protect herself, she had to give in...that is where I felt that we were ineffective.<sup>75</sup>

As a witness and as a social worker, Gupta's memoir moves between these two aspects of her self-hood: the helplessness she felt in bringing about any real change and Gandhi's ideal that permeated so much of her work:

People did not trust each other, they had no confidence (*bharsha korto na*) on their neighbours. All these were so true that in the face of so much distrust all our noises for communal harmony and united prayer meetings seemed useless.<sup>76</sup>

This residual guilt, that as exemplars they were sometimes ineffective, is also present in Nirmal Bose's writings.<sup>77</sup> Ashoka Gupta in *Noakhali Durjoger Diney*, noted the limitations of the relief workers' efforts to save people from daily harassment and also touched upon her own sense of futility. This creates a fissure in her memoir between the perceived and the ideal, a conscious effort to serve but an unconscious and terrifying realization that all had come to naught. It is also a gap between 'narrating' an event and 'intervening in the social processes' that oscillates between incomprehension and impotence.<sup>78</sup> She particularly remembers a painful incident where the intervention of relief workers had absolutely no impact:

I had, after great persuasion, taken a husband and wife to file a first information report (FIR) in the police station. In front of me, with the sari end covering her face, the wife had said that even two months after the riots 2-3 men forcibly took her away every night and returned her in the morning. This has been happening daily but her husband nor his family has come forward to complain out of fear. I brought them to Lakshmipur police station after giving them courage. But the woman did not give her name, or any other details. The Officer-in-Charge said that the FIR had to be signed. The husband said that they would be killed if they did that. It was better if they left the country. And, truly, that family left one day. I

was powerless to save the victim and punish the guilty. We remained mute spectators.<sup>79</sup>

Gupta's perception of Noakhali was from within as well as without. Like other workers, she came to Noakhali to help the victims and bring back the vestige of a life lived together. Her experience of *la longue durée* of Noakhali was through relief and rehabilitation, just as Gandhi's was through the lens of non-violence and prayer. 62 years later in another interview (she gave to the author) she recounted again what she had seen in the affected villages and all the details were absolutely fresh in her mind's eye: rape of women, forcible conversions, destruction of implements of livelihood like looms and ransacking coconut and other fruit trees. In the Namasudra villages she had seen widespread conversion, including slaughter of cows; but in the upper caste Hindu villages there was looting, murder and arson. The riot-affected were mostly agriculturists, *kobiraj* and daily labourers who worked in rice husking (*dhanbhana*) or as barbers and masons (*mistri*). Her papers also contain a list of people who headed the relief camps.<sup>80</sup> When the partition happened, her involvement with Noakhali came to an abrupt end. Gupta came back to Calcutta while Gandhi had already left for Bihar. Later in her biography, Ashoka Gupta would talk again of these months of uncertainty and agony where her actions in Noakhali with its synchronic time and its relationship between ends, means and agents suddenly changes to another order of discourse, which Paul Ricoeur calls the 'diachronic character of every narrated story'.

The two communities were now divided by tremendous suspicion, hatred and mistrust. Relationships between the two had gone terribly wrong, and there was no meaningful communication between ordinary people on both sides. Now that partition had taken place would anything change? What would be the political ramification? In the villages of Noakhali I had mixed with everybody, talked to everyone, and the actual nature of the divide had not been clear. I had no way of knowing that I would be shocked and deeply grieved by the subsequent events. That lay in the future. It was not quite so evident then. Those of us who had lived in East Bengal faced absolute, devastating changes after partition, which was such an overwhelming phenomenon that it could not quite be grasped, let alone analyzed. We simply floundered and groped in the dark. We were not really prepared for partition, though it was not as if we were caught unawares. We knew partition would happen, that changes would occur. What we did not know was what form it would take



– we could not conceptualize what life would now turn out to be. It was a time of panic and of paralysis.<sup>81</sup>

Gupta's memoir gives an indication of the daunting tasks ahead of workers like her. Her description of accessing the women's inner quarters often made her come face to face with the realization that although they had tried to work irrespective of community or religion 'they had not received true acceptance' especially amongst the Muslims.<sup>82</sup> All through her book on Noakhali one gets the impression of a woman who works assailed with fleeting despair, yet whose determination sometimes made her take unorthodox means to procure relief materials. For example, she did not hesitate to use her social status to cajole medicines for the affected people.<sup>83</sup> In many respect, Ashoka Gupta is the representative of other women AIWC workers who were engaged in relief work at Noakhali: they were urban educated, well connected, had spread out family networks or friends yet who turned away from their comfortable lives to live and work amidst poor and downtrodden men and women who needed their help. In her text there is some indication of class or caste barriers between the relief workers and the villagers; a rather self reflexive understanding of what separated the workers from the recipients of relief: in one instance she describes how she and a co-worker had taken up the challenge of a *moulvi* to study the Koran. Every morning they went to his home to read the religious text. After a week, a woman of the household told them that they should cover their heads when they read the holy book.

Even now I think how easily an illiterate village woman had shown us that whatever we do we must do it with respect... there was a way to read the holy texts – not just to gain knowledge but to accept with respect. We were at fault. We had paid more attention to doing relief, we had not respectfully judged the problem through the view of the other. For this reason, many times the work of so many of our workers remained unsuccessful.<sup>84</sup>

It is obvious that for her, as well as for Manikuntala Sen, Renuka Ray, Renu Chakravartty and others like them, social service was part of the political ethos in which they worked and lived. In all their writings one sees that the idea of *sewa* was not just a methodological tool of politics but a deeply held belief of personal integrity: as political workers and as women. They understood only too well how humanitarian work could be 'intoxicating' and 'it is only natural that the approval one earns from oneself and from others would nudge one to exert oneself even more.'<sup>85</sup> However, the women worker's self-fashioning in this era in Indian nationalism is accompanied by greater participation in public causes. Reading their

narratives, one begins to see how Gandhi's ideologies regarding *satyagrahis* did not just create a homogenous category of women as activists but underlined the ways in which the women themselves mediated, received and worked upon his ideas. Their emergence as subjects and agents in the public space is an invitation, in the words of Ranabir Samaddar to 'examine much more rigorously the unsettling effects that the emergence' brings on those who are not fashioned as 'subjects': the figure of the homeless violated woman and the 'politics of the unhomely' that redefines the question of citizenship. The abducted woman, a trope in some modern Bangla fiction, helps one see how this politics is played out in literature.<sup>86</sup>

If large-scale violence shaped or 'constituted'<sup>87</sup> our partition of 1947, then in our histories we have said little about that shaping force and have discussed little their effects on our collective psyche. The Noakhali riots, like other pre-partition riots, are still in many ways suppressed in the modern historiography of the partition partly because we have no 'means of representing such tragic loss, nor of pinning down – or rather, owning responsibility for it.'<sup>88</sup> The writings I have looked at do not provide a 'total' and 'objective' and 'comprehensive' knowledge of what happened in Noakhali; they are in most cases fragmentary in nature. They are tentative, bounded by the subject's own immediate personal understanding of events, their own subject positions as well as a certain historical context. Yet they have their importance in enriching our understanding by providing a perspective on the political and civic fault-lines of religion and gender and class that still run through the subcontinent's history. These texts can be used to see how the discursive intersections and disjunctions between reminiscences and imagination complicate the representation of the fissured tableau of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bengal. If Noakhali was the symbol of how Bengal imploded into strife and fratricide, the rumblings of the language movement in East Pakistan through the 1960s was a time when writers in West Bengal began to revisit the vivisection of the country. The possibility of an independent Bangladesh was a negation and a rejection of the communal violence that had accompanied the partition: Bangla language was now the thread that connected all Bengalis, whether Hindus or Muslims, this side or that side of the border. The three texts that I now discuss were all written in quick succession (between 1967–70), and it is not a coincidence that all of them are by writers originally from East Bengal who take up the theme of Hindu-Muslim relationship as their central novelistic concern. Ateen Bandopadhyay came to West Bengal when he was still in school, while Prafulla Ray came in his early youth. Pratibha Basu came to Calcutta permanently after her marriage to her litterateur husband Buddhadev in 1933.<sup>89</sup> All the three texts use the realistic novel as their chosen form, set at a time before the partition, in undivided Bengal,

two in places that have close geographical resemblance to Noakhali. They are also narratives that use the trope of 'abducted' woman to raise certain questions about the communal mobilization that elicited diverse responses from various social groups. Abduction represents a multiplicity of anxieties both among Hindus and Muslims and these texts carefully consider the formation of communal identities in pre-partition Bengal along caste and religious lines. They are thus in the form of recapitulated memories narrated by characters who lived within the social and cultural milieu where communal conflagrations and abductions took place. These provide us a way to understand how the 'metaphor' of Noakhali may have worked its way into the narrative texture of these novels in order to take a re-look at the partition in the context of Bangladesh. Abduction of women was a large scale feature of Noakhali and the treatment of this contentious subject, in the way the writers elide or reformulate the identity of the abducted women in the domestic/social sphere, throws insight into the grand narratives of 'citizenship' and the nation state in the context of the birth of Bangladesh.<sup>90</sup> Abductions, real and imagined, were a communal preoccupation in the 1920s Bengal and aligned not only to the question of gender but also interlocked with caste, class and political movements:

in general, the multiple operations of the abduction theme, goes to show...the paradoxical operations of the communal common-sense ideology - the fact that their surface simplicity, in fact banality, conceals the awesome range and complexity of social relations and contexts they problematize and seek to recreate.<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, the theme of abduction performs many actions in the above mentioned Bengali novels and address a number of anxieties and preoccupations including the issue of communal co-existence that Bangladesh would later signify.

Set in undivided Bengal, these narratives also share a commonality in the depiction of people and land, seen through a mist of time. The landscape is codified into symbols that allegorize a lost culture and a way of life that are characteristics of close-knit village communities of Hindus and Muslims, living peacefully. Thus their remembrance of a pre-partition life is 'almost invariably cast in nostalgic terms.'<sup>92</sup> Some critics have remarked that

when the Indian subcontinent was divided, the tolerant way in which ordinary people in urban areas and villages conducted their life was violated.....They forgot their shared life-worlds and became Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs – merely ideological and self-serving. And as the violence increased, their imaginative resources became

narrower and meaner; they ignored their holy books and became nastier.<sup>93</sup>

This linear description of cause and effect becomes complicated when one looks at the texts a little more closely and evaluate aspects of a tolerant syncretism that are projected in all of them.<sup>94</sup> Dipesh Chakraborty has theorized that the Hindu-Muslim relationship is an example of ‘proximity’ where one relates to difference ‘in which difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated.’<sup>95</sup> In the texts, the Hindu-Muslim relationship displays both ‘proximity’ and ‘identity’ but it has another dimension: the texts are a testimony to ‘affect’ where the emotional and psychological responses of this relationship is set out in vivid detail. The syncretic culture is seen in terms of how an individual responds to it in terms of class, gender and caste. In all three texts, the individuation of both the religions and communities is done meticulously in a way that suggests that communal identity is closely bound with class, although the Muslims are not depicted as a homogenous peasant community who suffer under Hindu landowners. The texts lay bare the long, intimate and close relationship of the two communities not only in terms of land but also through social practices to suggest that Hindus and Muslims are a part of the language and the history of a land. The Indian anti-colonial resistance encapsulates within it a strong religious identity and paves the way for a newly emerging Muslim class and political consciousness that becomes the basis for Pakistan. Yet religious nationalism is ultimately found wanting. That is why Noakhali eventually gives way to independent Bangladesh.<sup>96</sup> Both these novels take up this history of Bengal to reinterpret and redeploy it to chart out a new understanding of the relations between Hindus and Muslims in the context of linguistic nationalism. To map this new beginning, they both go back to the past and carefully craft their novels by using structures of location and geography to indicate the cultural and linguistic relationship of the two communities. Simultaneously, in doing this the novels also unearth the processes of ‘Othering’ that had created the Muslim or Hindu communal identity. The two novels by Bandopadhyay and Ray seem to be in dialogue with each other (and us) in setting out to map the lost habitation, the lost land: it constructs the ‘Other’: the Muslim who will abduct and pillage but who will also restore and nurture. By playing these two aspects of their relationship, the texts seem to formulate, produce and circulate an ideological and civilizational rejection of Noakhali and an acceptance of Bangladesh.

Ateen Bandopadhyay (b. 1934), a well-known name in Bangla modern literary canon, is the author of a number of stories and novels on the partition of which

*Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* (In Search of the Roller Bird, 1967)<sup>97</sup> is the classic that has been translated into 12 other Indian languages. This is a three part sprawling epic narrative that begins in the 1920s in East Bengal and ends in depicting refugee life in West Bengal in the 1970s. The first part, *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey*, is concerned with the lives of Hindus and Muslims both rich and poor, who live in a small village named Barodi, entwined to nature's cycle, following its rhythms. The text attempts a reconstruction of Hindu and Muslim identities by a narrow focus on the locality and community history of the people. Partition comes stealthily upon them almost without their knowing and the less visible and delayed causes and effects of displacement and violence are seen in the family and community spaces that this text foregrounds. Without slipping into parody or distortion, nostalgia plays an important role in this text of remembrance. Here, the 'home/land' is remembered through a language that is not pathological but erotic and sublime. The surfeit of memory, instead, constitutes the 'affective' dimension of loss of the everyday markers of lived experience that partition brings in its wake. The novel talks of geography (not as borders that will bind the new nation state) but as a sacralizing space that carries within it the markers of past struggles and future hopes. Thus, in this novel, place/space is not a passive container for social action or events but a vital and living presence whose mysterious and subtle properties transform the lives of people who live on them. The novel's historical/linear time has its corollary in the natural time of the seasons; again and again, the physical topos is transformed into the mysterious and subtle chora and the pastoral into 'home':

As soon as the monsoon arrived here, the *shaluk* flowers began to bloom.....there was water everywhere, the whole land got submerged ... the rice and jute fields....all of it went under water. Beneath the crystal water, small and big silver fish frolicked....once Shona had captured a wonderful insect, golden in colour, it did not look like any earthly insect. It had a pearl body with golden edges and a black border. It had no legs and it was ideal to be used on the forehead as an adornment. He had kept it inside a small jar for Fatima. When she came back he would give it to her.

Similarly Isham Khan labours in his watermelon patch that was once just a piece of fallow land and that he has transformed into verdant green. He keeps an eye open for the coming and goings of Thakurbari, the big Hindu household that employs him. The chronicle of the big house is one strand of the narrative that is entwined with other narrative strands. If according to Lukács, the novel is the epic

of the modern world, then Bandopadhyay sketches in loving details Barodi's rural life and its people in epic realistic mode, drawing in minute details the various characters who live and work and die on that fertile land, their subjectivities and the changes that come to their lives: Joton, the Muslim girl who marries a Fakir, Madhobi a widow who lives with her brother, the women of Thakurbari, Dhonbou and Borobou, the Muslim League member Shamsuddin, Jalali, the peasant Muslim girl who suffers from hunger and dies searching for *shaluk*, Felu Sheikh who believes Pakistan will be a country for the poor, and Shona the child protagonist through whose eyes one sees the unfolding of the events. The novel uses the protocols of social realism and its epic span begins with the Non-Cooperation Movement and ends with the division of the country. In keeping with its epic/realistic mode of narration it is both the quotidian lives of the characters and the larger life of the community. Without a single narrator and many points of view, the novel has a beginning typical of epics: the birth story of the child Shona whose growing up years in rural Bengal, with its unique traditions and rituals, its festivals and people that form the foundational impulse of the novel. In many ways the novel is a palimpsest of a civilization, where the complex relationship between Hindus and Muslims is an integral aspect of it, pointing to the larger complex figuration of it in the emergence of a nation. Bandopadhyay shows the closeness of life between the two communities just as he depicts the taboos of touch and ideas of pollution that act as invisible boundaries between the two: Shona's playmate Fatima knows that he cannot touch her when he hands her a captured butterfly as he has to bathe and purify himself if he does. These interdictions of the upper caste Hindus humiliate the Muslims who are dependent on them economically; these are one of the many reasons why the two communities distrust each other. The growing clout of the Muslim League is another. The control of local economic resources by the upper caste Hindus is a major cause of resentment amongst the Muslims who are politically aware, like Shamsuddin (Shamu). In the village there are a few well-to-do Muslims like him and Hajisaheb, but the rest are 'all like cattle. Hindus have jobs, land, education, everything.' (31) And during natural calamities, the 'Muslim villages suffer much more.' (101) Even the lower caste Hindus are better off as they own cattle. This relationship of the Hindu-Muslim to the larger question of nationhood is the defining characteristic of this novel. In the context of Bangladesh, one can understand why.

The Bengal countryside that Bandopadhyay depicts is a land of love (Shamu/Maloti), of childhood fairytales (Shona/Fatima) as well as the land where Pakistan will be born and then rejuvenated in a different avatar of Bengali linguistic aspiration in Bangladesh. This land is most closely realized through its variegated

seasons and its changing flora and fauna: the rhythms of nature, the harvesting of crops, the rivers, people's hunger and satiation.

In winter, there would be many kinds of food: *payesh* and *pitha* in every household. The large households would have their *bastupujo*: sacrificing lambs, *kadma* and *teel ambol*. Fish like *kalibaush*, lobsters and milk. The markets would be flooded with big *pabda* fish: large in size and golden hued. As soon as winter arrived, the cows in the village gave milk in plenty, and poverty, that stayed hidden the rest of the year in all the villages, abated a little. Things became cheaper; all daily wage earners got jobs and households became festive. (96)

The summer-end rains also bring a promise of good life:

All around one saw a verdant green, and in people's faces a hope of good times. ....in times like this the unfortunate and the poor could live on the greens available. ...the tender jute leaf *shak* or some *shukto*: a whole *shanki* of rice could be eaten with that. (63)

The novel's landscape is at once real and imagined: a place where the idea of 'home' is 'played out in the shifting invocations of a territory', often a contested terrain of politics as well as an 'elemental and enigmatic site of nature.'<sup>98</sup> Shona's ancestral village, whose morphology is intimately described with references to caste and class structures, have other referents that make it a landscape of belonging: its evocative symbolism resides in many objects both real and metaphorical like the Indian Roller bird (*neelkontho pakhi*) that is mentioned in the title but is never seen. Shona imagines its existence and likens it to his uncle who had fallen in love with an Englishwoman; just as Isham Khan knows the real and symbolic importance of the *beel*, the water-body where he gets lost and the truth about the *shimul* tree on its bank:

The light at the top of the *shimul* tree kept flickering. Was it the will o' wisp? At the far distance, the light strayed from one corner of the lake to another. ....Now he saw that the *shimul* tree was walking towards him. He saw the light on top of the tree and in every branch the hanging dead from the last epidemic. (14)

The tree is a geographical marker to his memory, a signposting of the 'history of an erased location' that is at once suggestive and symbolic. The landscape that Bandopadhyay evokes is thus a different kind of an 'archive' that cannot be found in the census or administrative data. This archive creates lists of plants, animals, trees

and other natural objects that relate differently to our senses; representing them entails a different kind of response from us as readers.<sup>99</sup> Just so does Buddhadev Bose describe the Noakhali of his adolescence:

The most beautiful road was lined with casurinas, its branches filled with deep sussurations, the whole day and the whole night. Crowds of coconut and casurinas, underneath them flickering circle of shadows made up of light and darkness ...where ponds and streams and waterways lay anywhere and everywhere, the gum from the *gaab* trees, the thorns of *maadar*, the fear of snakes....there was no path in Noakhali that I had not walked in, no field that I had not played in, in places far and near.....<sup>100</sup>

Both Bandopadhyay and Bose are imaginative cartographers, creators of an fictional map that will construct a meaningful microcosm of belonging and exile. This microcosm is the specific historicity of the landscape that they describe. The verbal and representational landscape becomes a repository of political values, for it is this landscape that will host a dance of death and also result in the birth of a new nation.<sup>101</sup>

In the novel Hindus and Muslims are not isolated and cut off from each other. Their lives are intricately and intimately bound with each other. Throughout the text, the physical *proximity* of the two communities is shown in great detail. In the summer months, when the water in the wells dry up, the Namasudra and the Muslim women gather by the river to make holes in the sand and dig for water (57). Maloti and Shamu share a deep and lasting friendship, as do Shona and Fatima. Isham Khan protects the child Shona in a riot. This intimacy of the two communities is circumscribed by land and labour; certainly Thakurbari's benevolence to the Muslims is the benevolence of a landowning class to its dependents, but there is also genuine compassion and care. Bound within this relationship of labour and reliance, the demand for Pakistan becomes inevitable to the Bengali Muslims as the novelist unfolds the intricately woven pattern of the personal and the political strands through Shamu's life, the lives of the labouring peasants and their attachment to the land. This land has different meaning to different people: to Shamu and Maloti it is a land of love and loss, to Shona and Fatima it is the cradle of childhood fairytales and to Felu Sheikh it is the land where Pakistan will be born. In this variegated and changing landscape, the Hindu-Muslim relationship is the low melody that sways between dependence and dread: a 'fear of the self' where the dominant self 'evokes another self' in a quasi-schizoid split.<sup>102</sup> It is a secret grammar of the psyche that is based on memory and longing.



Shamu's relationship with Maloti is an example of this: it is a relationship where a historical difference (of religion) is not erased but negotiated. Shamu, the Muslim League bigwig, pastes pamphlets on trees and dreams of a new Pakistan; but his moral universe is constituted by the suffering of widowed Maloti who lost her husband in a Dhaka riot. The text presents Maloti's sexuality not as a 'problem' but as an extension of her rich and evocative awareness of the poetry of the earth. The widowed Maloti is not a symbolic female form divested of individuality: she is a woman of flesh and blood whose sexuality cannot be contained by the rigid laws of Hindu society. Like the land, she is an enigma who draws powerfully both Shamu and Ranjit, her childhood playmates. Her desire's liminal play around Ranjit and Shamu's proximity is part of a 'land bound by human tears that have established an impartial circle of love from a time immemorial.' Maloti's abduction and rape by two Muslim Leaguers, Jabbar and Karim dramatizes the way her consent is blanketed out and 'the utter repudiation of her choices and personhood.'<sup>103</sup> However, she is rescued by two Muslims, Joton and Fakirsaheb and nursed back to health:

Joton wanted to wash off all dirt from Maloti's body and make her once more the widowed Maloti....She did not know why but again and again the image of a handsome man appeared in her mind's eye, a man fit for Maloti. For how long this body has not been worked as Khudah has decreed: the body was hungry....Slowly Joton poured water over Maloti's body that had been ravaged by barbaric men; her hands patted and brushed away all the torture from Maloti's limbs.(178)

Joton refuses to attach any signification to Maloti's abduction and by imagining the violated body as a desiring body, Joton re-inscribes both herself and Maloti into self-hood. Both Joton and Maloti will be the twin thrust of the new womanhood and the new nation: violated, abused but pristinely healed through love and longing. Are they then symbols of Bangladesh where two religions will be united?

Shamsuddin's moral universe is constructed both through Maloti and Jalali's sufferings. In an allegorical passage where Maloti loses her pet duck to Jalali's hunger and theft, Shamu goes looking for the bird that leads him to Jalali's hut. As he is about to call her name, he sees her at *namaz* her face cleansed of the stigma of theft, hands held aloft at prayer. Shamu feels the weight of her poverty and realizes 'in this long journey...he was mad about the illusory division of a kingdom.' Muslim communalism is intrinsically bound to class and Shamu's realization that poverty takes away self esteem feed his political desire to have a

separate nation for Muslims. But this separatism is ultimately 'illusory' for Pakistan will continue with divisive politics: religion and language will once again be used to draw boundaries. Shamu is the new postcolonial Muslim self who is capable of compassion and identification with Hindus: he is agonized at Maloti's abduction and he leaves the village forever to settle in Dhaka:

Shamsuddin was disturbed within his self; he knew he was helpless but he felt her dishonour. He was trying to bring back a measure of self-confidence amongst Muslims; he had pointed out that all they had accepted so long as fate was not so, it was humiliation. . . . to build the confidence of a new nation he had to make a number of harsh statements but this action of Jabbar was vile. Inside him, Shamsuddin burned with anger and hurt. (230)

Shamu never really forgets Maloti, his *priyo kafer*.

Shamu became sad when he spoke about Maloti. It was one woman, one woman alone, who took him back again and again to some other place – perhaps his childhood and the act of going to look for *bakul* flowers, crossing the rice and jute fields. When he went home these days, he felt there was an absence next to him: the Hindu houses were all empty, desolate. (385)

The invocation of the oppressive, lustful Muslim man, widespread in Hindu communal imagination, is negated by Shamu's deep sense of guilt and pain. Bandopadhyay does not allow his text to subscribe to this negative Muslim image available in popular Hindu communal discourse. Also, in refusing to generalize Maloti's abduction and consequent fate, he negates the overarching Hindu patriarchal values by upholding the rhetoric of abduction as 'initiated' by widows who are sexually vulnerable.<sup>104</sup>

On a realistic level, therefore, Bandopadhyay's text does not elide over the fate of Maloti. She returns to her family but is not accepted into the community. She is made to live in a separate hut and when her pregnancy becomes apparent, she is forced to seek the help of Ranjit, a revolutionary terrorist who brings her back to Joton's shelter. Partition creates another upheaval and Maloti ends up a smuggler, carrying rice across the border, a casualty of the country's division. The postcolonial nation's incentive that seeks to refashion abducted and recovered women to 'become useful and purposeful citizens'<sup>105</sup> is undermined by Maloti's fate. In the primordial landscape of natural cycles, abduction is then an act of unnatural hostility, a plucking out of a life from its innate and human environ.

Abduction then becomes a trope used by both Ateen Bandopadhyay and Prafulla Roy to denote a sundering and an ending: of a way of life lived in a land that can only be reconstructed now at the level of fiction and imagination. Perhaps the birth of Bangladesh will recreate that lost home?

Stylistically and thematically, Bandopadhyay's novel has a number of similarities with Prafulla Roy's *Keyapatar Nouka* (The Boat Made of Keya Leaves, 1968).<sup>106</sup> Like Bandopadhyay, Roy (b.1934) has written prolifically on the exigencies of partition: the dislocation and uprooting of thousands of people from a land they had loved and his short stories depict the effects of division on both Hindu and Muslim lives. Both Bandopadhyay and Roy's novels are postcolonial *bildungsroman* of a particular kind: the larger social and political events are seen through the eyes of a child whose growth parallels that of the new nation. The eponymous figure of the child hero personifies a diasporic self who is exiled from the land of his birth and has to take up residence in the metropolitan city. Ashis Nandy has shown how this journey to the city is never simple and contains within it a dream of return with a 'tacit realization that (the dream) had to remain unfulfilled.'<sup>107</sup> Shona in *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* and Binu in *Keyapatar Nouka* spend their childhoods in a land that endowed them with intense aural, tactile and sensory impressions that they recollect later like a moving tableau. This landscape is what they are immersed in, totally. Within it, they are clad in the civilizational fabric, the tissue of a culture that is seen through their relationships to both Hindus and Muslims. When they leave this land, their journey to the city encapsulates both an endorsement of the land left behind and a participation in the metropolitan city's postcolonial promise of freedom and advance. These contradictory affective responses are held in a balance in the figure of the exiled refugee persona in both the novels. According to Said, the important parameters of the modern novel are its ability to historicize the past through an appropriation of history.<sup>108</sup> Both these impulses can be seen in the two novels where the shared past of Bengali Hindus and Muslims are put into context in terms of religion and nationalism.

In Roy's novel, Binu's family decides to make their home in Rajdia, a small village in Dhaka district because the plenitude and magnificence of the green land is a contrast to the city they happily leave behind. This contrast between the city and the idealized country, 'gram Bangla,' is a familiar trope in modern Bengali writings. The playing out of this trope is to contrast the ugliness and violence of the city to the eternally romantic loveliness of Bengal's villages.<sup>109</sup> In undivided Bengal, before the partition, the city of Calcutta had offered education and jobs for the middle classes from East Bengal. Well-known city colleges like the Hindu College, Ripon College, and the Scottish Church College were filled with middle

class Hindu students from the East while the merchant and trading houses, the government departments had many workers who hailed from East Bengal. Living in cramped mess *bari*, or rented rooms, they dreamt of making it big in the city. Even though they lived and worked in Calcutta, it was never ‘home’; in their minds there always existed a division of culture, of landscapes, of food and flora and fauna. Calcutta, claustrophobic in its interiors, the mess room, the restaurants, the cinema halls were places of isolation.<sup>110</sup> Placed against this, they dreamt of the community left behind, their ‘desher bari’, the primordial place where they belonged. This contrast in landscape and actuality is seen brilliantly in a story, also by Prafulla Roy, titled ‘Swapner Train’ (The Train of Dreams):

Twelve or fourteen years ago, Ashok used to have a dream very often, early at dawn. It was a strange dream – in it he was sitting on a train. On both sides of the tracks were immense rice and wheat fields interspersed with shrubs of *bet*, *shonal* and jungles of *pithkhina*, *hijal*, *bounya*. As far as the eye went, the land was bathed in golden light. And drenched in that golden light, hundreds of birds flew about in the sky. So many kinds of birds – *shalikh*, *sidhiguru*, *bulbul*, *kanibok*, *haldibona*, *patibok* and wild parrots. They looked as if someone has strewn thousands of colored paper in the sky. Overhead, the clouds floated like cotton wool and from within their folds peeped the bright blue sky.

... Ashok used to wake up suddenly. In his sleepy state, he often forgot where he was. A little later when the dream train ... faded from his consciousness, he would see he was sitting on a three-legged bed, overspread with ragged, oily bedding, in a rundown room at the end of a suffocating lane in North Kolkata. The room had no plastered wall, no whitewash and cobwebs hung from the corners. On one side was the bed, on the other a clotheshorse, next to which were piled trunks, broken suitcases, tin boxes. Under the bed was another pile of pots and pans, cane boxes and broken water jugs.

The city room in its confined interiority and the wide, open space of the dream landscape (set obviously in East Bengal as the vegetation suggests) is a contrast between what is real and what is distant. The dream landscape is characterized by a kind of abundance and saturation; an archiving of memory before they are completely forgotten and the evocative symbolism is all too palpable. It is also a landscape of non-utility, where the beauty of the land exists without being constricted by utilitarian or worldly values: it exists for its own sake. It is symbolic

that the protagonist sees the landscape from a train, a symbol of progress and trade, very different from what the landscape stands for. In the two novels, this meant a re-appropriation of a land divided by partition, even if only in imagination.

The village of Rajdia wakes up during the autumn months, when the festival of goddess Durga begins: 'From the day of *Mahalaya*, Rajdia changed colours. Like the new waters of the monsoon, the children who lived far away all came home.' Roy gives Rajdia a nostalgic glow: his lower caste characters like Jugal and Pakhi, the Christian preacher Larmore who is more East Bengali than Irish, Binu's family, the Muslim neighbours like Majid Mian, the landless labourers, Taher and Bachir are enmeshed in a web of life that is intensely connected to the land. Binu's grandfather Hemnath is an exception who refuses to follow taboos of touch between Hindus and Muslims; the children love him and accompany him when he visits his Muslim friends. In the novel, the relationship between Muslims and Hindus is complex and long but it is not of fear or prejudice. This relationship is idealized to a large extent through the figure of Binu.

Unlike Shona, Binu is symbolic of the larger society that comprises Bengali speaking people: his very body comprises the two Bengals: his father Abonimohun belongs to West Bengal, his mother Suroma is an East Bengali. 'His bloodstream comprised of two channels: one of Padma and the other Ganga.' (414) Keeping with his symbolic function, Binu's recapitulation of the East Bengal that he leaves after the partition comprises all shades of people, of all religions:

At that moment he remembered so many things. Larmore, Majid Mian, Rojboli Shikdar, Patitopabon, Motahar Hosain Saheb, the man named Taleb who collected the grain from rat holes after harvest, the landless peasants of the sandbanks, even the golden monitor lizard that crossed the earthen path gliding on his chest – everything came back to him. And he remembered the bright blue autumn sky, the white clouds that wandered aimlessly, the misty days of *Kartik*. The intimate loveliness of *jolsechi saak*, the bushes of *bet*, *mutra*, lotus leaves, *kau* and *bijal* forests, the cry of gulls, egrets, cormorant, bulbul, fishes like *bacha*, *tyangra*, *bajali*, *bojuri* – he remembered all of that. They have drawn him by hand to usher him to maturity from adolescence. (414)

The idealized landscape is remembered in terms of what Ashis Nandy calls the 'psycho-geography' to mark the abandoned village as a radical site of social intervention: a new configuration of Hindu-Muslim relations that is abruptly brought to an end by the partition. But this land of diversity is now shattered:

Binu's journey to Calcutta marks the collective Hindu experience of uprooting and exodus symbolized in the figure of the abducted and violated Jhinuk, who is 'East Bengal's humiliated and shamed soul'.

The character of Jhinuk is central to the text especially in the last two sections of the novel and also symbolically signifies the breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bengal encapsulated in the partition.<sup>111</sup> Abduction becomes a common trope in both these literary texts that carries the resonance of love and fear: the abducted woman is both a lover and a violated self. The trope is often used in a dual way: either as an account of violent control, a sign of humiliation or breakdown of relation between communities; or as a space where potential lovers can meet. The two novels that I have so far discussed represent abduction in the former light. Jhinuk is raped and abducted in a riot, but she is seen as a passive victim who is a burden on Binu, her protector and escort to their journey to Calcutta. Her hopelessness and despair make her weak, so that the treacherous journey back to the city is made more dangerous because of her passivity. In Calcutta too she is an untouchable because she has been 'polluted' by coming in contact with Muslims. She gets no shelter in Binu's sister's house and even when Binu comes to his father Abanimohun to ask for help, he turns her away. What can Binu do with Jhinuk? He can marry her or he can put her in a home for abducted women. However, the problem is soon solved. Shaking off her earlier apathy, Jhinuk decides to disappear in the crowded metropolis, leaving the solution to her fate unanswered.

If abduction defines the foundational notion of community antagonism and a breakdown of nature's rhythms, then the abducted women present a new social question. The two novels then seem to be saying two different things. Bandopadhyay's text gives the abduction a metaphysical scope: if Maloti is violated by a Muslim, she is also nurtured back to health by another Muslim. On the other hand, Jhinuk is a symbol of *Muslim* aggression, so she has no place in the new structure of national/urban modern life that awaits Binu in Calcutta. In the new nation, the abducted and violated woman is marginalized and silenced. The difference between the two women can also be seen in the aftermath of the abduction, when the two perform different roles after they return to the society from where they have been forcibly taken away. Feminist historiographers have noted the stigma attached to abducted women who come back or are recovered, as well as the 'silence' that is imposed on them by their families and communities. Maloti is an exception to this idea, Jhinuk is not. After Maloti returns home, she is someone 'who loved the darkness now; but she did not want to live any more like an animal in the zoo' (240). She talks to Ranjit, who gives her sympathy and understanding that she does not get

from her own family. She decides to tell him of her experiences and the two forge an unusual bond that enables her to seek love again. Maloti's desire to speak is just not her desire to be absolved of her 'sins', or to gain Ranjit's sympathy. It is a violent foreclosure of the ambivalence of her position as an abducted woman: 'If only you had given me the knife' she tells Ranjit and when she is molested by the border official, she catches him around his throat to draw blood. In contrast, Jhinuk is shrouded in silence. She never speaks of her experiences of trauma and violence, and the few times she does speak, it is as a passive victim. The masculine and protective role that Binu plays is a re-constitution of the inequitable power relations that encourages her patriarchal patronage and that sees her as essentially a 'victim.' The abducted Jhinuk's reconstructed identity is not therefore as a girl who loves Binu but as a woman who lacks the ability or agency to act in her own self-interest. The ending of the novel however belies this lack. The text brings out a gap between desire and action in the construction of gender formation in the postcolonial state. When Jhinuk chooses to disappear in the crowds, freeing Binu from her responsibility, the novelist seems to be pointing to the possibility that she is able to renegotiate the terms of patriarchal patronage that had so far stifled her speech. But this renegotiation is done in silence: we do not see her again. This rupture in the text, a gap that is created, gives a more problematic interpretation to the theme of abduction as far as the woman's agency goes. If that agency is at all possible, and it is possible, as the text seems to suggest, then the new nation state still does not have the space where it can be formulated or articulated.

Pratibha Basu's (1915–2005) novel *Shamudro Hridayo* (The Heart is an Ocean, 1970)<sup>112</sup> uses the trope of abduction in a different way, not as sexual humiliation and degradation, but as a space where potential lovers from different communities meet and choose each other. Bankimchandra's 1865 novel *Durgeshnandini* is a famous example of intercommunity love. However, in Pratibha Basu's novel, this notion has a more social orientation as the love story now begins to address the problem of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, a major impetus of communal politics in the years leading up to the partition. The novel tells the story of Sultan Ahmed, the Nawab of Dhaka, who falls in love with Sulekha, the granddaughter of his father's lawyer. The two grow up as bitter communal foes, obsessed with each other's culpability in fanning the communal conflagration in the city. The Nawab's hatred of the Hindus comes from a recollection of his childhood experience in Sulekha's house when he was stopped from entering a room because he was a Muslim. For Sulekha, her commitment to revolutionary terrorism makes her determined to kill the Nawab because she believes him to be an ally of the British. Sulekha attempts to assassinate him but fails; she is abducted by the Nawab who reveals

to her gradually his double personality: he hates Hindus yet cannot demonize them, a duality that is reflected in his love for Sulekha and his desire to destroy and humiliate her. However, when serious Hindu-Muslim riots break out as the country is partitioned, the Nawab is forced to realize the fallout of this duality. He decides to release Sulekha and brings her back to Calcutta, risking his life. On an avowal of trust, he places his life in her hands in riot torn Calcutta. By now Sulekha is in love with him and she decides to go back to Dhaka with him. But this wish remains unfulfilled as Hindu goons attack her house and drag the Nawab to his death.

As anti-abduction campaigns played out in the years before the partition to harden the elements of boundary making between the two communities, this novel's treatment of the trope of abduction is different. Abduction is reconstituted as an enabling literary convention that permits Basu to represent an intercommunity love story. Given the gulf that separated Sulekha from the Nawab, the notion of abduction clearly does away with implausibility of a love story between a Hindu and a Muslim. The Nawab is aware of that:

Would he have been able to bring this dark skinned granddaughter of Bhuban Talukdar to his home? Why not? Because he was born a Muslim, that's why. However much he had the ability to be her equal, however much heartfelt love he may have possessed for her, however much wealth, power, health, prestige and beauty he may have had, he would never have got her. It was race and race alone that separated them....He was a Muslim, a Muslim. That was an obstacle, a terrible obstacle. (145)

The pressure of this obstacle never disappears so that the Nawab has to take recourse to abduction to allow a full elaboration of his attraction for Sulekha. It is when Sulekha is abducted that she gets to see him at close quarters, to get to know him and to finally love him. This is because communal antagonism is shown as an inherent part of the lovers' milieu that will not allow their love to flower naturally. This is shown in the schizoid conflict in the personality of the Nawab who confesses to Sulekha:

There have been two beings within me, side by side, who have nothing in common within them. I have tried earlier to abduct you but I was unable to do so....I had promised myself that if ever I laid my hands on you I would destroy all Hindu traits in you. I would humiliate, torture, and wound you and throw you away (146).



Given this internal conflict, Sulekha's decision to go back to Dhaka with the Nawab introduces a new element of the woman's agency. This is certainly a different agency that is constituted through speech and action: Sulekha closely approximates the figure of a woman promoted by anti-abduction campaigns: a woman who is empowered through violence. She is an expert in *lathi* and sword combat and fights off a Muslim mob that attacks her home. But Sulekha is much more than a prototype of a woman who is at the centre of the anti-abduction campaigns in Bengal. Her decision to return to Dhaka can be seen to question and to subvert the social and political boundaries of the new nation state and the hard logic of separation based on religion. She wants to return to Dhaka not only because it is her '*desh*' but because people like the Nawab can be found there. Her decision originates in love and it resonates 'beyond the doom that overcomes the lovers.'<sup>113</sup>

All these texts revolve around questions of subjectivity, memory and history set within the lush verdant fecundity of a landscape that relooks at economic and labour relations between communities but also posits the tearing apart of these relations through abduction and rape. The nostalgic portrayal of the primordial village (where abduction and rape are situated) is opposite to the moment of postcolonial modernity symbolized in the cities that the male characters later come to inhabit. This village of the imagination is however not false: when Bandopadhyay or Roy choose to depict East Bengal through a 'creative nostalgia' (to use Ashis Nandy's phrase) their works are ultimately a repudiation and rejection of sectarian and communal processes of identity formation that began with the pre-partition riots like the one at Noakhali. At the level of literary form, these novels place at the centre the figure of the abducted woman, a figure that is 'sexually and morally displaced.'<sup>114</sup> They show how a utilization of such a gendered semiotics can destabilize the given paradigms of national-allegorical ideology of citizenship and belonging.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings*, 72.
- <sup>2</sup> Pradip Bose, 'Partition – Memory Begins Where History Ends' in Ranabir Samaddar, (ed.), *Reflections on Partition in the East*, 85.
- <sup>3</sup> Tanika Sarkar, 'Politics and women in Bengal – the conditions and meaning of participation' in J. Krishnamurty, (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State*, 241.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1,52. Also, Geoffrey Roberts, (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader*, Introduction.

- <sup>5</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, *A Biography of the Indian Nation 1947-1997*, discusses the autobiographical writings of Sarala Choudhurani, Manikuntala Sen and Hena Das as examples of women writing themselves into the nation.
- <sup>6</sup> Susie Tharu and K Lalitha eds. *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, xix.
- <sup>7</sup> Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*, Delhi, 2006, 11.
- <sup>8</sup> The fallout from Noakhali was immediate as well as long term. In Bihar, 'Noakhali Day' was observed on 26 October and riots broke out in Patna, Chapra and Jehanabad districts. See, Papiya Ghosh, *Community and Nation*, Delhi, 2008, Chapter 7. Also, Sanjay Verma, *Communalism and Electoral Politics in Bihar, 1937-47*, unpublished M.Phil dissertation, Delhi University, 1991, that show the fallout of Noakhali on Bihar politics.
- <sup>9</sup> Udaya Kumar, 'Subjects of New Lives: Reform, Self-Making and the Discourse of Autobiography,' in *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, Vol XIV, Part 4, Bharati Ray, (ed.), New Delhi: Pearson, 2009, 323.
- <sup>10</sup> The gap in time between the disturbances and the newspaper reports were because of the inaccessibility of the region. There was also a kind of silencing as the district administration was caught unawares about the extent of rioting.
- <sup>11</sup> Phillips Talbot, an American reporter, describes the inaccessibility of the place thus: 'To reach his (Gandhi's) party, I traveled by air, rail, steamer, and bicycle, and on foot....Hardly a wheel turns in this teeming jute and rice growing delta. I saw no motorable roads....The civilization is amphibious, as fields are always flooded between April and October.' See Talbot, 'With Gandhi in Noakhali' in *An American Witness to India's Partition*, 201–202.
- <sup>12</sup> MARS had branches in Jessore (headed by Charubala Roy), Khulna (Bhanu Debi), Barisal (Bina Sen), Faridpur (Uma Ghosh), Dhaka (Hiranyaprobha Bannerjee), Mymensingh (Jyotsna Niyogi), Kumilla (Bina Bannerjee), Pabna (Maya Sanyal), Bagura (Renuka Ganguly), Rangpur (Reba Roy) and Dinajpur (Asha Chakraborty). See Kamal Chaudhury, (ed.), *Banglay Gono Andolonor Chhoy Dashak 1930-1950*, 338–39.
- <sup>13</sup> The Noakhali riot is discussed within the dynamics of the development of Pakistan consciousness and its interplay with a radical agrarian consciousness (the 'no rent' demand in the districts of Tippera and Noakhali) in Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943-47*, 295–332 but he does not discuss how the former succeeded in co-opting and silencing the latter. Another view sees the riots as 'class-based'. See Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850*, 498.
- <sup>14</sup> Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 'Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: The Indian State and the Abduction of Women During Partition,' in Mushirul Hasan, (ed.), *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India*, 209.
- <sup>15</sup> Ashoka Gupta, 'Reminiscences of a former President', in *A Fighting Spirit*, 131.
- <sup>16</sup> Kamala Visweswaran, 'Small Speeches: Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography', *Subaltern Studies IX*, Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakraborty, (eds.), 124.
- <sup>17</sup> Introduction to *Noakhali Durjoger Diney*.
- <sup>18</sup> See Akeel Bilgrami, 'Two Concepts of Secularism,' in Sudipta Kaviraj, (ed.), *Politics in India*, 360.
- <sup>19</sup> Report, Kanpur Riots Enquiry Committee, *The Communal Problem*, 1933, 148.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Census of India*, 1941, IV (Bengal), Shimla, 1942, 2. The Census stated that in Noakhali

the total population was 2,217,402 of which Muslims numbered 1,803,937, Scheduled Castes 81,817, Others 273,130 and Caste not returned 57,314. In Tippera, out of a total population of 3,860,139, Muslims numbered 2,975,901, Scheduled Castes were 227,643, Others 480,539 and Caste not returned was 171,778, 9 (44–45).

- <sup>21</sup> J.E. Webster, *Noakhali District Gazetteer*, 35–39. See also *Tippera District Gazetteer*, 1910 by the same author.
- <sup>22</sup> Webster, *Noakhali District Gazetteer*, 1–2.
- <sup>23</sup> Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, 223–24. Renu Chakravartty also stressed the economic reasons when in 1946 rice was selling for ₹ 30 a maund in Noakhali. See Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 103.
- <sup>24</sup> For an assessment of the economic situation during the inter-war years see M. Mufakharul Islam, 'Bengal Agriculture during the Inter-War Depression' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building In South Asia*, 509–34.
- <sup>25</sup> Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal: 1875-1927*, 369.
- <sup>26</sup> See Patricia A. Gossman, *Riots and Victims: Violence and the Construction of Communal Identity Among Bengali Muslims: 1905-1947*, 136–55.
- <sup>27</sup> P.K. Datta, 'Abductions and the constellation of a Hindu communal bloc in Bengal of the 1920's,' *Studies in History*, 14:1, 1998, 37–39.
- <sup>28</sup> P.K. Datta, *Questionable Boundaries: Abduction, Love and Hindu Muslim Relations in Modern Bengal*, unpublished paper, 2–6. Datta also gives a detailed survey of the antagonism between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, as reflected in literature beginning with Rangalal Bandopadhyay's *Padmini Upakhyan* (1858) in another article, 'Hindu-Muslim Love and Its Prohibition: The Social Importance of Literature in Early Modern Bengal,' *Studies in History*, 18(2): 323–33.
- <sup>29</sup> See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism and Partition in Bengal (1947)' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda*, 161.
- <sup>30</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Partition Tapes*, Number 74.
- <sup>31</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism, 1926-35', *Subaltern Studies*, vol.1, 9–38 states the various patterns of the linkages between peasant communal politics and organized political parties or factions especially within a process of differentiation among the peasantry i.e., a process of breakdown of peasant communities in times of scarcity.
- <sup>32</sup> Letter from Sudhir Ghosh, Assistant Secretary, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (while forwarding a report by Kalipada Mukherji, Secretary, BPCC) to the District Magistrate, 31 October 1946, *AICC Papers*, File 53/1946, NMML, 53. See also *Hindustan Times*, 18 October 1946.
- <sup>33</sup> File on Bengal Riots, L/I/1/425, India Office Library and Records.
- <sup>34</sup> *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. LXXXVI, Publications Division, 469: 'In a prayer meeting at Raipura, Gandhi referred briefly to the speech reported to have been made by the ex-Premier Maulvi Fazlul Haq. He was reported to have said that as a non-Muslim Gandhi should not preach the teachings of Islam, that instead of Hindu-Muslim unity he was creating bitterness between the two communities...' See also Phillips Talbot, *An*

*American Witness To India's Partition*, New Delhi, 2007, 204: 'To test the applicability of his faith, therefore, he went to the heart of the trouble. He chose East Bengal, and when people asked why he had not gone to Bihar province where the damage was greater and the culprits were Hindus, he replied that the people of Bihar had repented. Besides, he could control the government and people of Bihar from Noakhali, but had no special powers over the people of Noakhali.' Gandhi himself asserted why Noakhali was so important to him: 'If Hindus and Muslims cannot live side by side in brotherly love in Noakhali, they will not be able to do so over the whole of India, and Pakistan will be the inevitable result. India will be divided, and if India is divided she will be lost forever. Therefore, I say that if India is to remain undivided, Hindus and Muslims must live together in brotherly love, not in hostile camps organized either for defensive action or retaliation. I am, therefore, opposed to the policy of segregation in pockets. There is only one way of solving the problem and that is by non-violence. I know today mine is a cry in the wilderness. But I repeat that there is no salvation for India except through the way of truth, non-violence, courage and love. To demonstrate the efficacy of that way I have come here. If Noakhali is lost, India is lost.' *Talk with Friends*, Srirampur, 31 December 1946, (*Collected Works*, 294). As late as November 1946, Gandhi was receiving threatening letters asking him to leave. See *Hindustan Standard*, 21 November 1946.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Peter Ruhe, *Gandhi*, 240.

<sup>36</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, LXXXVI, 21 October 1946-20 February 1947, 263.

<sup>37</sup> Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> Buddhadev Bose, *Noakhali* (1946) in Debesh Roy, (ed.), *Raktomonir Harey: Deshbhag-Swadhinatar Golpo Shonkalon*, 66-67.

<sup>39</sup> Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days With Gandhi*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, 437-38. See also David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power*, London: Pearson, 2001, 222-23. The other view seems to be that Gandhi's sojourn in Noakhali was in a way escapism in which he had left the important political decisions to others in New Delhi: 'While he was moving in the villages of Noakhali and then of Bihar, the fate of India was being decided by the leaders in New Delhi.' See Bimal Prasad, 'Gandhi and India's Partition,' in Amit Kumar Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, 112-13.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips Talbot, *An American Witness*, 207. See also Nirmal Bose, *My Days*, 100: 'Gandhiji dealt with the problem as a whole and explained that we should proceed in such a manner that the government might be put in the wrong and the struggle lifted to the necessary political plane.....The whole struggle had to be lifted to the political plane: mere humanitarian relief was not enough, for it would fail to touch the root of the problem.'

<sup>42</sup> Interview taken by the author in Calcutta, 21 June 2008. This is, in all probability, the last interview of her life. Ashoka Gupta passed away in August.

<sup>43</sup> I am using this word 'exemplar' after Akeel Bilgrami who sees in the figure of the 'exemplar' an effort of Gandhi's integration of an epistemological and methodological commitment to the concept of non-violence and truth. Akeel Bilgrami, 'Gandhi's Integrity,' *Raritan*, 2001, 21(2): 48-67. Towards the end of his life, Gandhi was urgently trying to test his vision of a 'moral man' in a political and cultural circumstance that was most inimical to his philosophy: communal violence and religious intolerance. I am grateful to Rimli Bhattacharya for this reference. See also, Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, 'Postcolonial reactions: Gandhi, Nehru and the ethical imperatives of the national-popular' in Elleke Boehmer and R. Chaudhuri, (eds.), *The*

*Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, 245 who sees his authenticity as a non-contradiction between practice and preaching.

- <sup>44</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit*, 64–5.
- <sup>45</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durjoger Diney*, Calcutta, 1999, 8. Translations mine.
- <sup>46</sup> Renuka Ray, a member of Dr. B.C. Ray's cabinet and one time Rehabilitation Minister was also a part of the AIWC team who went to Noakhali with Gandhi: 'On his arrival in Noakhali, Gandhiji visited some some of the villages and made his headquarters at Chaumahoni.....We stayed for a few days at Chaumahoni and then left for Haimchar. The char lands are a very special feature of East Bengal; they are a gift of the river and emerge after erosion has worn down the land upstream or downstream.....Haimchar was an old established char and had once been a big village that had turned into a small township. As I had come earlier...and remembered what a flourishing village it was, I was unprepared for the scene of destruction that lay before us. It was as if an earthquake or an explosion had taken place. All thatched houses were wrecked and the township was in ruins.' See Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences: Social Development During Gandhian Era and After*, 118–19. See also *AIWC Papers*, Microfilm Reel 25 (398), 1946, NMML, for accounts of funds collected for relief work in Noakhali by Congress workers like her.
- <sup>47</sup> Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 138–39.
- <sup>48</sup> Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 138–39.
- <sup>49</sup> Shiv Viswanathan, 'In Praise of Walking', *The Hindu*, 23 April 2014.
- <sup>50</sup> Deshbandhu Tyagi, 'Gandhian Alternatives of Communal Disharmony', in *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi: Ethics, Religion and Culture*, eds Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy, 306.
- <sup>51</sup> Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 68–69.
- <sup>52</sup> Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 59.
- <sup>53</sup> Mushirul Hasan, 'The Partition Debate I', *The Hindu*, 2 January 2002.
- <sup>54</sup> Sumit Sarkar uses this term while describing the Mahatma's presence in Noakhali in his introduction to the section on Communalism in Sumit Sarkar, (ed.), *Towards Freedom*, 667.
- <sup>55</sup> See Sumit Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 712.
- <sup>56</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 719–20.
- <sup>57</sup> Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist*, 64. Lahiri mentions 'Hasnabad Day' on 12 February to commemorate the unity of Muslim and Hindu activists in Noakhali/Comilla border areas when Muslim volunteers arranged shelter for Hindu refugees for weeks on end and states that the 'influence of our Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India and the movements led by them had prevented the riots from spreading into the countryside at the time of Partition.' Lahiri's statement clearly points to an important reason why the partition in Bengal was accompanied by less bloodshed than in Punjab. The strong presence of Communist workers at the grassroots level surely influenced sectarian politics. See also A. Ruud, 'Marxist Conquest Of Rural Bengal,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 1994, 28(2): 357–80.
- <sup>58</sup> Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 125. See Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 312. Also Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal*, 340.

- <sup>59</sup> Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women' in *Debating Gandhi: A Reader*, ed. A. Raghuramaraju, 317.
- <sup>60</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durjoger Diney*, 22.
- <sup>61</sup> A MARS leaflet (2 April 1953) stated that 'in undivided Bengal's 28 districts, 40 thousand women members' had 'helped in relief work in 1946 Noakhali riots.' West Bengal Police Files, S Series, File 565/52. I am grateful to Gargi Chakravartty for this reference.
- <sup>62</sup> Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 105.
- <sup>63</sup> Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 106. Elsewhere in the book she states, 'The All India Women's Conference through Ashoka Gupta who was the wife of the commissioner of Chittagong and a social worker, got help and recognition for doing relief work' (p.104). In the untitled article among her private papers she states: 'AIWC did not pay much heed to us. We were putting up at Pankajini Singha Roy's house; but I was hesitant because she was not too welcoming of the Communist women. Sucheta Kripalini and others had started (relief) work and they were receiving official and unofficial aid. But we were determined. We collected some relief and started for the villages.' (7–8). The dissimilarity between the different groups working in Noakhali was not simply of perception but also of politics: 'We returned to Chandpur. There was no doubt we had given enough proof of courage and guts. In the face of the rather cold reception we received from the AIWC it was necessary to discuss how to proceed next.' (106) In another handwritten article amongst Renu Chakravartty's papers (probably written by Bela Lahiri?) the writer states: 'It was not possible to go to Noakhali without military help, but Communist women, with great courage, went to the affected villages along with the Red Cross and helped give courage to the victims.' I am grateful to Gargi Chakravartty for letting me read these unpublished articles both dated May 1973 amongst Renu Chakravartty's private papers.
- <sup>64</sup> Manikuntala Sen, *Shediner Katha*, 177. Manikuntala Sen's autobiography, like Ashoka Gupta's, stressed on social aspects and issues of the nationalist struggle, an echo of an orientation where politics was an important part of society. See Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biography of a Nation, 1947-1997*, 245–54 for a discussion of Sen's autobiography.
- <sup>65</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub. File 1, 302–06.
- <sup>66</sup> Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. LXXXVI, 23.
- <sup>67</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub File 1, 433. This letter is printed in parts in *Noakhali Durjoger Diney*, 61–62. This complete trust in the rightness of Gandhiji's advice was evident even after more than 60 years of his death. In the interview to me she said: 'I was in Noakhali from October 1946 to May 1947. Gandhiji was in Ramgunj village. I was there with my youngest daughter Kasturi.' When I asked her if she had been afraid for her personal safety, she said that Gandhiji had told her that it was important to go and live in the villages among the affected people. 'It was not enough to save my own child, but one should try to save everybody's child.'
- <sup>68</sup> Nirmal Bose, *My Days*, 140.
- <sup>69</sup> Kanai Basu, ed., *Noakhali Potobhumikaye Gandhiji*, Calcutta, 1947, 130.
- <sup>70</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub. File 1, 215. We catch a glimpse of the task at hand from a handwritten page by Ashoka Gupta in which she notes the methods that relief workers used in the camps that were under Sucheta Kripalini's stewardship. The note states that 'the workers have to visit every village, every households, both Hindus and Muslims and organize meetings frequently to increase communal harmony, enhance village

developmental work with individual and collective efforts, work in close coordination with village headmen and inspire villagers to work for their own welfare to undertake census work within all communities.'

- <sup>71</sup> Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 132.
- <sup>72</sup> Ashoka Gupta, 'The Joys of Social Service', in *A Fighting Spirit*, 31.
- <sup>73</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences pertaining to Refugee Rehabilitation Work in Noakhali 1946-47*, Sub File 1, 98. Gupta's testimony is directly contradictory to a government report that stated that only 2 women were abducted in Noakhali. This government report is quoted in a memorandum by the Indian Association, *AICC Papers*, File No. G53/1946.
- <sup>74</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub. File 1, 342-45. Also Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit*, 68.
- <sup>75</sup> Partition Tapes, Number 74. Testimony of Ashoka Gupta.
- <sup>76</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durrjoger Diney*, 31.
- <sup>77</sup> Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 147. Bose was deeply influenced by Gandhi's physical and moral courage yet he understood that the message of the Mahatma was a cry in the wilderness: 'Gandhiji's call for courage for the sake of reordering one's life as a preliminary step in the practice of non-violence, did not seem to bear much fruit. Perhaps the time at the disposal of the sufferers was too short, perhaps the claim upon their courage, whether physical or moral, was too great.'
- <sup>78</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'The Journey to the Village as a Journey to the Self' in *A Very Popular Exile*, 90.
- <sup>79</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durrjoger Diney*, 31.
- <sup>80</sup> In January 1947, Ashoka Gupta was in charge of the Tumchar camp while other camps were headed by: Labanyalata Chanda (Dattapara), Sucheta Kripalini (Baralia), Arun Dutta (Nandigram), Kamala Dasgupta (Bijoy Nagar), Bina Das (Noakhola), Ramapada Mitra (Lakshmipur), Probhat Acharjee (Majupur). See Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, 1946-47, Sub File No. 1, 310-11.
- <sup>81</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, 116-17.
- <sup>82</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durrjoger Diney*, 31.
- <sup>83</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub File 1, 295-96, where in a letter dated 26.12.46 she writes to the Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, Chittagong Division, reminding him that they had met in Jessore in 1940 where 'my husband was District Judge' and asking his help in providing medicines and equipment for two medical camps at Charmandal and Dalabazar.
- <sup>84</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali Durrjoger Diney*, 14.
- <sup>85</sup> Saibal Kumar Gupta's letter to his wife, *A Fighting Spirit*, 93.
- <sup>86</sup> Indrani Chatterjee, quoted in Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biography of a Nation*, 263.
- <sup>87</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness,' in David Arnold and David Hardiman, (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, VIII, 189: 'Perhaps the most obvious sign of the Partition of India in 1947 was the massive violence that surrounded, accompanied or as I would argue, constituted it.' The constitutive element of violence that signified Noakhali is also seen in the communal conflagrations of later years. See the account of Nilima Sen of Lamchar in Noakhali who fled to India in 1950's in an article by Monmoyee Basu, 'Unknown Victims of a Major Holocaust' in S. Settar and Indira B. Gupta, eds, *Pangs of Partition: The Human Dimension*, 158.

- <sup>88</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today' in Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, 8.
- <sup>89</sup> Pratibha Basu, *Jiboner Jolchobi*, 102–05.
- <sup>90</sup> Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*, 66.
- <sup>91</sup> P.K. Datta, *Hindu Muslim Relations in Bengal in the 1920's*, PhD Thesis, University of Delhi, 1995, 210.
- <sup>92</sup> Alok Bhalla, (ed.), *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*, 10. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling' in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, 115–20 for an explanation of the way nostalgia is used to create and recreate the idea of 'home.'
- <sup>93</sup> Alok Bhalla, *Partition Dialogues*, 14.
- <sup>94</sup> The idea of a syncretic culture that diffuses Alok Bhalla's *Partition Dialogues*, is contested by the very writers whom he interviews. For example, Krishna Baldev Vaid says: 'Much as I think that the society in which I grew up was very rich, and had all the complexities of a composite culture, I also think that one could appreciate its beauty only if one also closed one's eyes to its economic and social realities. It was a culture that hurt the average, the intelligent Muslim. It hurt him to know that the Hindus would not eat with him, whereas he had no objection to buying sweets from a Hindu *halwai*. The Muslim had no food taboos. It was the one-sidedness of the taboo that hurt him.... There were very few interreligious marriages and love affairs. This was because there was very little interaction between the two communities, except in certain classes.... These barriers were not new. I think they existed even in the past,' Alok Bhalla, ed., *Partition Dialogues*, 177. Ateen Bandopadhyay too fails to show an effort by the Hindu characters to remove the taboos of touch. On the other hand, his depictions of Muslim characters are remarkably intricate in this novel as well as his short stories, particularly in a short story titled 'Kafer' in D. Sengupta, (ed.), *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, 87–104.
- <sup>95</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The In-Human and the Ethical in Communal Violence' in *Habitations of Modernity*, 140 where he states: 'By *identity*, I mean a mode of relating to difference in which difference is either congealed or concealed. That is to say, either it is frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same. By *proximity*, I mean the opposite mode, one of relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated.' The Hindus and Muslims in Bengal lived in proximity rather than intimacy with each other, in a situation of passive mutual tolerance, maintaining a safe socio-cultural distance. But the novels show much more than proximity; they set out to describe *affect*: how an individual *responds* to this proximity through his or her class, gender and caste.
- <sup>96</sup> Gandhi's words are relevant in this context: 'The Hindus and Muslims should remember that they are nourished by the same corn and live under the same sky, quench their thirst by the same water, in a calamities that overtake the country are afflicted in the same way, irrespective of their religious beliefs.' *Collected Works*, vol. LXXXVI, 348.
- <sup>97</sup> Ateen Bandopadhyay, *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* (1967–71) rpt., 2008. The other parts of this three section novels are *Oloukik Jolojaan* and *Ishwarer Bagan*. All translations from the novel are mine.
- <sup>98</sup> See Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The Lie of Freedom: Justice in a Landscape of Trees' unpublished paper, no date. Also his essay 'Mourning the Mother, After Midnight' delivered at the



- 'Revisiting Partition Programme', International Seminar Consultation, organized by the Centre for Refugee Studies (Jadavpur University) in collaboration with International Institute for Mediation and Historic Conciliation (Boston), Delhi, 24–26 August 2005.
- <sup>99</sup> Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The Lie of Freedom', no pagination.
- <sup>100</sup> Buddhadev Bose, *Noakhali*, 64–65. Translation mine.
- <sup>101</sup> The idea of the writer or the poet as the imagined cartographer mapping a locale with the contours of his art is particularly resonant in Romantic poetry. See Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth*, 62.
- <sup>102</sup> This idea of the schizoid self is a model used by Ashis Nandy to explain the communal relationship in South Asia, which he describes as a 'controlled split.' The author refers specially to his lecture 'The Fear of the Self' delivered at Hans Raj College, Delhi on 9 February 2010. Various instances of this tension can be seen in Bangla literary texts. See also the interview with Intizar Husain in Alok Bhalla, ed., *Partition Dialogues*, 103: 'I can... say with some degree of confidence that I am a Shia Muslim who thinks that there is a Hindu sitting inside me because I was born in this land'.
- <sup>103</sup> P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 201.
- <sup>104</sup> P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocks*, 199.
- <sup>105</sup> Renuka Ray, *Speech in the West Bengal Assembly regarding Abduction of Women and their Rehabilitation*, 12 March 1948, quoted in Jashodhara Bagchi et al., eds, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 2, 251–52.
- <sup>106</sup> Prafulla Roy, *Keyapatar Nouka*, rpt., Calcutta, 2003. All translations from the novel are mine.
- <sup>107</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'The Journey to the Village as a Journey to the Centre of the Self: Mrinal Sen's Search for a Radical Cinema', in *A Very Popular Exile*, 73.
- <sup>108</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 93.
- <sup>109</sup> Tarashankar and Bibhutibhushan are the two writers who have immortalized Bengal's villages as settings in their works like *Gonodebota* and *Pather Panchali*, yet their depictions are never romantic idealizations. The conflicts of caste and class make their villages a living critique of economic and social relations in early decades of twentieth century Bengal.
- <sup>110</sup> Boddhisattva Kar and Subhalakshmi Roy, *Messing with the Bhadrakoks: Towards a Social History of the 'Mess Houses' in Calcutta*, where they show that in the mess houses, caste and locality surfaced as two distinct paradigms for the segregation of the inmates. See also Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's short story 'Sitanather Bari Phera' in *Golpo Shomogro*, vol. 2, 291–97.
- <sup>111</sup> Rajinder Singh Bedi's famous Urdu story 'Lajwanti' also shares some of these concerns. For a discussion on Bedi's short story see Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition*, 58–66.
- <sup>112</sup> Pratibha Basu, *Shamudro Hriday*, Calcutta, 1970. All translations from the text are mine.
- <sup>113</sup> P.K. Datta, *Questionable Boundaries*, 59.
- <sup>114</sup> Aamir R. Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India' in *Subaltern Studies*, XI, 13.