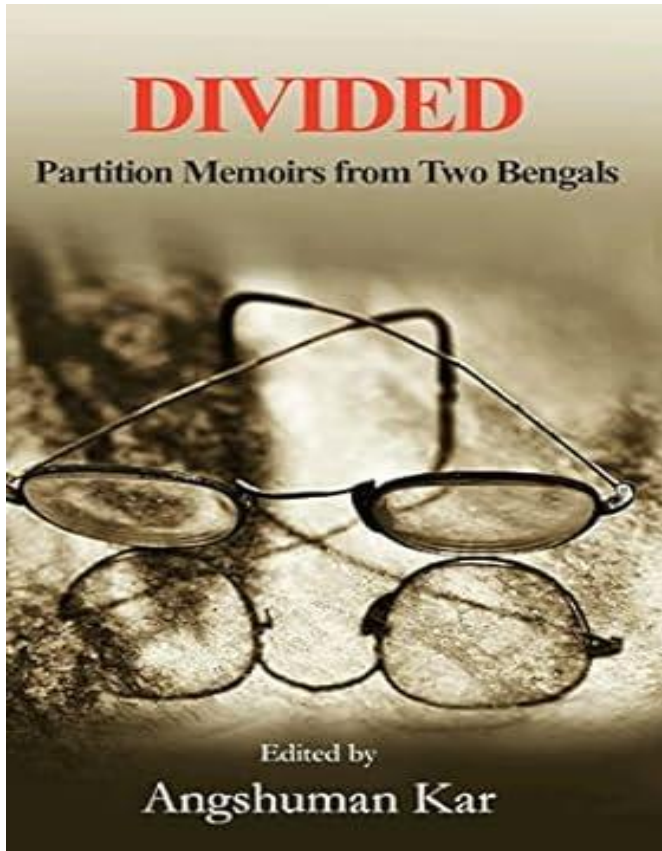


Angshuman Kar, ed. 2022. *Divided: Partition Memoirs from Two Bengals*. Kolkata: Gangchil, 1-216 pp. ISBN: 978-93-93569-75-2



In one of the memoirs titled “Border and Barbed Wire” included in the anthology *Divided: Partition Memoirs from Two Bengals* edited by Angshuman Kar, Smritiranjana Mridha writes, “Radcliffe’s pencil did not section the ground or the land but it stabbed the rib of one crore eleven lakh unfortunate Bengalees” (104). The anthology as a whole testifies to the truth of the comment. It contains fifteen memoirs of displaced residents from both East Bengal (subsequently East Pakistan and now Bangladesh), and West Bengal (now an Indian state). Written originally in Bangla, the memoirs were subsequently translated into English. The reminiscences record how displacement and its afterlife moulded individual consciousness. The memoirs vividly capture changes in the quotidian lives of the common people, the transformed demography, forced changes in routes of

travels and modes of transportation. Evidently, the act of recounting turns cathartic in its recall of bygone days replete with lurid details.

Kar's "Introduction" problematizes a monolithic understanding of partition by fleshing out multifarious connotations of the Partition in Eastern India. He explores the multi-pronged intersections between history and memory to show the unequivocal grip of the "past" that informs and shapes "present" understandings of individual and community identity. Much of his discussion focuses on discourses of borders as they appear in the works of critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, William van Schendel, Ranabir Samaddar, Paula Banerjee, and Ashis Nandy, to name a few. He also tries to grapple with the question of "being a refugee, and not being one" which becomes an important issue in the light of recent legislations on citizenship in India. Kar's theoretical deliberations are amply substantiated by the account of Nityapriya Ghosh, the very title of whose memoir "Refugee, Not Being One" questions the hollowness of statist policies regulating individual conformity to citizenship laws.

The edited volume significantly differentiates between territorial "border" and "borderlands" in an Anzaldúan sense. The latter allows a broader and much more rounded approach towards the human consequences of border. Gloria Anzaldúa goes beyond a specific geo-political definition to include the vast adjoining zones and shows how these borderlands are sites of "economic exploitation, gross human rights violation, illegal migration and border-crossing, militarism, sexual and gender assault, trafficking and smuggling" (22). This partition volume truly evokes the borderland activities mentioned by Anzaldúa. We get a picture of the social landscape and the lived experiences of the displaced, both before and after the partition, and how the trauma of the survivors continues to affect the members of the later generations. The volume also takes the idea of partition and borders beyond their material sense to refer metaphorically to the divides between castes and religions which too contributed to the partitions of the mind. Tarun Sanyal's "Border of a Bangal Brahmin," for example, shows how the sense of caste and religious division pervaded the social structure. The "Bangal Brahmin" (the Brahmin from East Bengal) for this reason is a misfit in the Rarhi (a caste) areas of Bardhaman in West Bengal. The "gorib para" (locality of the poor) is similarly demarcated as separate from the "borolok para" (the locality of the rich). One Bengal existed for high caste Hindus and the other, for the low caste Hindus and Muslims.

Instead of talking about a monolithic partition, the reminiscences in the volume reveal diverse experiences of different individuals. Not all the regions of the subcontinent, for instance, witnessed partition on the same day. Neither were the expectations of the Hindu and Muslim residents of particular regions to live

in the country of their choice fulfilled. Shanti Chakraborty in the volume recollects how the Hindu residents of Khulna were grossly disappointed for not being a part of India. Similarly, as Smritiranjana Mridha recalls, regions such as Tehatta of Nadia and Bargaon of 24 Parganas celebrated Independence not on 15 August but a few days later. Bagerhat district in what is now Bangladesh shared a similar history.

The powerful presence of the border as a territorial and metaphorical entity is evident all through the volume. Shanti Chakraborty's account, for instance, informs us how in many cases the line went right through bedrooms and kitchens of the residents. In such cases, the border is nothing short of a spectacle worthy of popular curiosity, touristic gaze, and critical-theoretical scrutiny. Smritiranjana Mridha in his narrative "Border and Barbed Wire" remembers his much younger self looking outside the window of the train trying to discover the much-discussed spectacle of border. But this innocent looking takes on a sinister character when violence makes its presence felt. In Hapizul Molla's "Chora" (written on his behalf by Satyaki Halder), Hapizul, a cow-smuggler, witnesses the death of another smuggler, his senior and a mentor, who is shot dead on the border. In another narrative, "And so, I Left Her Behind" by Jharna Basu recounts the horrors of communal violence that broke out in 1949 in Khulna and its surrounding regions. Severed heads of eleven members of a Hindu family were lined up in front of the boundary wall of their house in broad daylight, by fanatics propelled by communal hatred.

The border also witnesses other forms of illicit activities. Often such atrocities were committed by security forces and custom officers themselves posted at either side of the border. The agents of security forces even resorted to monetary exploitation and looted belongings of hapless refugees. Smritiranjana Mridha's memoir also bears testimony to that. After the 1964 riots, on an order by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, all trains coming from East Pakistan to India were stopped. The one particular train on which Mridha was onboard, only the first five coaches were allowed to pass, while the rest seven were left at the border. It appeared to the child narrator back then that maybe the border was where the "coupler was detached" (110).

There are some narratives of arrival and settlement. Sealdah station received thousands of refugees after 1947 which continued for decades. Hasan Azizul Hoq in "Blind-folded in the Middle," for example, shares a scene at the Sealdah station sometime in March, 1954:

Hordes of men, women, children and the aged were coming from all different directions. All around was a crowd of helpless, hungry people.... In midst of the prevailing chaos people were migrating from

their ancestral home to an unfamiliar country to plant new roots there. And in course of this mass migration, the identity of their country and the nature of their citizenship were being transformed. (165)

There are stories of boardings in the slums like Kalabagan and Belgachhia where the refugees often lived together. The trauma of partition pervaded the children and adolescent lives as well. In “Border of a Bangal Brahmin,” we come across the story of a Muslim adolescent boy who committed suicide because of his inability to understand in social terms what his being a “Musalman” (Muslim) demands of him. Raised in a Hindu family and later made aware of his Muslim identity, he was left in utter confusion about his religious lineage. In “Two Little Avatars of the Border” and “A Trivial Childhood,” Kapil Krishna Thakur and Jaladhi Haldar respectively talks about children partaking in the corruption at the border in hopes of earning a few easy changes in moments of crises.

Sita Sarkar and Jharna Basu offer women’s accounts of the horrors of partition, death of fathers and children. While Basu recounts memories of rape, plunder, and insurmountable violence that gripped the outskirts of Khulna in the aftermath of 1964 riots, Sarkar’s narrative on the other hand recounts love which existed despite all adversities. While Sarkar was crossing the border years after she had left school, a Muslim teacher of her primary school recognised and blessed her. She was brought to tears being reminded of this old association.

Like Sita Sarkar, Smritiranjana Mridha and Hasan Azizul Hoq recount instances of communal harmony and show of humanitarianism in the darkest of nights when everything seemed to have been lost. Mridha also talks about a peaceful co-existence of Muslims in a Hindu majority village in Jabagram of Burdwan. We, as readers, are, therefore, faced with the question of why the partition had to happen at all in the first place, or as Nishat Jahan Rana points out in the volume, “Why does man feel the need to leave his motherland and settle in other geographical territories?” (169). There are multiple narratives of Hindu families helped by their Muslim neighbours to cross borders when communal riots broke out in 1964.

This edited volume is a significant contribution to the growing scholarship on Bengal Partition. The significant shift in such scholarship is aptly identified in Nandini Bhattacharya’s “Foreword” as remembering the hurt and documenting how it is remembered across categories of citizenry is significant. The narratives additionally compel thoughts on commemoration of partition history and its significance on future generations. The anthology most significantly ties the memories of Independence to those of trauma of Partition that often remains hushed up. Kar’s anthology has very successfully portrayed the manifold layers of Partition and memories tied to it, be it the immediate effect

of partition on Bengal and its borderlands, the refugee crises, the riots, communal hatred, fear, and violence that it manifested. More importantly, the volume reminds us of love and bonhomie that continued during the difficult times. Very interestingly the editor has tried to link the memory with a marine metaphor by calling it “buoyant,” something that cannot ever be fully submerged. Partition narratives continue to “remember” the past, although the trajectories of remembering take different forms.

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