



Debleena Sen and Partha Sen.

Fig. 1. Mother: a long journey behind her.

Growing Up Refugee *by Manas Ray*

INTRODUCTION: REFUGEES IN CALCUTTA

India's case is unique in the history of anti-colonial struggle: the independence from British rule that came in 1947 after a long, popular and difficult nationalist movement also meant for a vast number of its people banishment from homeland. The city that was affected most by this sudden and vast traffic of people – by any estimate the biggest instance of human displacement – is Calcutta.

The country was divided on religious lines and split at its two flanks – east and west – to form a new nation state, Pakistan. In the western sector, the transfer of population – Hindus and Sikhs from West Pakistan and Muslims from Indian Punjab – was nearly total, immensely brutal but nonetheless a one-off affair. The eastern frontier, in contrast, was a protracted scenario of border-crossing, happening in regular spurts from 1946 and continuing for decades to come. According to a government report of

Anjusri Bhattacharya

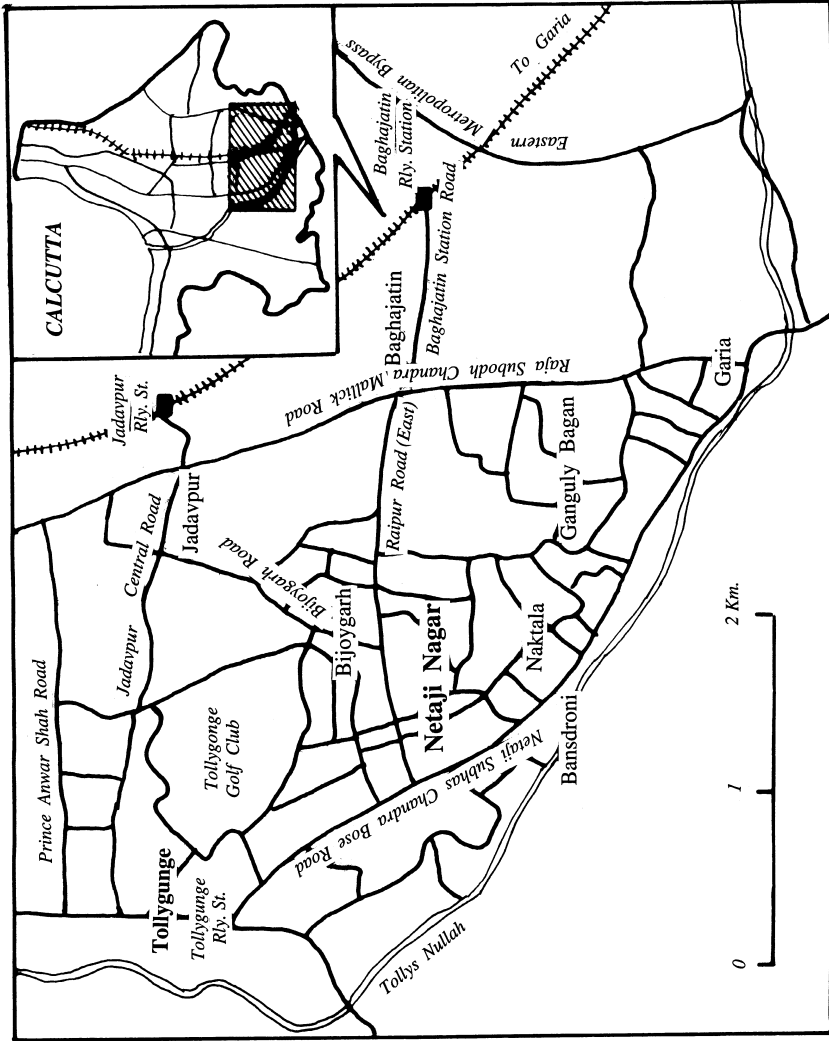


Fig. 2. The settlement of Netaji Nagar in relation to Calcutta. 'The main road', one of its boundaries, was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Rd.

1981, as many as eight million Hindus had by then crossed the national border of East Pakistan (subsequently, Bangladesh), more than half of whom settled in Calcutta and the adjoining districts of south and north twenty-four Parganas and Nadia. Muslims who lived in West Bengal also migrated to East Pakistan (though presumably not on this scale), victims likewise of violence and persecution.

The refugees in Calcutta were not a homogeneous group. About sixty percent of those who came immediately before or after the partition were upper-caste Hindus. A good portion were *Bhadralok*,* educated people with varying degrees of exposure to urban life and its different white-collar professions. The predominance among the refugees of peasants and various subaltern castes of different trades is a later phenomenon.

The early migrants settled in and around Calcutta. Some preferred to squeeze into the already-cramped quarters of the city; those without any means or connections struggled in the nightmarish conditions of the government transit camps; but a large number decided to rehabilitate themselves without waiting for state support. Thus came into being the squatters' colonies, which subsequently would become the principal signposts of refugee presence.

The government at once lauded such enterprising spirit (in an environment grossly at odds) and also actively opposed the initiative since the land where the squatters settled belonged either to the government or, more often, to private owners. The refugees did not give in to state pressure but also kept the doors open for negotiation. Over time the colonies have increased in number and spread, soaring from 119 in 1952 to nearly two thousand at present, and dotted across virtually the whole of West Bengal. What was rural hinterland has become part of the urban sprawl of Calcutta that runs for more than thirty miles north-south denting deep into the surrounding districts.

The Left very early on utilized the widespread frustration among the refugees about the lackadaisical rehabilitation initiatives of the local government. In course of time, the refugee population would provide the Communist Party of India (CPI) with cadres and also some of its prominent leaders. In 1964, the party was split into two. The breakaway outfit – the Communist Party of India, Marxist CPI(M) – gained in strength and over the years became the principal bastion of the parliamentary left. The Congress, after ruling West Bengal for the first two decades, started showing cracks due to factionalism and popular disenchantment. Together those factors resulted in the electoral defeat of Congress in 1967. The party responded by replacing the old guard of the independence-movement era with what it called 'young turks', a group of student leaders bent on recruiting local toughs to combat the challenge of left advance.

Meanwhile, discontent among sharecroppers in the arid Naxalbari area

*Words in italics are explained either in the glossary or in the text itself.

at the foothills of North Bengal snowballed into a putative Maoist movement and took the youth of Calcutta – especially those of deprived, refugee background – by storm. For the next few years, between 1969 and 1973, the city became a site of bizarre fratricidal carnage, when the unco-ordinated spontaneity and self-righteous idealism on the extreme left (popularly known as ‘Naxals’) matched lethal violence from the state apparatus backed by professional killers under the patronage of the Congress. The CPI(M) fought both these forces and on occasions allegedly took help from one to neutralize the other. On an average day Calcutta was witness to more than fifty political murders.

By the time the Emergency was proclaimed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, the extreme left had already been wiped out in Calcutta, its cadres either eliminated or jailed. Once the Emergency was lifted in 1977 and elections called, the CPI(M) rode to power on the crest of popular anti-Emergency waves and formed an alliance of left parliamentary parties, the Left Front, never to be ousted since – a record of sorts in the history of parliamentary left coalitions. The refugees meanwhile have gained legal ownership of their land; the earlier bamboo-thatch huts of middle-class households have now given way to quite respectable-looking structures.

Today, after all these years of drum-roll, the refugees present a sharply-variegated scenario – from those powerfully entrenched in the bureaucracy and professions to the emaciated vendors at busy market sections or the near-pauper ragpickers in the eastern flanks of the city. For the educated *bhadralok* refugees it has been a journey towards Calcutta’s protean civil society, while for the vast ranks of poor refugees living in shabby conditions, electoral democracy has offered a political space and cultural confidence that the *bhadralok* resents but dares not challenge. The anguish of being dispossessed, however, has only on rare occasions been translated into open anti-Muslim aggression: a demonstration of the effectiveness of the Hindu nationalist hegemony that allows multiple possibilities, from downright hatred of Muslims to patronizing campaigns of Hindu-Muslim solidarity.

This paper tells the story of one of the early squatter colonies on the outskirts of Calcutta and tries to capture in an anecdotal mode the social and political developments within the bounds of the locality.

ON MEMORY AND LOCALITY

What is the history of a nation after all but its stories. Numerous stories. Stories upon stories, like the many surfaces of a nation.

Alexander Kluge, 1986.

The camels were coming. The lamp-posts had been erected for quite some time. We lads were waiting in all eagerness. A small public debate emerged around the phenomenon of electrification – how was electricity generated,

who would switch on the lamps every evening, what would electricity mean to the locality. Gradually the posts were painted silver. Then one day someone came and put some inscrutable numbers on them, numbers that had no meaning for us. We felt closer to Calcutta.

The camel finally arrived. One evening, at one particular moment of that long-awaited evening, light speared forth from the lamp-posts. Street lamps. For the pock-marked by-lanes, the bamboo-strip fences, and the tin and tile roofs, that was the virgin touch of an electric beam.

But to our horror, the lights were everywhere save the post next to our house.

It must be Sitanath's cows. We had indeed noticed one of them banging its head on the post on its way home early that evening. The older boys agreed that this must be the reason. Inside the bulb apparently there was a thin filament, which must have severed. We nodded our heads. Nikhil took the initiative. He rushed with a bamboo to Sitanath's house. He would kill that cow, and maybe also its master.

We knew Sitanath as a *vaid*, though no-one really saw him practicing medicine. In fact, he was the milkman of the locality. Sitanath loved his cows, screamed in their defence, was inconsolable when one of them died. If he was unhappy with any of them, he berated by comparing her with his no-good son, Uttam.

Then again Sitanath was not your ordinary milkman next door. When called to some meeting at the residence of the well-heeled Congressman Bidhubabu across the main road, after a meticulous scrubbing he would squawk along in his shiny pump shoes, attired in starched and ironed *dhoti-panjabi*. Squatting on our red cemented floor on turgid summer afternoons I have heard him reminiscing about his school days in Noakhali and about Dhaka, where he went to get admitted to a college. If the fruit-laden mango tree started thumping our tin roof with increased tempo, he would lazily get up, apprehending an approaching storm, and walk towards the patch of land where we played and his cows grazed.

Today Nikhil would not spare Sitanath. Shaking his fists, at times armed with a bamboo stick, a brick and of course blasphemous invectives aimed at the ancestors, he made several charges towards Sitanath's house. Sitanath valiantly fended off the bamboo stick and all the rest. Those who had come for the excitement of tonight's caper were soon getting nervous – so intense was the encounter. At some point, elders had to intervene.

The night deepened, the locality hushed, spots of virgin light lingered on privileged spaces, but the expanse in front of our house remained in the same darkness.

The older boys were not prepared to give up so easily. Stealthily, late at night, they climbed up the mango tree to our roof with a pile of stones. Stones rained on Sitanath's cowshed. First there was a languid mooing. Stones kept falling, with rising intensity. Soon there was loud mooing from all over the shed. The cows started jumping in panic. The boys jumped down

from the tree and fled. Meanwhile Sitanath flung out of his house, armed with a stick. He went straight into Nikhil's house, just opposite the lane; he had no doubt who the miscreant must be.

But where was Nikhil, after all? Unfortunately for him, he was in the toilet. Those days our toilets used to be in the far corner of the houses, tucked behind thick trees. He came out of the bush, hearing all the noise. Nikhil's *mama* had had enough. His claims to innocence unheeded, Nikhil was thrashed mercilessly.

Pacified, Sitanath returned home. But not Nikhil. He howled, howled deep into the night:

I was crapping, had nothing to do with all this, but I was pounced upon! This is only because I am an orphan! The Muslims have chopped up my parents, and now you bash me! Go on, why don't you bash me even more . . . ?

Nikhil had come to our locality much later than us, in the early sixties, bundled off from an orphanage in Barrackpore. He was a bit of an exotic for us: the tough guy amongst us, the fullback of our football team. His kicks would make the bewildering ball climb the sky far beyond the stretch of our field. For us, the younger lot, he was our pride. We did not expect Nikhil to howl like this. It created strange feelings in us. That night we forgot all about the lamp-post.

* * *

This article presents an overlay of two narratives: the story of my growing up as a refugee boy and the story of the locality's own growth from a piece of waste land outside Calcutta to what it is now, a fully-integrated part of Calcutta's postcolonial landscape. Using an anecdotal approach it narrates micro-histories of how belonging and locality shaped the identities of inhabitants of this refugee colony over the last five decades. I conduct the journey in roughly three phases: the fifties and sixties is the time of the formation and shaping up of the community ('Community'); the first half of the seventies marked the outbreak of unprecedented political violence, something that would have deep repercussions on the life of the community ('Violence'); and finally, the slow beginnings of developmental activities from the mid seventies, a process that would be accelerated with the coming of the Left Front government to power in 1977 ('Government').

COMMUNITY

1

Bijoygarh, the first refugee settlement of divided (West) Bengal,¹ functioned as the epicentre for the formation of squatters' colonies in the

adjoining areas, among them Netaji Nagar. As a military camp during the Second World War, Bijoygarh had the initial advantage of a ready infrastructure of some kind. Close on the heels of Bijoygarh came Netaji Nagar. I was born in 1954 at Netaji Nagar, and by the time I was five or six the colony was already ten years old. Netaji Nagar celebrates 26 January 1950 (the Republic Day of India) as the colony's birth-date.²

A committee was formed under the leadership of a handful of men of some recognition, mostly teachers and lawyers. The word was spread amongst the refugees floating in and around Calcutta (and known to the committee members) that if they could take the risk and pay a one-off fee of fifteen rupees to the colony committee, they were welcome to live in Netaji Nagar. The condition for residency was that one must have a room in an allotted plot (of mostly three *kathas*)³ and a hearth.

It was waste land of mostly marshy patches, shrubs and wild growths, crisscrossed with ditches. People came from different districts of what was East Bengal through different networks, with the result that right from the beginning there was a parity of background among the inhabitants. The vast majority of those who came were middle-class people with some urban exposure. Those who did not fall in this bracket – fishermen, carpenters, hut-builders, masons, barbers – tended to concentrate in two adjacent wards lying at one end of the locality. My early memories of these places are of lanes full of children, large families and houses bursting with tenants. In retrospect, it seems amazing how little I knew of that world, how subtle and comprehensive was the process of normalization of divisions. If Calcutta invested us with its terrors, we did the same to the people we thought were peripheral, infusing them with the terrors we were so familiar with. In course of time, the female folk of these families would provide us with our domestic help. The internal boundaries settled, we felt comfortable with our habitat.

The landowners' goons would come regularly towards the evening or even far into the night. There was an informal information network of mostly young boys to signal their arrival. Men resisted as women blew the conch. By all accounts, the fights were seldom bloody. Throughout this period and subsequently, the government maintained an ambiguous attitude towards the refugees; in a way, the vagaries that marked the pragmatics of colonial administration continued.⁴ A boys' school was set up in active confrontation with the police. Approximately a year later, a separate girls' school came. Local people were desperate for these schools, to give the community the moral sanction it badly needed. Along with the schools came the clubs and their regular staging of plays. The main one had close links with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural platform of the undivided CPI. The emerging public sphere had many layers. Formal democratic protocols and leftwing attitudes resided side by side with traditional ethos and practices, making any such divide problematic. They blended, overlapped or at times simply existed separately.

The colony committee, elected by the vote of one member (almost always a male) of every household, negotiated land disputes amongst neighbours, took charge of such activities as constructing unpaved roads or cleaning the ponds and organized medical help during an emergency. In the process, the committee helped shape the modes of interaction among neighbours; the aim was to foster a kind of governmentality with clearly-understood norms and responsibilities. Gradually, the space became a place, a certain relational and contextual affair endowed with a complex phenomenological quality.

2

Different stories of different families who came from different places – incomplete and mythified stories – were transacted, modified and at times contested. The Muslims were a constant presence in those stories but only in the figure of the eternal peasant – hard-working, obliging, happy with his marginality, a part of the Hindu domestic imagery. No space was allowed to their rituals, their universe of beliefs. Neither did the middle-class Muslim ever figure in these stories. I remember my grandmother reminiscing:

Whenever some repair work was necessary in the house, I always employed our Muslim peasants, and never the Hindus. And after a good day's work, I used to treat them to a hearty meal. I asked them to clean up the place under the jackfruit tree and lay out banana leaves. Then I served them food in person. They would be mighty pleased. The meal over, they cleaned the place with cow-dung, while I took a dip in our pond.

Stories upon stories – the sense of place took a nostalgic aura, a nostalgia for the present. The landscape was a landscape of nostalgia. The shadowy *hijal* tree next to the water-hyacinth pond was the *hijal* of *desher bari*, the village home on the other side of the border. It offered a telos, a meaning beyond the play of the merely accidental. The displacement was bearable.

Deaths were bewailed loudly and collectively: '*Thakuma, tumi baigun bhaja khaiya gela na, thakuma*' (Granny, you couldn't eat the fried eggplant you wanted to), as the women rolled all over the floor where the dead body lay. As late as the sixties, most houses were constructed of bamboo, with tiled, tin or asbestos top. Local accounts confirm that ours was the first house which had anything to do with bricks – thin brick walls with a tin top. Ours was the rich man's house, '*baroloker bari*'. *Barolok* meant bricks.

3

The place used to be infested with ghosts and their stories would be deployed variously. Ghosts and jackals. The colony's inhabitants appeared

more perturbed by jackals than by ghosts, holding the existence of jackals as a sign of modernity's betrayal. 'We remain in the same darkness', the residents despaired. The jackals however departed long before electricity arrived.

Once during *Shoni puja* at a neighbour's courtyard, a poltergeist wreaked havoc. The *puja* had just begun; suddenly stones began to rain down on the side of the yard facing a derelict film warehouse, the godown. The men rushed out towards the godown, while the women restrained us, the kids, and took us inside. Nothing could be found, nobody was seen. The *puja* started again. After a little while, stones fell again and with more vehemence. The men went to the godown and stationed themselves at strategic places. But the stones kept falling. The *puja* had to be cut short.

The film godown was the citadel of all kinds of ghosts. The story went around that Choton's mother had noticed somebody cooking late at night on top of the palm trees bordering her house. The palm trees were within the perimeter of the godown. One evening Choton climbed one of those trees. He saw something strange and fell down unconscious. Regaining consciousness, he kept saying, 'The ghost has come, the ghost has come!' The trees were cut down the next day. In less than a month's time, the boundary of Choton's house moved to include the land where the trees had stood.

The main road among many other things signified a different language – the road that took us to a land of a different language, where our vernacular was taboo. In fact, we lived in three orbits of dialect. First, the dialect of our family, where we were the unadulterated inhabitants of our own East-Bengal district – Chattogram, Barishal, Noakhali or Dhaka; second, the particular synthetic lilt of Netaji Nagar, where we were East Bengalis and our language hegemonized by the Dhaka dialect; and, third, as office-goers and in the heart of Calcutta, our Dhaka-influenced dialect yielding to the standard version of Calcutta.

English words had a sparkler effect – words that came to us not so much for their meaning as to give a little sparkle to our speech. My friend Khudu suddenly picked on the word dictionary, which he pronounced, part-deliberately, 'disk-ke-nari'. He would at times go round and round Mangal, the *gharami* who worked with bamboos at one end of the ground where we loitered, and rhyme: 'Mangal's disk-ke-nari, Mangal's neck in the noose'. Once I found Shyamal plucking leaves from the small community garden in a vacant plot. I asked him to stop. 'Why shouldn't I pluck? Is this London?' Be it the English language or be it London, for us the ultimate metaphor was Calcutta where all that was remote, unknown and cherished converged. We decontextualized Calcutta just as Calcutta decontextualized us.

4

Every evening around five, *Dutta barir jethima* (the lady of the Dutta household) would come to our house, carrying the falling sun on her back. Her

white widow's dress looked reddish yellow from a surplus of rust in the water and the absence of detergent. My granny would see her slowly approaching, but wouldn't bother to make room for her. She came, climbed the three steps to our house, pulled up a flat stool and sat on our verandah, next to my granny.

They talked, irregularly: of sciatica, of her uncaring nephew who was her sole heir, of the eggplant field that had separated their house from ours in East Bengal, of the sharing of mango yield among our four households there, of the gigantic fish that was caught one evening but which slipped back into the pond, never to be traced again, and of similar events, places and people determinedly lost. My mother made tea for them which she served in large black marble bowls. They slurped the tea noisily.

Jethima was always a shade too eager to please my granny, which my granny was in no hurry to reciprocate. *Jethima* was childless, a fact my granny explained as partly due to her self-seeking nature. 'Pampered women don't bear children', she used to say.

One afternoon *jethima* called out for my mother as she essayed up our steps. She took my mother inside, hurriedly untied the knot at the border of her sari with tentative fingers and gave my mother three hundred rupees. Her crumpled face looked serious. Apparently, she had got this money from the government as compensation for the property she had left behind in East Bengal. 'But it should have been much more!' my mother said to her. 'That fellow is a thief!' she said, referring to her nephew, but it didn't seem to bother her much. She asked my mother to keep a hundred rupees apart for her *satkar* (funeral rites) and with the remaining money buy her favourite sweet cake, a *mouchak*, every afternoon to go with her tea. My mother reluctantly agreed.

'How much for one?'

'Four annas' (a quarter of a rupee).

'How long it will last!' She was evidently pleased.

'Long enough – eight-hundred days . . .!' My mother sounded peeved.

'Are you angry?' *Jethima* smiled like a child.

'No – you can eat', and my mother moved out of the room.

From then on, a *mouchak* used to be served to *jethima* along with her regular quota of tea.

Jethima arrived religiously at five. The two ladies barely talked to each other. *Jethima* held the old saucer next to her mouth; her toothless mouth suckled the juicy, burnt-brown sweet inside, bit by bit. One day, on eye contact, she held out the sweet to me and asked, 'Like to have?'

I flicked into the room and watched from inside the dried drips of paint at the ends of the window, the red verandah with black border broken at the edge.

'*Chunni magi!*' (Greedy harlot!) My granny roared mutely, her one hand stretched on her half-folded legs.

‘What utterings in front of kids!’ My mother’s thin muttered disapproval.

Jethima said nothing, continued eating the *mouchak*, drank her glass of water, and got up with difficulty.

‘See you, Chabi’, she said to my mother like every other day and opened the wicket gate. Then after a few steps on the road, she stopped. Her hands rested on her thighs, her stooped torso waved up a little. ‘I don’t feed off anybody. I too can say a few things . . .’, she said fairly loudly, gaze held towards the front. After a long pause, she sighed to my mother: ‘See you, *didi*’.⁵ Her torso stooped again as she started walking.

Jethima did not last the full eight-hundred days; my granny died even earlier.

5

Childhood was the time of peeping – peeping, and all kinds of holes: peeping between the legs as my granny snored in her afternoon siesta, peeping at the pickle jar through the rusty, torn iron-net of the kitchen cupboard, or peeping out through the hole under the bamboo fence of our primary school at the world upside down. We would occasionally slip out through that hole, run as fast as our legs could carry us – the next day at school was a long twenty hours away!

There were other kind of holes, those made by thieves to enter into the house through the clay base of the walls. In Bengali the act is called ‘*sindh kata*’, but for a long time I knew it as ‘*singh kata*’ (to dig hole with horns) and conjured up grotesque images of thieves as men with horns. Those events were indeed grotesque in what followed if the thieves were caught, which very often was the case. Thief-bashing was a system all of its own – merciless, nightlong. The initial alarms, the rushing of local men from different directions, the way they would cordon off the thieves, the early interrogations, tentative cuffs, the slow start of bashing, the gagging of the men with pieces of cloth when the elders left them to the local youth, the carnival of brutality where everybody must have his turn.

The fiesta ended in the ceremony of handing over the men to the cops and their officious boss early in the morning, by when the bodies of the victims drooped, a few teeth were missing, a damaged eyeball stared from the depth of the socket. But often they remained, magically, with unimpaired faculty of speech, which broke into a howl the moment the police were spotted, ‘Sir, look what have they done to me . . .’ Mostly they would die before the cops came, or on the way to the police station. Those who survived would at times be seen back on the job a few months later.

After the police van left, the place wore a forlorn look. A few torn pieces of raiment, a couple of broken incisors or molars and the inevitable blood stains. Someone among the revellers might then be looking for a missing slipper. Suddenly someone might realize he was still grasping a tuft of hair in his closed fist, brush off the hair and scurry homeward in revulsion.



Debleena Sen and Partha Sen.

Fig. 3. The house.



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Fig. 4. Inside the house: the ladder to a dark world.



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Fig. 5. Giving way to the new, once again.

I would develop a ghastly intoxication for the spot where the bashing took place, usually at some intersection of lanes. I would go back to it several times in the next couple of days but return inevitably with a slimy, salted taste in my mouth. I could not understand what made these men risk their lives and, crucially, the torture – all for a few old blankets (these events would occur mostly in the winter), talcum powder, a few saris, trousers, shirts, a transistor set maybe and, if in luck, a few gold trinkets. I could not understand why in the story that would be spun next day, the victims did not have a place, only direction: from the other side of the silted gutter, or from the paddy fields way beyond our locality, someone would say vaguely. I could not understand why the women and the elderly who lamented to my mother ‘It’s too ghastly for the eyes, *didi*’ also, and inevitably, urged the youth to teach the men a good lesson next time. I could not understand why the man who plunged into our local pool to save a drowning child and then, jumping on a wayside rickshaw, rode to the local hospital ignoring the blistering afternoon heat would also champion such monstrosity. The valiant expression of our insecurity was never seriously challenged; the collective brutality of the community was beyond the pale of its Marxist wisdom.

Dhaneshda could recognize one of the nocturnal visitors among the plumbers who had come to install a tube-well in his house: ‘Well . . . have you given up? . . . How can a human possibly teach you a lesson?’ Not far away, his youthful wife might be busy pouring boiling water from the cooked rice. Big-headed, buck-toothed, big-eyed Dhaneshda would take a moment’s look at her with hooded eyes as he climbed down from the mound of freshly-dug earth, spitting sharply between the gap in his teeth. He was getting late for the office.

The next couple of evenings would bring an inexplicable sense of fear and I wouldn’t dare to go out in the dark. The scene of the hellish bashing started resembling an abstruse hydra-headed pustule, harrowing and enticing at the same time. In the pale glow of the moon-silver on the *dhutra* bush amidst the barking of dogs and braying of jackals, the dark night would look like a crevice from mystery books. I would start becoming an outsider to myself.

6

Amidst all this, something importantly different happened to me. I was in class four. One of my *mamas* who lived with us for his studies got a job after completing his degree. He was posted to distant Andhra Pradesh. From the very first month, he started sending money to my mother – twenty rupees. I had to join an English medium school, he thought; it had to begin somewhere. The dark nights of thieves and lantern remained as before but the days changed dramatically. It was a new world of hardcover textbooks neat in brown jackets, no slapping around, no slate pencils but proper pencils and proper copy books, stories of Jesus, progress report at the month’s end.

I felt excited but also a little divorced from my ambience. There was an urgent need to rechristen the one who has strayed; I acquired a new nom-de-plume. The sobriquet *saheb* had already been bestowed on my elder brother for his pale skin. Soon I was being referred to as ‘Horlicks!’, enunciated in the stylized way of advertisement jingles.

English overwhelmed us – in denial and engagement. ‘Kakru, what’s the name of your school again?’ Everyone ready for a gust of laughter. Kakru does not disappoint: ‘Karo-paro-marotion’ (he used to go to the local corporation school). Before the riotous gambol finishes it is my turn, taunted with some other question.

The imperious *saheb* school with the wide gateway hardly offered anything beyond the formal. No nooks, no slip-outs. There was a huge lawn with flowerbeds at the borders. Madhusree of olive complexion and chiselled features at times would take me up on the swing. Together we would traverse the sky cocooned in the strong smell of starched frocks. Madhusree of dazzling white sports shoes with long laces neatly done, of long, slender legs, thin lips and curly hair. She was the quiet type.

In the late afternoons, I would sometimes journey to Madhusree’s imposing house, meandering past Manohardadu’s shop of jars full of S biscuits, candy sticks and marbles, past Majumderbabu’s ration shop, past the common tube-well of the locality, the potter’s workshop with huge mounds of clay, the violet of water-lilies in the wayside ponds, the long closed gate of the Laskar residence near the main road. When I finally reached her place, Madhusree would be playing badminton with her brother.

In that bright, airy house with a grand piano in the wide foyer, music would reverberate from every corner. Everyone would look composed and serene. Her father with drooping eyes would stare at the fading light. Once, in his younger days, he had stumped Don Bradman for a duck. Madhusree’s mother would give me caramel custard to eat, her brother would show me his stamp collection, and she her colourful storybooks.

Amidst the elegance and understated splendour, a sense of insecurity would creep up on me. I felt sure that once her father was out of his stupor, he would start yelling. I would conjure up scenes of adult altercations with Madhusree; would tell my folks, they own a tea garden in Darjeeling.

In less than a year *mama* returned to Calcutta, his eyes and legs swollen. He was admitted to a public hospital. The name of Dr Chetri made its round in the family for a while. One early morning – when doctors had given up hope – father woke up with a fright seeing a patch of bright white light and called out *mama* by his name, ‘Khokan, Khokan!’. *Mama* died, I returned to local school.

Once out of St Mary’s, I gradually stopped visiting Madhusree. My memory of her would carry no melancholia, it wouldn’t dim either.

Largely, my sojourn there was an aberration. In those days, the local school and the community were indivisible. The school was the most potent source of imaginative mapping for the locality. The press for education

(*shiksha*) was enormous and to counter its constant discursive presence, we boys took up different comportments. Education of course brought the ability to attain economic security and, accompanying it, the ability to cope with moral vices. Our neighbour, Jyothisbabu, used to yell at his two daughters almost compulsively as he entered his courtyard on return from the morning bazaar: ‘Swapna read, Ratna read. Keep reading, read out loud!’. ‘What’s the matter, why did the reading stop? – I’m going to pounce on you like hell!’: loud threats like this would occasionally pierce the night. The locality in the late evenings would take the proportions of a factory, the *shiksha* factory, with loud readings – rendered in a variety of styles – emanating from different houses. *Shiksha* would help us win recognition from Calcutta of our *bhadralok* status, something we thought we rightfully deserved but were deprived of. More importantly, it would demarcate us from the sub-altern people of our locality, few of whose kids could complete their schooling.

7

My father was active in the West Bengal Headmasters’ Association, a Congress outfit, and used to come back home late. If for some reason I happened to be awake, he obliged me at times with oranges and almost always with stories – stories of other times and places. Stories of bravery and humanism, of Arjun’s *laksha-bhed*, of the Titanic, of Casablanca, stories of historic figures: Newton, Napoleon, Ashok. Of all the shadowy figures of conquest, Nelson bothered me the most. ‘Read and you will know’, was apparently what Nelson’s grandmother, who raised him, used to tell young Nelson every time he had a query – a sermon my father would often use on me as an invocation to the world of knowledge. I knew most of the stories; there was no surprise. But the pleasure of listening and repetition was welcome to my tired eyes. The image of the poor juggler in a remote French village, displaying his feat as mother Mary descended from her altar and rubbed the sweat away from his exhausted body, enveloped my world with a sense of distant goodness as I glided into cosy sleep. Late at night, amidst the tired barking of the dogs, the waft of distant *kirtan*, a sliver of moonlight on my bed, the juggler used to reappear between my sleep and awakening, but not in the way my father described him. He appeared as our Nobi – our nasal Nobi – tall, parrot-nosed, dark tan, sparse goatee, soft voice, eyes of a saint. We did not know where Nobi lived, but saw him hustling from one house to another, washing clothes, shredding ripe coconut, sweeping courtyards. He was the community’s handyman, a daytime figure. He had a funny gait. His legs dangled a bit as he walked. All this, plus his nasal voice: he was our ideal source for fun. ‘Nobi, nachoto!’ (Dance for us, Nobi!) He would flick his arms and legs, bend and twist his body briskly but say, ‘Will tell your folks, okay!’ One day Nobi went mad. Raving mad. The elders of the locality took him away. Nobi never returned; neither did mother Mary.

I never managed to read the piece by Anatole France – perhaps as an act of penance for all the bullying done to this man of innocence.

Mornings came with a fright – the squashed, half-eaten orange under my pillow! ‘I’ve to slog daylong like a genie; on top of that, all this farce!’, my mother used to fly into a rage, take the pillow-cover and the bedsheet off and throw them on the floor pointedly. ‘What will you understand!’, my father would say with a helpless smile, wiping the milk and puffed rice that stuck around his mouth from his just-finished breakfast.

Towards the mid sixties, and for a long while, my father’s salary from the school became irregular. The family gained some notoriety from a photo that appeared in the newspaper of my father and his colleagues on hunger strike next to the locked gate of the school. My *didi* had completed her BA degree by then, and as one more enactment of the much-repeated refugee allegory she took up a job as a junior stenographer in a government office. Marriage proposals were put on the back burner; her job came handy in stabilizing the listing boat that was our family. On the day she joined work, *didi* – like many other womenfolk of our locality – in starched and pressed printed saris, purse strapped on her shoulder, was about to set off. Mother paused for a moment – she was prepared yet somewhat ungirded – blessed her thrice and went through the gesture of mock spitting once on her forehead, a ritual to ward off evil, reserved for special occasions. Father accompanied my sister to her office, a long red colonial building, number 3 Government Place in the city centre. He returned after a couple of hours holding a green coconut in his hand, much to the embarrassment of my sister. Like other graduate refugee women, *didi* did not have much problem in conversing in the standard Calcutta dialect. It was a question of manners, of honour – they did not have the latitude that a male refugee enjoyed in this aspect. Soon enough *didi* created her own space in the office.

My *dada* did not fare well in his Intermediate Science. After a few days of drawing sketches of balloon vendors and moping about contemplating suicide, he all of a sudden joined the Air Force without letting anyone know in the family. The news caused some ruckus. Father, consulting his Congressmen friends, gave his verdict: ‘No risk, no gain!’ (After getting thrashed in a border skirmish with China, we were then preparing for a round with Pakistan). *Dada* vowed to mother never to touch a cigarette, stashed the sandalwood-smeared holy flower petals in his new rexine suitcase and set off for the railway station in a taxi. As the taxi turned the next corner, mother realized that the tiffin carrier was left behind in the hubbub. Dowryda sprinted behind the taxi, tiffin carrier in hand and returned soon. Mother and grandma got into another of their interminable squabbles.

The bickering continued intermittently even after others came back from seeing *dada* off at the station. Both were lamenting in self defence without any apparent rationale. With father’s arrival the spat took another turn. The wrangles between father and grandma did not create any disquiet in me; on

the contrary, I felt the stirrings of a dormant pleasure more like rumbles of distant shelling.

There was quite a gathering in our house that day. Uncles and cousins, they all came. Gradually the petty squabble morphed into a discourse of social history. Annals of our post-partition trajectory were laid bare. Was it correct to come and settle in Netaji Nagar from the dank rented dwelling in central Calcutta? My *dada* must have crossed Khurda Road Junction by then, and be moving farther away.

The question startled me somewhat. It never occurred to me that Netaji Nagar was one choice out of many. We did hear of *desh bari* all the time but it only bolstered the feeling that Netaji Nagar was indeed our only home. We kids like our elders wore the badge of refugee all right but in every nook and cranny of our being was Netaji Nagar. The nephew of my father, Keshab, agreed with my grandma – the daughter of a *dipti* – all the way, ‘I will not let my Swopu grow up in Bijoygarh. I will extract every drop of refugee colony blood from his veins. You just see’. He kept his vow: they soon shifted to a rented residence in central Calcutta. Swopu was started on a new chapter.

8

The combined earnings of *dada* and *didi* not only shielded us from being singled by economic hardship, they brought in the drift of modernity to our home. The bookshelf was lined with thick coloured papers bought at G. C. Laha’s; small curios were put on display. *Didi* one day came home with a large packet containing a Bombay Dyeing bedcover with temple-sculpture prints and some colourful drapery. Mother during her afternoon recesses dragged her old Singer machine on to the middle of the floor and started stitching curtains, her looking-glasses on her nose, wetting the broken end of the thread on her tongue to make it pointed for ease of entry into the eye of the needle – all the time thinking of the ‘interior decoration’ of father’s younger uncle’s flat next to the Indira cinema in the heart of south Calcutta.

The curtains were in place, the bedspread covered the bed.

It did not last. The assault was unstoppable. The curtains were slashed by a shaving blade. Mother virtually performed the last rites on the inhabitants of this spooky haunt – and for no known reason blamed it all on father.

Father smiled benevolently at mother’s ire – kids everywhere are the same these days, he said. As the communists make headway all sense of morality and justice will go down the drain. Mother again dragged out the Singer on to the middle of the floor, mended the curtains, folded them into a tin trunk and made new curtains out of *didi*’s faded old saris.

One afternoon, mother almost threw up everything she had for lunch a little while earlier. The bedspread was splattered with fresh human excreta, wrapped in yam leaves and chucked in through the window. Paresh had just managed to escape. Ma loudly invoked the gods to hasten his death, adding:

'They call themselves Brahmins! All the no-good *namasudras* from *Noakhali* have settled here, preening as Brahmins!'

9

Following father's footsteps, Dowryda was also a Congressman. But he had to be a few steps ahead. He was the Congressman 'original' much before the party was split into the old and the new. Dowryda was with the 'original' because whatever was original was authentic. Trails of that line of thought stopped at Gandhi.

Dowryda had two icons – Mahatma Gandhi and Dilip Kumar.⁶ And only one addiction: lottery. He came to this family as one-and-a-half year old. That was in 1943, the year of the great Bengal famine. His was the cow-tender family. His mother came to sell him at the village market: five rupees. The father had already hung himself by then. Granny purchased him – that's how the name Dowry. The mother came free.

Dowryda accompanied father to school. He called himself the 'caretaker' and never a peon or an orderly. The idea of being a member of *bhadralokdom* obsessed him, perhaps the reason for his attachment to 'original' Congress. He was never tired of explaining to my mother how important he was to the city's bigwigs and that the city was not your two-*anna*-bit refugee colony.

Mother used to hand over hot chapati smeared with a thin layer of cream and ask him to stop jabbering. He would change track, this time to the lottery and how he missed the elusive number by a whisker at every go.

On holidays granny was entitled to a hundred 'pumps' from the tubewell. She used to savour this share of the dividend on her five-rupee investment by massaging her well-oiled hair with chubby palms under the cascading water, purring all the while: 'May the gods bless you, my son – may they'. The chanting used to spur Dowryda to whoop 'Lord be praised' with every downward stroke, maybe to earn twice the amount of blessings to double the investment for his next life. If Dowryda ever stopped before the entitled number, granny used to squall: 'Swine, didn't I pay for you in hard cash!'

Dowryda disappeared one day. We came to know that he had left for Bombay with Manuda's brother Jungle (so named by the locality after the Hindi film by the same name). Father's sizzling fizzled out soon. Mother stopped griping. Grandma also fell quiet after a while of ravaging Hindi filmdom and 'who knows where that monkey has taken him!' Dowryda's mother became busy consoling everybody, 'Not to worry, he will come back eventually'. And to my father: '*Dada*, when he does, give him an earful . . . you do!'

Father was ready with the dispensation. When he heard of Dowryda's return, he climbed down the three steps of our verandah, adjusting the knots of his *lungi*. Dowryda, in printed shirt, came forward, head bowed down as

if receiving benediction. Father shook his head violently by grabbing his unruly mop. But the slapping stopped after just one.

‘Did you buy him? Who are you to slap him?’ Grandma rescued Dowryda from my father. Tear-streaks like glycerin drops arrested on his cheek. Grandma dragged Dowryda to the tube-well. Shoving his head under the spout, she started pumping it herself that day.

10

There was not much to read save those large volumes of the Greenwich Encyclopaedia, looking rather out of place in our sparse room. And like every other item in the house that had crossed the border and survived, this too had its own story. In fact, these moth-eaten and seldom-used volumes had a special place in the family’s history. They were caught in the convulsions of the partition, inscribed in an image and described to me so many times that it had almost become part of my growing up: the image of my parents crossing the border during those blood-crazed days, leaving everything behind save my mother’s sewing machine and my father’s bundle of encyclopedia volumes. Sewing machine and encyclopedia – two perfect images of domesticity and enlightenment that we acquired from the British, now left to negotiate with the brutality of political geography.⁷ The few other things that could be recouped to grace our new household – like my mother’s wedding cot (see Fig. 6), a mirror (original Belgium glass, my mother was never tired of reminding us), a kitchen cupboard, a bookshelf where the encyclopaedia volumes were eventually housed – came much later.

Apart from these encyclopedia volumes, there were numerous English grammar and composition books, given as ‘specimen’ copies to my father. My father held Nesfield’s grammar with the respect due to an original, but thought that the one by P. K. De Sarkar was more useful. My father tried hard to put into our heads a delight in the way English works. He used to read out Bengali passages from the book for us to translate. Quite a few of them were written by the author himself, mostly in the remembrance mode. As my father read them aloud: ‘There was a mango tree in the courtyard of our village home’, he sobbed, then cleared his nose with his *gamcha* that he normally used to wave the mosquitoes away.

One day P. K. De Sarkar came to visit my father. He was old, thin, with small, curly receding hair. He had thick glasses with a red sandalwood coloured frame and hands that trembled. My father showed him my translations. He nodded his head, approved my handwriting and asked me the spelling of ‘barber’. He was the first celebrity I met in person.

Impaled by the gaze of *shiksha*, tired of rebellion and lacking other options, I taught myself to struggle through the entries of my choice from the old, moth-eaten encyclopedia volumes – the early medieval towns of Europe, the rumbustious conquest of America, Benaras of labyrinthine



Debleena Sen and Partha Sen.

Fig. 6. Inside the house: mother's wedding cot, which bore marks of the Partition journey, and the bookshelf.



Debleena Sen and Partha Sen.

Fig. 7. What was once Sitanath's cowshed.

lanes, sundials, the history of the locomotive. Many a time have I visited the bordering areas of Bengal and Bihar, carried by an engine of some other time. The zombie fresh air, the drone of logging, the rustle of pine and deodar. An unbecoming sense of not belonging begins to get the better of me.

VIOLENCE

11

Local frictions, rivalries and divides notwithstanding, the main theme of the fifties and the sixties was one of social harmony. All this changed radically, almost overnight, in 1970. I remember very precisely the first day of violence at Netaji Nagar. It was one afternoon in September, shortly before my exams – the pre-test for the finals. My mother was in *puja*. I was trying to solve the test papers of the previous year, waiting to be served food. I heard some footfalls, strange noises coming from outside. I peeped out of the window. Some twenty people marching quietly. They carried knives, pipe-guns, spears and iron rods. Their looks signalled they were on a mission. They were brisk and soft and soon went out of sight. We had heard of the fights between Naxals and Congress for quite some time then. They took place on the other side of the main road, away from our locality. It did not affect us much. We belonged to a different political terrain. I was not much concerned about what I had seen that afternoon.

Hours later, towards the evening, the news rolled back in whispers that four young men, apparently Naxals, had attacked our locality with bombs and guns from the Naktala-side. The men were cordoned off in the vast stretches of empty land that lay there. They were overpowered and the leader of our side took out his small knife and slit the throats of the four.

Within days of this event, the locality took on the aspect of a siege. CRP (Central Reserve Police) raids became common. How quickly people got used to this new reality! How quickly the entire locality took on a combative look! The fight was between the CPI(M) and the Congress, but it was translated into a fight between two localities.

12

We were not unused to politics. Since childhood I had seen small rallies of local people streaming down the lane, men chanting slogans in unison, the boys youthful at the front followed by the senior of the lot, his palms held at the back, gaze fixed to the sky like the defiant terrorist Khudiram approaching the British noose. So often in our high-school days we had gushed out in a team, ignoring the scornful looks of older teachers, shouting in unison slogans of gigantic simplicity: *Amar naam, tomar naam*,

Vietnam, Vietnam (My name, your name, Vietnam, Vietnam – *naam* being the Bengali word for ‘name’). I didn’t exactly know where Vietnam was on the map. It didn’t matter for Vietnam was everywhere, a libidinal expanse, a name-place where blood flowed to announce the death of a world order.

What was happening now, however, was very different. That day the CRP men came pretty early. I ran out of our house, unnoticed. My school-leaving exam was not long ahead. If I were arrested, I argued to myself, I would lose a whole year. We started off as a group of three. Gradually others trickled in and we became a group of six. Boys and women banged the lamp-posts to indicate the direction of CRP movement. We followed the sound and navigated our way. I hadn’t been in such a situation before. This was a lack I needed to fill. Sounds of footfalls were coming from different directions. We were taking our chances. We reached the main road and took an oncoming bus out of the area. We returned much later and discovered that all our efforts had been in vain. Apparently, the CRP had come, made a round and left in about ten minutes. On this occasion they never got off the van.

As I neared our house, I saw my mother waiting at the end of our lane. On other occasions when I was late getting back home in the evening, I used to find her at the gate ready to blow up into a rage. But today it was different; she didn’t look at me, merely entered the gate and quietly told my father that she could not take this dance with death anymore. She looked distraught, pale.

At night, my father came to me and caressed my back with his palm. He had been in and out of British jails; the present leaders would surely respect that, he mused. The next day I was arrested, unceremoniously.

On return from Jadavpur lock-up, I was bundled off to a relative’s place at New Alipore, a nouveau-riche locality in Calcutta those days. The strongly-built, nicely-curved houses, the spacious rooms, huge radiogram in the lounge, boys and girls looking neat on spanking bicycles, young women gracefully attractive – all this found a lulling resonance with my adolescence. I took it as my true ambience.

I was brought back home the night before my school-leaving exam. The next morning I started off early to Bapuji Nagar School to take my exam. When the bus reached a large playground outside Netaji Nagar, I saw a crowd in one corner. I peeped out of the window to see four headless bodies lying in a pool of blood. I had finally entered adulthood.

The English department of Presidency College in those days was unmistakably an elite bastion. I did not belong. My friends were from other faculties. For the first time, I became conscious of my background. Daughters of the D. K. Sens – the city’s commercial aristocracy once nurtured by the British – remained alien to me. Political correctness was yet to come,

and they had no time for me. On my part, I was busy hiding my inadequacies, expressed mostly through various means of subaltern bravado. Caught between desire and deprivation, I at times used to see one of them at the turn of the staircase, drinking water from the tap. Head bent. Her lips did not touch the multicoloured plastic cup. A hanky flickered between her fingers. The gentle movement of her throat as water gargled down. She shook the glass dry, neatly tucked it into her bag and went away. Later in their lives, they would talk 'discourse', teach English in Denver, do Cultural Studies, expose the politics of English, in the same breath support a New-York cabbie strike and talk about a tenure-track position in Philadelphia; but first they would have got married to their eligible Indrapratims: biophysics, postdoc, Sussex . . . Our names were different. My inhibitions. Their elegance. Our mutual deprivations.

Back at Netaji Nagar, one had to keep track of the changing geography of safety. The road that might be safe today was not so the next day. My entry to college was marked by one significant personal disappearance: the main road. Our narrow but deep spatial home needed a boundary to be real. And this was the main road. It wasn't the kind of boundary that contrasted us, immediately, with what we were not. Rather, it was like an endless ribbon stretching through an endless tapestry beyond our immediate domain to a remoteness of dreams, messiness, and what we threateningly knew as 'reality'. As Calcutta came close, the main road receded.

14

As our days became nights, the nights in their turn woke up to their many crevices. Strange stories started circulating about the nocturnal adventures of those who, risking their lives, protected us from marauders of the rival localities. Locally-made grenades and other arms were stored in bushy corners of the house courtyards, without the knowledge of the occupants. Boys climbed to the top of coconut trees and were stuck there, as CRP men patrolled the area with torches. If a coconut dropped at odd hours without any notice, we became suspicious. Nights were full of sounds of footfalls, whispers and brisk running. The story went that on one occasion Kanu fell down from a tall coconut tree unhurt, his body finely balanced on his chopper that dug deep into the ground.

The shaping of the community as a combat zone had profound effects on its social structure, particularly in terms of collective guardianship. Netaji Nagar was reduced to little more than a political habitat. Its precious social capital haemorrhaged in every direction and the locality struggled to retain something of itself. Familiar people suddenly became strangers. Khoka, who lived a couple of houses away from ours, stopped going to college one day. He was found pacing up and down our lane in the afternoon heat, holding an old umbrella with a cane handle. He did not respond to greetings, did not bother to recognize any one. One day on seeing me, he

stopped. He looked pensive as an iguana and said softly: 'When aroused, a husband is a husband – earning or not doesn't matter'. He started walking again.

The rumour made the rounds that Harimohan was made to do sit-ups holding his ears by the night guards in broad daylight. Apparently, he was found raping a girl of class four. This was stunning. Some witnessed it, everyone heard about it, but no-one – even now – is willing to talk about it.

Harimohan was the headmaster of our primary school. He was tall, dark and willowy. When he wanted to beat us, which he did quite often, very casually he would take a strip of bamboo out of the *bera* and beat us. There was no use complaining. He was an organic part of the community, respected by elders and feared by us. I remember an incident on one stormy morning. In those days rain was rainier, storm stormier. On that particular occasion, when the storm had subsided, news reached us that our school had apparently been blown away. We rushed out to find that it was all a shambles. The tin roof, the moth-eaten wooden poles, the black boards all lay scattered and abandoned. And in the midst of the debris sat Harimohan on a bench, stoned and listless. The bad words that we had engraved on the benches and the stones thrown on the tin roof in the evening hours as acts of shadow rebellion and compulsive mischief remained mute and unnoticed and witnesses to nature's fury. The striped shirt of Harimohan was familiar, so were the slippers made of tyre, but his look was unfathomable. We kids did not know how to negotiate this new figure of Harimohan. One kind of fear was challenged by another, new kind – the fear of uncertainty, of confronting the ravaged look of someone we believed to be indomitable.

Our locality had its own refugees, the political activists ousted from our rival localities. We looked after our political guests well. One day a few of them disappeared. After that, the CRP started coming with men in masks. The underground hospital was discovered, the arms factory and the different hideouts. Netaji Nagar gradually bore a desolate look. The CRP would visit our locality less often and the killings became infrequent. In course of time, it was no longer all that unsafe to sit next to the window in the bus and be seen from the roads.

15

Towards the end of my college life, my father fell critically ill. Renal failure, the two words that every member of the family knew and dreaded. Father came back home after four months in the hospital, never to be the same person again. He survived for two more years. My contribution to the sagging family finances became urgent and I found myself offering private tuition, almost endlessly. I was mindless about the job and only the monthly payment interested me. On one occasion when I visited a student during *Bijoya Dashami*, the father came up to me and in the guise of doing *kolakoli*, whispered the three words, '*Tomar-ta kal habe*' (You will be paid

tomorrow) from one side of my head to another, as he pressed his mouth close to my left ear, then right and back to the left again. The words were relayed with such finesse that I was willing to believe that the ritual was designed to serve such a purpose.

On the day of my father's death, my mother cried for a long time. Towards the evening, as the dead body was placed on our courtyard and preparations were under way for the funeral, I remember her lying on the bed, mute from weakness, her one leg bent at the knee, the foot pressing the other leg stretched straight as she rolled gently from one side to another, the quilt she had embroidered for her grandson wrapped on her hand rubbing her face. She tossed her head at times and sighed deeply as if it was an early end, as if it was at the end of the road. Her sari with green border (which would soon be replaced by stark white *thaan* for the rest of her life); her skin radiant; her lips dry, purple-pink; the thin, sparse down around her mouth sprightly in oblivious rebellion. Her body looked like a scroll. The nagging tapestry of poverty; her mother-in-law who as the daughter of a *dipiti* of colonial times considered herself superior in status and who, widowed at the age of eighteen with two children, would live for sixty years more, cautious and boastful of the nitty-gritty of her widowhood; all the children my mother bore; the partition; the house set on fire as she rushed out with her three children, the younger two on her two arms, the eldest clinging to her sari from the back, she moving towards her parents' place through a locality sporadically burning under a crimson sky rent by cries of bigots; the first couple of years immediately after the partition in a dingy tenement house in north Calcutta which she had to share with other relatives, also refugees; the early years at Netaji Nagar amidst strange-looking insects, preying jackals, snakes, and dark nights; the journey to collect drinking water from the deep tube-well that Adhikaribabu had bored for the new locality, a good ten minutes walk from our home, while I hammocked in her belly; camaraderie with neighbouring women with whom she would at times spend hours chatting, sitting in the courtyard in late-afternoon sun; my father's gastronomic whims: 'Look Chabi, what have I got!' as he poured out the tiny, jumping fishes late at night and which she then had to dress and cook though not without a whimper; the pestering demands of my father after her day's chores (he was a headmaster, he used to say); the hand that slapped me, stiff and with cracks.

As my father's body burnt and the robust bones rattled, Calcutta seemed to be receding to a distance. Within days, I knew I had to give up my job and try somewhere else, in some other city. I was actually running away from the smell of the pyre. Standing next to the thick granite boundary wall of 'up-campus' Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, faced with an empty drone and a torrential space that stretched beyond the airport, I sensed a new beginning.

People coming from East Bengal carried their ‘homes’ on their back. They saw the landscape grow as part of their settling down. The landscape we created and the dialects we spoke were the only traces of our history. We kids were brought up in the midst of that landscape: it had a sensual density that made us ignore the rest of the world, other ways of living, other refugees who struggled in similar yet different ways in the dingy quarters of the city. Harmony, haphazardness, curves, bends, the dialects, the proverbs, stories of our roots: all this gave the place its nativity, a structure of feeling, and we were serenely, mirthfully cocooned in it. We acquired our significance, our place in the world, from a Calcutta eternally trespassing, eternally kept in abeyance. In retrospect, what Appadurai calls ‘the locality constituting’⁸ exercise seemed in our case a drive to prevent, if not obliterate, ‘the contingency-awareness’⁹ of the partition – that is, the fear of the aleatory, the sense that home, no matter how ancient and blessed by ancestors, can be tossed away overnight.

The violence of the seventies demolished all that, all our ‘home-work’, and the contingency-awareness once again occupied centre-stage. The routes of these two experiences of violence were different as were the causes. But once again people would see the disruption as a ‘monstrously irrational aberration’¹⁰ from what was taken as almost a natural order. An air of conspiracy filled the place – forces greater than us seemingly conspired to deprive us of our ‘dwelling’. We celebrated our victimhood in whispers, stories of those killed, the efforts gone into making ‘our’ pipe-guns and grenades. Ironically, for the first time, we also felt ‘inside’ history.

The years of violence were a great watershed. Those who returned to the locality after the violence subsided and those who had continued living there, we all lost our ‘dwelling’ or at least in the way we knew it. Calcutta was our destiny; there was no room for opaqueness.

GOVERNMENT

Ironically enough, the seventies were also the time of sustained development efforts. For the first time, the government cast off its veil of ambiguity and took us seriously. The World Bank entered in the form of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA): roads were metalled, an underground drainage system constructed, the primary schools moved into new buildings, lamp-posts were seen in remote narrow lanes, the locality was given its first post office.

The development efforts accelerated once the Left Front came to power in 1977. Given the tradition and structure of the CPI(M) a refugee colony

like Netaji Nagar (located as it was at the interface between the city and outsiders) played a crucial mediating role between the party's urban and rural policy in the early days of the Left Front government. Netaji Nagar was particularly fortunate in this regard since the local leader Prasanta Sur was in charge of the Ministry of Urban Development for the first ten years of the Front rule. People who had left the locality came back and quite a few of the young party activists were rewarded with government jobs. Overall, the economic standard of the locality has gone up, since the school goers of the sixties and seventies have joined the job market, and families now have more than one earning member.

I left Netaji Nagar in 1978 to do my Masters in New Delhi. Since then, I visit my ancestral home every now and then and have stayed there for different stretches of time. When I visit the place, a strangeness overcomes me. It is quite a differentiated place now. This is in almost every respect: in terms of space (those who live in apartment houses vis-à-vis those who do not) as well as in terms of the time-scale with which people operate (those who have a strong nostalgia for the past and those who have very little appreciation of it). In terms of language too, the place is no longer a homogeneous entity (apart from those who speak the dialect and those who do not, there are also those who do not speak Bengali at all). Class-wise, the differences are most keenly felt between those who have 'made it' and those who haven't. And if this is so among neighbours, it is equally true within the same family.

As Netaji Nagar became more complex, literate, urban, it lost its distinctiveness and, along with it, the founding myths. The households have become self-sufficient and the infrastructure of the locality is on a par with the rest of Calcutta. This has eaten deep into the roots of the once-valued colony solidarity. Local people want to enjoy the fruits of development but do not want to participate in the social life of the locality. More important perhaps is the new orientation: what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls 'the telos of a result'¹¹ – modernity's web of product and purpose – has now been built into the life-world of local people. They have moved away from the colony committee, once the nodal point of sociality, which in its turn has taken on an increasingly bureaucratic role and become a surveillance centre for the party apparatus. As part of the broader scenario of West Bengal, the local schools, once the focal point of community's moral posturing, have disintegrated. Sending children to such schools is beneath people's dignity. Private institutions, mostly 'English-medium', have mushroomed and school buses from far quarters of the city are seen in the locality.

During this period, the local people have gained legal ownership of their land. In 1989, we were given a lease by the government of ninety-nine years. Ten years later, in 1999, the right to sell our land was granted to us, with a far-reaching impact on the local landscape. Real-estate sharks have moved in, creating new networks of power and money in the locality. After retaining a village-like look for four decades, Netaji Nagar since the early nineties has suddenly started growing tall. New constructions go up every day. The advent

of apartment modernity looks absolute and as a corollary to the process, new people from different parts of the city are coming in. It is no longer unusual to hear languages of other parts of India being spoken at market places, bus stops and telephone booths. Even Netaji Nagar has gone 'multicultural'.

With pastoral governmental care reaching our locality from the mid seventies in the form of developmental activities, the community had already been bureaucratized. Now with acquiring legal title to land, we have been thrown into the maelstrom of contemporaneity, the contemporary face of postcolonial urbanity: one of gadget shops with fancy names, 'Sugar and Spice' and other confectioneries, *joint entrance*, tutorial classes, godheads, STD booths, even cybercafés. Catching up with Calcutta also meant becoming translocal. The process has mapped the political space of all colonies that came up close to the partition, Netaji Nagar being no exception.

Very early on a civic association was formed, since most of those who settled here had the language of political processes, the link-line with the language of the state. The struggle with the state was to become part of it, not to question it head-on. The demand was not to overhaul the state apparatus, but to be included within its fold. Once that demand was satisfied substantially in terms of developmental activities – legally and otherwise – people felt no intrinsic need for posturings of the Left. The earlier sense of politics has lost much of its appeal, as the community is being thoroughly included within the folds of the larger civil society and our *bhadralok* status vindicated. Today the Left draws its rhetorical force from an act of remembrance: it asks that the early days of hardship and the achievement of the colony people should not be forgotten and contrasts the role of the Left with the neglect of the Congress regime. Understandably, this does not evoke the desired response from young people, who did not witness much of this; more importantly, such claims provide no answers to their present problems. The vacuum is addressed by another brand of politics – a politics of memory that gestures at the treatment meted out to the Hindus by the Muslims in undivided Bengal. Those born after the partition are more eager to subscribe to this thesis of the past – a past bereft of memories is the ideal ground for state-sponsored nostalgia. And between these fraught acts of collective remembrance/forgetfulness is the electronic public sphere, giving to the locality a virtual identity.

Recently Netaji Nagar held its annual entertainment evening. Such occasions no longer attract a crowd. Not good enough for the main community ground, not even for the relatively smaller school ground, it was held in the main cross-section of roads to gain some visibility. The artistes were no longer from the locality, but hired prominent personalities of the city. The spectators, the few that there were, consisted mostly of the domestic helps and their children. But it would be utterly wrong to think no-one else was watching, for everyone was watching. They were watching from their bedrooms or drawing-rooms on the small screen cabled by the local operator. Netaji Nagar today is largely a virtual community, a virtual locality.

The charming fluidity of nostalgia is the charm of an internal space, one

that colours a void with diverse shades of light. The trope of the traveller of the non-modern, however, looks pitiable in a scenario of uncontrollable postcolonial urbanity. I aspire to representational stability, needing for my own emplacement to bridge my present with the past of Netaji Nagar. Others who live there have lived through the slow process of oblivion. More than ever before, Netaji Nagar today is an open chapter; it is no more the locality of one kind of people with one kind of past. On the contrary, it is a living crisscross of many lines, the web of intricate connections not unfurled to the occasional visitor. Memory, even as memory of changing space, does not live in a void but in relations: not only to other micrological memories but of necessity to that other broad scenario of history as memory, the governmental site monitoring our self-understanding of the social – a point that remains largely unaddressed in this essay.

The recent spate of academic interest in the partition of India takes place at a point of time in Bengali national life when the word ‘displacement’ has become more of a euphemism for betterment, evoking as it does the prospect of the professional Bengali diaspora in the West, and not so much the sad plight of millions ousted from their erstwhile home. The melancholia that had set in with the partition only deepened as Bengal’s economy dwindled and its status in national politics waned. The *bhadralok* class of today’s Calcutta is immersed, it seems irredeemably, in a retro-celebration of its past achievements, cornered and lonely in the face of the swelling demands for democracy by the subaltern classes. The alienation of the *bhadralok* is a bridge between the *bhadralok*’s two selves – the ‘local’ and the diasporic. The diasporic *bhadralok* recognizes but does not acknowledge this, since spelling out his alienation in his ‘chosen’ land will deprive him of all justifications for having emigrated. The ‘local’ *bhadralok* on the other hand sees in his diasporic ‘other’ the self that has risked ‘death’ and hence is the ‘master’. He expresses this crisis in either complete surrender or vehement rejection of his ‘other’ – more often, the two together – while both the selves are caught in the fossilized ‘taste’ culture of yesteryears. Written in it is the lost project of the Bengali *bhadralok*’s modernity that he had once framed for himself and to which he is umbilically attached. In this context, the history of the uprooted, who had once staked their claim for the city’s *bhadralokdom* they thought they rightfully deserved but were deprived of, acquires a special poignancy. The present paper tries to capture some shades of that story of struggle, to convey a sense of the ‘compelling, contradictory, and pernicious’. The desire to understand is an attempt to recapture what one has lost.

* * *

In the beginning there was a river.
 The river became a road and
 the road branched out to the whole world.
 And because the road was once a river
 it was always hungry.

Ben Okri, 1991.

GLOSSARY

Anna: In the old coinage, no longer in use, sixteen annas made a rupee.

Arjun's *laksha-bhed*: An episode from the *Mahabharat*: Dhranacharya, the guru of archery, asked young Arjun to aim at a bird sitting on a tree. Arjun said that he could see only the bird and nothing else. Asked again, Arjun replied that he saw only one eye of the bird. The guru meets his perfect disciple.

Bera: Fence or wall made by knitting bamboo strips.

Bhadralok: The educated Hindu Bengali middle class which looks up to itself as the standard bearer of Bengali modernity. The term derives its charge from its antonym, *chotolok* (literally the small people) – the illiterate, uncivilized class.

Bijoya Dashami: Festivity that follows after the immersion of Goddess Durga.

Dada: Elder brother.

Desh bari: Village home (here it has the added connotation of home left behind on the other side of the national border).

Dhoti-panjabi: Traditional attire of Bengali *bhadralok*.

Dhutra: A bushy wild plant with long slender white or violet flower and small, round thorny fruit known for its mild narcotic property.

Didi: Elder sister.

Dipti: Deputy magistrate.

Gamcha: A thin piece of cloth, usually coloured and striped, used as a towel.

Gharami: One who builds huts of bamboo and tiles professionally.

Hijal: A tree associated with the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) landscape and immortalized by the poet Jibanananda Das. Scientific name: *Barringtonia acutangula*.

Jethima: Wife of uncle older than father.

'*Joint entrance*': Admission exam for medical and engineering colleges in West Bengal.

Kirtan: Singing in praise of God, at times in narrative form.

Kolakoli: Mutual embrace between two male family members.

Lungi: A piece of long cloth wrapped around the waist, like sarong.

Mama: Maternal uncle.

Mouchak: Literal meaning, beehive. Here the name of a juicy sweet, now not so much in vogue.

Namasudra: Agrarian caste of lower order.

Noakhali: district in East Bengal, now Bangladesh, the storm-centre of communal violence between Muslims and lower-caste Hindus prompting Gandhi's famous peace mission in 1946.

Puja: Worship.

Shiksha: Education, in the broad sense.

Shoni Puja: Worship of the god Shoni, the Saturn; in popular belief, Shoni's displeasure can cause utter distress.

Thaan: White cloth without coloured border, the traditional dress of Bengali widows.

Vaid: Country doctor, usually practitioner of herbal medicine.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 See Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Man*, Lumiere Books, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 36–7. Also see Debabrata Dutta, *Bijoygarh: ekti udbastu upanibesh* (Bengali), Progressive Publisher, Calcutta, 2001.

2 For a detailed account of refugee inflow in the immediate years after the partition, see Jhuma Chakrabarti, 'The Refugee Problem in West Bengal: 1947–1955', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calcutta, 1995, pp. 43–6. See also Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? the Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–50' in Suvir Kaul (ed.), *The Partitions of Memory: the Afterlife of the Division of India*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2001. As per official estimate, a total of 4.26 million refugees migrated from East Pakistan to West Bengal between 1946 and 1962. (Chatterji, pp. 102–3.)

3 Sixty kathas to an acre.

4 Jhuma Chakrabarti and Joya Chatterji have documented in detail the ambiguity of both the state and central governments towards Bengali refugees. See Chakrabarti, 'Refugee Problem in West Bengal', chaps 3 and 4, and Chatterji, 'Right or Charity?', pp. 74–110.

5 Didi: elder sister; here used affectionately by a lady much older than my mother.

6 Hindi cinema's top star of the fifties and sixties.

7 I borrow the phrase, 'brutality of political geography' from Urvashi Butalia: '[The partition's] simple, brutal political geography infused and divided us still.' Urvashi Butalia, 'Blood', *Granta* 57, 1996, p. 16.

8 See Arjun Appadurai: 'The Production of Locality' in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997.

9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Economic and Political Weekly* 31: 32, p. 2,143.

10 Chakrabarty, as previous note, p. 2,144.

11 'Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity', *Public Culture* 11: 1, p. 135.