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## Remembered Villages Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition

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Memory is a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes an historian's archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past. It is also about what we do not always consciously know that we remember until something actually, as the saying goes, jogs our memory. And there remains the question, so much discussed these days in the literature on the Indian partition, of what people do not even wish to remember, the forgetting that comes to our aid in dealing with pain and unpleasantness in life.' Memory, then, is far more complicated than what historians can recover and it poses ethical challenges to the investigator-historian who approaches the past with one injunction: tell me all.<sup>2</sup>

The set of essays I propose to discuss here turns fundamentally on this question of difference between history and memory. They were first serialized in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* from 1950 onward and later collected together in 1975 in a book called *Chere ashā gram* (*The Abandoned Village*) under the editorship of Dakshinranjan Basu, a journalist in Calcutta.' The names of the authors of the individual essays are not mentioned in the book, nor do we have any idea of their age or

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gender though one would suspect, from the style of writing, that with the exception of one, the essays were written by men. The authors recount their memories of their native villages—sixty-seven in all—of East Bengal belonging to some eighteen districts. Written in the aftermath of partition, these essays capture the sense of tragedy that the division of the country represented to these authors. This attitude was more Hindu than Muslim, for to many if not most of the Muslims of East Pakistan, 1947 was not only about partition, it was also about freedom, from both the British and the Hindu ruling classes.<sup>4</sup>

My aim is to understand the structure of sentiments expressed in these essays. One should remember the context. There is no getting around the fact that partition was traumatic for those who had to leave their homes. Stories and incidents of sexual harassment and degradation of women, of forced eviction, of physical violence and humiliation marked their experience. The Hindu Bengali refugees who wrote these essays had to make a new life in the difficult circumstances of the overcrowded city of Calcutta. Much of the story of their attempts to settle down in the different suburbs of Calcutta is about squatting on government or privately owned land and about reactive violence by the police and landlords.<sup>5</sup> The sudden influx of thousands of people into a city where the services were already stretched to their limits, could not have been a welcome event. It is possible, therefore, that these essays were written with a view to creating a positive emotional response in the city towards the refugees. The essays were committed to convey a shared structure of Bengali sentiment through the grid of which the irrevocable fact of Hindu-Muslim separation in Bengali history and the trauma surrounding the event could be read. The question of creating in print something of the sentimental and the nostalgic about the lost home in the villages of East Bengal was the task that these essays had set themselves. Not surprisingly, therefore, they drew on the modes in which 'the Bengali village', and in particular the villages of East Bengal, had already been seen in Bengali literary and nationalist writings.

There are then two aspects to this memory that concern us here: the sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma, and their contradictory relationship to the question of the past. A traumatized memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. At the same time, however, this memory, in order to be plausible, has to place the Event—the cause of the trauma, in this case, the partition violence—within a shared mythic construction of the past that gives force to the claim of the victim. Let me explain.

Consider what makes an historical narrative of the partition possible. A historical narrative would lead up to the event, explaining why it happened and why it happened at the time it did. Indeed, for historical analysis of the event of the partition, the event itself would have to be fundamentally open to explanation. What cannot be explained normally belongs to the marginalia of history—accidents, coincidences, concurrences that remain important to the narrative but which can never replace the structure of causes that the historian looks for. Conceived within a sense of trauma and tragedy, however, these essays maintain a completely different relationship to the event called partition. They do not lead up to it in their narratives, the event of the partition remains fundamentally an inexplicable event. The authors express a sense of stunned disbelief at the fact that it could happen at all, that they could be cut adrift in this sudden and cruel manner from the familiar worlds of their childhood. There is nothing here of the explanations of Hindu-Muslim conflicts that we are used to receiving from historians—no traces of the by now familiar tales of landlord-peasant or peasant-moneylender conflicts through which historians of 'communalism' in the subcontinent have normally answered the question, Why did the Muslim population of East Bengal turn against their Hindu neighbours? Here the claim is that this indeed is what cannot be explained. The writers of these essays are all caught unawares by this calamity. One refrain running through this book is how inexplicable it all was—neighbours turned against neighbours after years of living together in bonds of intimacy and affection, friends took up arms against friends. How did this come to pass? This is the question that haunts the book. As the following quotes from *Chhere asha gram* will show, the event was not only seen as inexplicable, it was also seen as something signifying the death of the social:<sup>6</sup>

Dhirenbabu used to teach us history.... He had been the Headmaster of our Jaikali High school for the last few years.... Even a short time ago, I had heard that he was still in the village. I saluted his courage on hearing this.... But, to my surprise, he turned up in my office one day and told me about his plight. He and his companions were attacked by the friends of the very student who had advised him to leave while he still commanded respect. Eventually, he managed to extricate himself and his family in exchange of two hundred rupees, thanks to some mediation by his favourite student, and crossed the Padma to come to Calcutta. But the simple-hearted teacher from a village school remained in a state of shock—what was this that had happened? How did it happen? All these questions crowded his mind. The age of Ekalabya [a figure from the *Makabharata* who cut off his own thumb as a payment to his guru] is now in the womb of a bottomless past, we all know that it will not return. But still it was unthinkable that in the land of the newly independent Pakistan, it is the guru who would

have to pay the student.... Yet this happened and who can tell if this will not be the permanent rule in the kingdom of shariat? (p. 7)

Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs. Christians have always treated women with respect, what is this that happened today? (Shonarang village, Dhaka district, p. 57)

How could that land become somebody else's for ever! Just one line drawn on the map, and my own home becomes a foreign country! (Binyapher, Mymensingh, p. 66)

True, my home is in a country to which I have no relation. The house is there, the village is there, the property exists but I am homeless today. The suffering of somebody who has had to leave his home can only be appreciated by a person with a large heart.... Man, the son of the immortal one, knows no happiness today—pleasure, security, peace, love and affection have also left the land with us. On all four sides exist the filthy picture of mean intrigues. Where have the images of the olden days—of happy and easy-going people and villages—disappeared?... Who has stolen our good qualities? When will we be delivered from this crisis of civilization?... What happened was beyond the comprehension of ordinary human beings. By the time they could [even] form an idea [of the situation], the destruction was complete. (Sankrail, Mymensingh, pp. 88, 91)

Why was the innocence of the mind banished after so many days of living together? Why did the structure of the human mind change overnight? (Sakhua, Mymensingh, p. 101)

Who would have thought that the country would be engulfed in a such a fire? Brothers fight and then make up to each other but the common person had no inkling that the single spark of the day would start such a conflagration. (Kanchabali, Barisal, p. 122)

Who is the conspiratorial witch whose [black] magic brought death to the cordial social relations that were to be seen even only the other day? Why does man avoid man today like beasts? Can't we forget meanness, selfishness, and fraudulent behaviour and retrieve [the sense of] kinship?... Was our kinship based on quick sand, why would it disappear into such bottomless depths? (Rambhadrapur, Faridpur, pp. 155, 156)

I am today a *vastuhara* in this city of Calcutta. I live in a relief camp. Some in this camp have contracted cholera. A *vastuhara* child died of pox this morning when I received a handful of flattened rice. I do not dare to approach the 'relief babu' who only gets into a rage if I try to say something. I do not ask, why this has happened.... At the time of our leaving, I asked for [a loan of] the boat that belongs to the grandson of Nurshvabi without realizing that he also had turned against us. We tiptoed our way under the cover of darkness from Patia to Chakradandi. (Bhatikain, Chittagong, p. 194)

And our Muslim neighbours? For aeons we have lived next to them sharing each other's happiness and suffering, but did they feel the slightest bit of sadness in letting us go? Did it take only the one blow of the scimitar of politics to sever for

ever the kinship that had been there from the beginning of the eras? (Ramchandrapur, Sylhet, pp, 235, 236)

On the day of the Kali puja we used to take care of the sacrificial goat, carefully feeding it leaves of the jackfruit tree and carrying it ... and stroking it all day. But we never felt any pain at the moment when we pushed toward death this creature that we had looked after with so much care all day. We were not old enough to explain then these contradictory qualities of the mind but today it surprises me a lot to think about it. [But] isn't that what has happened all over Bengal? (Bheramara, Kustia, p. 293)

This very ascription of an inherent inexplicability to the event of partition is what gives these essays their pathos. They are the helpless recall of a victim overtaken by events rather than of one in narrative control of them. And this, I suggest, is the first important distinction we have to note between history and memory (for the Bengali *bhadralok*) of the partition in Bengal. History seeks to explain the event, the memory of pain refuses the historical explanation and sees the event causing the pain as a monstrously irrational aberration. These are undoubtedly essays written in the spirit of mourning, part of the collective and public grieving through which the Hindus who were displaced from East Bengal came to terms with their new conditions in Calcutta. Yet we have to remember that this grieving was being publicized in print, perhaps in the cause of the politics of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal in the 1950s that Prafulla Chakrabarti has written about in his book *The Marginal Men*.<sup>3</sup> This mourning therefore had the political task of garnering sympathy by speaking, at least in theory, to the entire readership of the Bengali press.

## I

There are two Bengali words for 'refugee', *sharanarathi*, meaning, literally, someone who seeks refuge and protection—*sharan*—of a higher power (including God); and *udvastu*, somebody who is homeless but homeless in a particular sense, the word 'home' carrying a special connotation. The word *vastu* used here to mean 'home' is a Sanskrit word of Vedic vintage. Monier-Williams defines it as meaning, among other things, 'the site or foundation of a house.'" In Bengali the word is often combined with the word *bhita* (or *bhite*), a word derived from the Sanskrit word *bhitti* meaning 'foundation'. The idea of 'foundation' is then tied to the idea of 'male ancestry' so that the combined word *vastuvita* reinforces the association between patriliney and the way in which one's dwelling or home is connected to the conception of foundation. One's permanent home is where one's 'foundation' is (the subject of this imagination being,

undoubtedly, male). The Bengali language has preserved this sense of distinction between a temporary place of residence and one's foundational home, as it were, by using two different words for a house: *basha* and *bari*. *Basha*, no matter how long one spends in the place, is always a temporary place of residence; one's sense of belonging there is transient. *Bari*, on the other hand, is where one's ancestors have lived for generations. Middle-class Bengali Hindus of Calcutta, when it came to ritual occasions to do with life-cycle changes (such as marriage), would often refer to the ancestral village in explaining where their *bari* was, while their *basha* might bear a Calcutta address.' *Bari* would also be exchangeable with the word *desh*, signifying one's native land.

An *udvastu* then—the prefix 'ut' signifying 'off' or 'outside'—was someone who had been placed outside of where his foundations were. And since this was not a desirable state, it could have only come about through some application of force and/or a grave misfortune. For the ability to maintain connections with one's *vastubhita* across generations is a sign of being fortunate, a fortune that itself owes something to the auspicious blessing of one's ancestors. This idea of 'home' was extended during the course of the nationalist movement into the idea of the 'motherland' where Bengal became the name of part of the world made sacred by the habitation of the ancestors of the Bengali people. To become an *udvastu* was then to be under some kind of extreme curse. And if this curse had befallen somebody through no fault of their own, they deserved sympathy and compassion from others. This could indeed be the language of self-pity as well. But when a refugee spoke in this language of self-pity, he spoke, ostensibly, for the nation. 'I recall,' wrote one contributor to *Chhere asha gram*, 'that about twelve years ago when a household in our village lost their only son, Deben, my grandmother remarked in sadness, "What a pity, there is nobody left to light the lamp at Sarada's bhite [this being an auspicious ritual of middle-class Hindu well being]." ' Today, every Hindu family in East Bengal, even if they are blessed with sons, is bereft of people who might have lit the lamp at their bhite.<sup>10</sup>

To achieve this effect of speaking for the Bengali nation, the essays in *Chhere asha gram* have recourse to a particular kind of language, one that combines the sacred with the secular idea of beauty to produce, ultimately, a discourse about value. These are narratives that have to demonstrate that something of value to Bengali culture as a whole had been destroyed by the violence of the partition. The 'native village' is pictured as both sacred and beautiful, and it is this that makes communal violence an act of both violation and defilement, an act of sacrilege against everything

that stood for sacredness and beauty in Hindu-Bengali understanding of what home was. There are four narrative elements that help achieve these ends. What gives the 'native village' its sacredness is patriliney, its ancestral connection. Worshipping of the land of the village was the equivalent of worshipping one's ancestors. The language of secular aesthetics is provided, on the other hand, by three different ingredients, all identifiably modern in character. They were: the idea (and hence the relics) of antiquity, connections the individual village may have had with recent nationalist history, and modern secular literary descriptions of the beauty of the landscape of rural Bengal. Altogether, this was a combination where sacredness was difficult to separate from questions of aesthetics. But one thing is clear: nothing in this combination had anything much to do with the Muslim pasts of Bengal. Muslims are mentioned in these essays; indeed, their depiction is critical to the depiction of an idyll, but their 'traditions' are not part of the sacred or of the beautiful. The following excerpts will demonstrate this.

#### THE DISCOURSE OF VALUE I: ANCESTRY, PATRILINITY AND THE SACRED

I shall refrain from framing these quotations which are self-explanatory. They all refer the reader to the narrative association between the sacred and patriliney. The future of the mother, often evoked in describing one's sense of attachment to the land, is not a matriarchal conception.

In this urban life humming with the sound of work, a message of greeting from a friend reached me one evening.... He had just returned from [having spent some time in] the lap of the village in which we were both born. The question he asked as soon as we met was: 'I have brought this ultimate treasure for you back from *deh*, can you guess what it might be?'... Eventually, he surprised all by handing over to me a clod of clay. This was from the soil of my *bhite*, the 'Basu-house', sacred from the blessing of my father and grandfather. This soil is my mother. The sacred memory of my forefathers is mixed with this soil. To me this was not just of high value—it was invaluable. I touched this clod to my forehead. This is no ordinary dust. This clay is moist today with the blood that has been wrung out of Bengal's heart. (Bajrojogini village, Dhaka district, p. 1)

For seven generations we have been reared on the affection and grace of this land, perhaps our yet-to-arrive progenies would have one day made this land their own. But that hope can only feel like a dream today. (Khaliajuri, Mymensingh, p. 73)

An obscure ... village though it is, Gomdandi is a veritable part of historic Chattagram (Chittagong).... In so far as can be gathered from history, it is observed that my ancestor Madhabchandra Majumdar, exasperated by the oppression of the bargi [Maratha raiders], left Bardhaman for Chattagram nearly

two hundred years ago and founded a settlement there in the village of Suchia north of the river Sankha. Sometime later ... Magandas Choudhuri came to his farm in Gomdandi village and built a homestead there.... *The village that is more-valuable-lhan-gold, where my forefathers had grown up for seven generations, where is that village lost today? Where is Gomdandi today and where am I (Gomdandi, Chittagong, pp. 195, 197)"*

But no friends stopped us and no Musalman neighbour told us not to go, the day we, driven by the need to save our honour and life and with no fixed destination, left for ever the sacred land of our place of birth where our forefathers for seven generations had had their *bhite*. (Ramchandrapur, Sylhet, p. 235)

We did not want to think that we might have to leave the village. Yet we had to leave and come away. Everybody did their last act of obeisance on the day of our departure—at the foot of the tulasi tree [a sacred plant bringing well-being to the Hindu homestead], in the deity-room, even at the door of the cowshed. My old aunt would not leave the threshold of the deity-room, her tears and the sadness of the moment wetted my heart too. The village, associated with the many memories of my forefathers, was like a place of pilgrimage to me. On that last evening, I prepared myself for the departure with a respectful salute in the direction of the village, my mother. (Amritabazar, Jessore, p. 241)

I wonder, will it not ever be possible to go back to the lap of the mother we have left behind? Mother—my motherland—is she truly of somebody else's now? The mind does not want to understand. (Dakatia, Khulna, p. 257)

#### THE DISCOURSE OF VALUE II: ANTIQUITY, HISTORY AND NATIONALISM

It is understandable that the remembered village would derive some of its value from the associations it could claim with the nation's antiquity and anti-colonial struggle. The point to note is how unself-consciously this association becomes Hindu. Nothing that the Muslims could take pride in features in these accounts. Some excerpts follow:

The name of Bajrojogini is unforgettable in the history of Bengal ... this is the place of birth of (the) ancient scholar Dipankar Srigyan Atish.... The historical village of Rampal next door—the seat of the Sena kings—is without any beauty today. I had listened to speeches by the Congress leader Surya Sen at the time of [the] non-cooperation [movement]. (Bajrajogini, Dhaka, pp. 3, 5)

Sabhar, my village, is one of the main centres of commerce in the district of Dhaka. In her breast she carries centuries of indestructible history, fading skeletons of ancient civilizations.... It was here that the lamp of [learning] of Dipankar Srigyan was lit first, it was here that his education started in the house of the guru. Sabhar then was a city of supremacy, the capital of Raja Harishchandra, adorned with all kinds of wealth. (Sabhar, Dhaka, p. 10)

Dhamrai, a place of pilgrimage. In the very ancient days the Sanskrit name was Dharmarajika. The modern name of Dhamrai was derived from the Pali name Dhamrnarai. Truly, the people of Dhamrai were mad about religion. But what is the result of so much cultivation of *dharma*? —The people of Dhamrai are themselves without a *dham* (place)! (Dhamrai, Dhaka, p. 19)

The well-known educationist Dr Prasannakumar Ray and the once-famous doctor of Calcutta Dr Dwarkanath Ray were both born in this village. It was in this village that Pandit Krishnachandra Sarbabhauma, a logician of yore belonging to the whole of Bikrampur and the neighbouring regions, lived in a thatched hut, teaching Sanskrit to the students of his tot [traditional school for learning Sanskrit]. (Shubhaddhya, Dhaka, p. 42)

The history of my village is the history of peace. Its historical heritage makes it great.... It contains the ruins of the Buddhist period.... The successful women and men of this village come to mind. Some of the people from here have become famous professors, some ICS [officers], while some have gone to Europe as representatives of independent India. (Shonarang, Dhaka, pp. 54, 59)

Banaripara occupies a special place in [the annals of] all the political agitations, from the Swadeshi movement of 1905 to the non-cooperation and the Civil Disobedience movements. The contribution of this village in the freedom struggle of the country is truly great. The sixteen-year-old youth, Bhabani Bhattacharya, who gave his life to the hangman for trying to kill the then Governor Mr Anderson at a place called Lebong in Darjeeling in 1934, was an unselfish son of this village. (Banaripara, Barisal, p. 108)

My village has remained blessed and sacred ever since it received the touch of the sacred feet of Netaji Subhas Chandra [Bose]. (Gabha, Barisal, p. 113)

It is said that it was during the reign of the emperor Shahjahan ... that the Bosu family settled here. Under the protection of Kandarpanarayan, the *Bhuians* of Chandradwip, a great and civilized society grew up in the neighbouring villages of Gabha, Narottampur, Banaripara, Ujirpur, Khalishakota and so on. (Kanchabalia, Barisal, pp. 118-19)

Many, instead of going to Navadweep, would come to the world-conquering pandit of this village, Jagannath Tarkapanchanan.... I have heard that some of the stone images and stone inscriptions of Nalchira have found a place in the Dhaka Museum. (Nalchira, Barisal, pp. 141-42)

Navadweep, Bikrampur, Bhatpara—the place of our Kotalipara is inferior to none among these jewels of the crown of brahmanical knowledge in Bengal. (Kotalipara, Faridpur, p. 148)

This young brahman named Rajaram Ray features as a footnote to the history of Bengal. By the sheer force of his arms, Rajaram ... founded the settlement of this Khalia village. Gradually, his thatched hut was converted into a seven-winged palace. Only a fourth of that huge palace exists today. (Khalia, Faridpur, p. 164)

I have mentioned the copper-inscriptions of Kumar Bhaskar ... discovered only

two miles away from our...village. The Kushari river described in those inscriptions still flows past our village ... from this may be gauged the antiquity of the ... villages in this area. (Ramchandrapur, Sylhet, p. 236)

Senhati is one of the famous villages of East Bengal.... There is a saying that Ballal Sena made a gift of this village to his son-in-law Hari Sena.... It was Hari Sena who named it Senhati. The book *Digvijaya-prakasha* says that Lakshman Sena established a town called Senhati near Jessore.... Be that as it may, we do not need history now any more, Senhati today exists in its glory. I am a son of that village. That is what makes me proud. (Senhati, Khulna, p. 248)

The village is self-sufficient. Its name is Ghatabari. The little river Atharoda flows past it. A few miles away is Bhangabari, the birthplace of the poet Rajanikanta Sen. Raja Basanta Ray is the person whose name is unforgettable in the history of this village.... The ruins of his palace are still there in the village next door. (Ghatabari, Pabna, p. 277)

What I have heard about the history of the village is this. Sati, the goddess, killed herself on hearing Daksha [her father] speak ill of her husband [Shiva].... One of the fifty-one pieces [of her body] fell on this obscure village Bhabanipur in north Bengal. (Bhabanipur, Bagura, p. 303)

Let me tell you the history of the name Boda. Budhraja built a big fort and a royal palace over two square miles. With the passage of time, a temple was built at the fort, the temple of the goddess Budheswari.... Gradually, the name was transformed in ordinary speech to Bodeswari, and from that came Boda. (Boda, Jalpaiguri, p. 315)

### THE DISCOURSE OF VALUE III: THE IDYLIC VILLAGE. BENGALI PASTORALISM AND LITERARY KITSCH

Apart from antiquity and the glories brought about by the village's participation in the life of the nation there is also a present pertaining to the village but it is an eternal present. The village lives in an idyllic present into which intrudes the beast of communalism. The writers of the essays in *Chhere asha gram* are not the first to create this idyllic picture of the Bengali village. The picture had been developing since the 1880s, the time when nationalist writers such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee and later Rabindranath Tagore and a whole host of others drew upon new perceptions of the countryside to create, for and on behalf of the urban middle classes, a powerfully nostalgic and pastoral image of the generic Bengali village. Thus the *basha/bari* distinction was rewritten into a much larger opposition between the city and countryside. I do not have the space to develop the point here but a few words may help set this document into its own context.<sup>12</sup>

The geographical name East Bengal may have been of modern colonial

and administrative origins but the languages and the ways of the people of the eastern side—people usually called 'bangles' by their detractors on the west—were for long an object of amused contempt on the western side of Bengal. We know, for example, that the great Bengali Vaisnava leader Chaitanya of the fifteenth-sixteenth century reportedly once entertained his mother after his travels in the east by deliberately mimicking the manners of speech of the 'bangal'." This tradition surfaces in Calcutta in the mid-nineteenth century when the city expands as European rule consolidates itself and people from the eastern side begin to move to the city in large numbers.<sup>14</sup> It is significant that Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay's text *Kalikatakamalalaya* (1823), while using the figure of the 'stranger to the ways of the city', does not make the 'stranger' speak in the bangal accent.<sup>15</sup> The bangal, it would appear, does not feature as the butt of jokes "Until well into the 1850s. By the 1860s, however, the bangal emerges as the standard laughing-stock of the Calcutta stage, one of the most famous characters being that of Rammanikya in Dinabandhu Mitra's temperance-inspired play, *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (1866). Rammanikya is immortal for the following lines reporting his pathetic attempts to become one of the city's sophisticated. His self-pitying sentences would speak for a long time to the sense of marginality that migrants from East Bengal felt in a Calcutta dominated by the dandy descendants of the residents of the western half of the province:

I have eaten so much rubbish yet I cannot be like they are in Calcutta. What have I not done that is not Calcutta-like.<sup>7</sup> I have gone whoring, made my woman wear fine dhoti [the normal sign of a widow], consumed biscuits from European houses, imbibed *bandil* (brandy)—yet in spite of all this I could not be *kalkatta*-like! What use is this sinning body, let me jump into the water, let me be eaten by sharks and crocodiles.<sup>16</sup>

Both before and after independence, this image of the man from East Bengal has supplied much of the urban humour of Calcutta. Sometimes, in fact, gifted artistes from East Bengal have used this to their advantage as in the case of the pioneering stand-up Bengali comedian Bhanu Banerjee who made a career in the 1940s and the 1950s selling precisely the accent Calcuttans loved to laugh at.<sup>17</sup> But some significant changes in the cultural location of East Bengal began to take place from the 1880s as an emergent Bengali literary nationalism started to work out, in the poetry and music of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and others, an image of Mother Bengal as a land of bounty. Accompanying all this was the idea of a Bengali 'folk' situated in the countryside and evincing, as against the artificiality of the city of Calcutta, the qualities

of the Bengali 'heart' (another category essential to the romantic nationalism of the period).<sup>18</sup> The village, as opposed to the city, became the true spiritual home of the (urban) Bengalis. The riverine landscape of East Bengal was as critical to this development as were new ways of seeing that landscape, including the influence on the Bengali imaginative eye of Sanskrit literature, of classical Indian music, and of European writings, paintings and the technology of the camera. Two major literary and intellectual figures should suffice as evidence, Tagore and Nirad Chaudhuri. Tagore's *Chhinnaparrabali*, a collection of letters written during the 1880s and the 1890s when his duties as landlord made him traverse East Bengal by boat, can be easily read as one of the first literary efforts in modern Bengali prose to describe the landscape deploying the idea of a western and painterly perspective.

Some people's minds are like the *wet plate of a photograph* [the italicized words are in English in the original; unless the photo is printed on paper right away, it is wasted. My mind is of that type. Whenever I see a scenery, I think I must write it down carefully in a letter."

Our boat is anchored on the other side of Shilaidaha in front of a sandbank. It is a huge sandbank—a vast expanse—no end in sight—only the river appears as a line from time to time—there are no villages, no humans, no trees, no grass ... turning the head to the east one can only see the endless blue above and down below an infinite paleness, the sky is empty and so is the earth, a poor, dry and harsh emptiness below and a disembodied, vast emptiness above. Nowhere is to be such *desolation* [in English] seen.<sup>20</sup>

I had sat outside barely for fifteen minutes yesterday when massive clouds collected in the western sky—very dense, disorderly clouds, lit up here and there by stealthy rays of light falling on them—just as we see in some paintings of storms.<sup>21</sup>

Nirad Chaudhuri's self-conscious discussion of the Bengali landscape and his experience of it in the 1920s, shows the same changes to be still under way a few decades on. Chaudhuri's discussion is extremely aware of the recent origins of the practice of seeing Bengal as beautiful. The curious thing was', writes Chaudhuri, 'that the Bengalis taken collectively showed no awareness of their natural environment, not even of their great rivers' and adds:

Generally speaking, when modern Bengalis acquired a feeling for the beauties of nature they showed it by a vicarious enjoyment of those described in the source of their new feeling, namely, English literature. Thus English and Scottish landscapes in their imaginative evocation became the staple of the enjoyment."

Chaudhuri's own experience of coming to grips with the landscape of Bengal shows the modernity of the landscape-question in Bengali history.

Indeed, one could argue, nationalist perceptions of the Bengal landscape owed much to the labour of cultural workers such as Chaudhuri himself. He writes:

when I grew up I began to put this question to myself: does the Bengali landscape have any beauty ...? I could not be sure.... But one day I had an experience which I can regard as conversion in the religious sense. That was in 1927 during that very last stay at Kishorganj. I was always in the habit of taking long walks, and on that day I was strolling along the railway embankment northwards from Kishorganj. After I had gone about three miles I suddenly noticed a homestead with half a dozen huts to my left, which was silhouetted against the sunset. There was a long pool of water by the side of the railway line.... There was the usual pond before it.... The whole scene was like one of Constable's landscapes, and I can confirm the impression after seeing the Constable country.... I do not know if other Bengalis have felt like me, but for me it was like enlightenment bestowed in a blessed moment.<sup>23</sup>

It would be untrue to give the impression that this was all there was to the way the city/country question was given shape in Calcutta's urbanism. The nostalgic, folksy image of the village never died. In the early decades of the twentieth century, however, after the emotionalism of the Swadeshi days had subsided, 'realistic' novels such as Saratchandra Chatterjee's *Pallisamaj* helped develop yet another stereotype of Bengali rural society. Bengali villages, so often celebrated as abodes of peace, now became the den of factionalism, casteist exploitation and malarial diseases, all making them deserving candidates for nationalist developmental work.<sup>24</sup> Yet the softer image, located in the lush water-washed landscape of East Bengal, remained and was celebrated, for instance, in Jibanananda Das's sonnets *Rupashi Bangla* [Bengal the Beautiful] written in the 1930s "(though published posthumously in the 1950s and soaring in popularity during the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh).<sup>25</sup> It is clear that by the time Bibhutibushan Bandyopadhyay's novel *Pather Panchali* was published, in 1927, it spoke to a dearly held urban image of the 'generic Bengali village'—a place, true, marked by suffering, poverty and sometimes a meanness of spirit but yet the abode of some very tender sentiments of intimacy, innocence and kinship. This was the picture of the Bengali village as a modern cultural value. The exact geographical location of the village of Nischindipur, the village where the story of the novel unfolds, was not relevant to the way Bengali readers appreciated the story. As Suniti Chatterjee, the noted linguist, said of the novel: 'I have always lived in Calcutta but I have affection for the village. I feel that Nischindipur is familiar to me. Likewise, Apu and Durga's story seems to be our own, even though we have grown up in the city.'<sup>26</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that journeys—to East Bengal, to the

countryside—should be a major feature of the literature dealing with the beauty of the Bengali landscape. For, quintessentially, that perception was urban. Tagore's eyes often frame the countryside through the window of his boat:

Now, after a long time, being seated near the window of my boat [English in original], I have found some peace of mind.... I sit in a reclining position by the side of this open window. I feel the touch of a gentle breeze caressing my head. My body is weak and slothful having suffered a prolonged illness, and this nursing by nature, calm and soothing, feels very sweet at this time.<sup>27</sup>

Travel, by boat, is a major motif in Nirad Chaudhuri's appreciation of the Bengali landscape as well:

Consciously, I never credited Bengal with beautiful landscapes. Yet when I passed through one or other of most commonly seen aspects of the Bengali landscape, for instance, a great river (and I have journeyed in boat and steamer on all the big three), the rice fields either in their green or in their gold stretching out to the horizon and billowing under strong winds, the bamboo clumps or the great banyan tree, there was not one occasion when I did not lose my sense of being a viewer only and became one with these scenes like Wordsworth's boy.

I shall never forget one such occasion. It was 14 April 1913, that I was going from Goalundo Ghat to Narayanganj in the river steamer *Candor*.... I had just read about Turner's paintings in a book.... The glow of his paintings, visualized by imagination, seemed to lie on the wide landscape all around me.<sup>28</sup>

Tagore, of course, was a landlord visiting the countryside on business, and Nirad Chaudhuri, a salaried clerk in the city of Calcutta, visiting his family in East Bengal during holidays. But in either case, as in the case of so many other members of the Bengali *bhadralok*, it was a matter of accommodating the village and the country into the rhythm of an urban life, where the village and holidays stood in relationships of intimate association.

*Chhere asha gram* repeats these associations between urban life and images of the pastoral that informed the Bengali sense of a beautiful life which, it was said, was never theirs in the city. These themes appear in *Chhere asha gram* not as so many masterpieces of Bengali writing but as hackneyed expressions derived from Tagore and other sources, short cultural clichés, pieces of literary kitsch, aimed at the shared nostalgia of the city's *bhadralok*. In other words, this memory places the idyllic village squarely in the middle of the city-country question. Here, too, the beauty of the village is often tied to travel by boat and to the rhythms of holidays in urban working or student lives, the holidays coinciding with religious festivals. I reproduce again a long string of quotations to illustrate how profusely the sentiments appear.

I remember the days of autumn. How long people would wait the whole year for this season to come. And what preparation! The people who lived afar were returning home. Everyday new boats would come and lay anchor on the banks of the Dhaleshwari. We boys would crowd the [riverside]. For a few days, Gangkhali was full of people. And everybody would renew their acquaintances. (Shabhar, Dhaka, p. 12)

The steamers on the Narayanganj line would leave Goalundo ... and stop at Kanchanpur. The wind on the Padma would carry to our station ghat the sound of the siren of departing steamers. And the sound would be heard in other villages across the Ilamora fields and the tanks of Aairmara ... all the people of this district knew that their relatives who lived in exile in Calcutta were coming by those steamers. (Notakhola, Dhaka, p. 47)

We are educated, we have tasted the intoxication of the city. We have lost our caste. That is why we feel international. Without tap-water and machine-made bread nothing tastes good to our palate.... The door of returning back to the village has been shut for ever in our lives. (Binyapher, Mymensingh, pp. 68-9)

We had to take the ferry across the Jamuna after alighting at the Sirajganj ghat, and then take a boat to our village. I can clearly recall, even in darkness, the picture of the sun setting on the river. When the young sun, bright and bearing [the message of hope], appeared in the body of the sky, my head would automatically bow at its feet. I found life in the water of the river and youth in the sun.... The taste of the gravy of rice and curried Hilsa fish that I used to have at the Sirajganj Hotel those days still lingers in my mouth like the taste of nectar.... (Sankrail, Mymensingh, pp. 89-90)

My [village] Gomdandi, surrounded by the endless beauty of nature, had only green on all four sides. Whenever we could get over the seduction of the artificial environment of the city and find refuge in the green lap of the village, our mother, we would forget all the sadness and suffering of city-life.... Travelling on boats with white sails along the Karnaphuli in the month of Bhadra and Aswin, when the river overflowed both its banks, the exiles' minds would experience thrill at the very sight of the paddy fields.... (Gomdandi, Chittagong, p. 196)

The puja[-holidays] are close. At this time of the year, every year, the mind yearns to go to Shilaidaha. As soon as we got off at the Kustia station, our hearts would fill up with an immeasurable sense of joy. (Shilaidaha, Kustia, p. 286)

I specially remember today the days of the Durga puja. Every year I would impatiently look forward to these days. A few days before the puja I would leave Calcutta for the village. The distance seemed inexhaustible. The moment I set foot on the village station after a long journey, I felt like a king. Who am I in Calcutta? I am only one among the innumerable ordinary men. In my village, the station-master at the very sight of me would ask with a smile, 'So you have come back to *desh*?' (Phulbari, Dinajpur, p. 306)

It was within this city/country division that the village appeared both as an ideal and an idyll, its idyllic qualities enhanced—in the experience of the writers and in their telling of their stories—by allusions to literature and festivals. Both of these allusions, as we have already seen, actually direct our attention to the city where this literature was produced and where the major Hindu festivals punctuated the annual calendar of modern work. But they also imaginatively endow the village with its 'folk' character, festivals being particularly important to the construction of the folk. The literary allusions are sometimes direct and sometimes buried in the very style of writing:

Whenever I could break the harsh and gloomy bonds of the city and placed myself within the affectionate and calming embrace of my mother-country, I would remember the truth of the great message of the Kaviguru [Tagore].... In a moment I would forget the insults, suffering and the weariness of the city.... (Gabba, Barisal, pp. 111-12)

Today I am a man of Calcutta. But I cannot forget her in the dust of whose sari-wrapped tender soil I was born.... The moment I get a holiday, I feel like running away to that village three hundred miles away. I wish I could walk along the tracks of that dream-tinged green village of Bikrampur and sing like I used to as a child: 'Blessed is my life, Mother, that I have been born in this land [Tagore]. (Bajrajogini, Dhaka, p. 4)

## II

Where was the place of the Muslim—or indeed of people who were not Bengalis—in this idyll? Was this Bengali home—that the village was supposed to be—was it without a place for the Muslims? The language of kinship is one of the means by which the Other is absorbed into the idyllic and harmonious village. The Muslims participated in the Hindu festivals and thus were narratively absorbed into the image of the eternal Bengali folk. The boatmen and other Muslims treated their Hindu passengers with civility, and are hence placed within the pleasures of the putative bonds of the village life. Even the market-place is seen as an extension of this harmony. The imputed idyllic nature of this home only emphasizes the inexplicability of communal violence and the sense, of trauma that the violence produced.

There was a woman who belonged to the Muslim community of a distant village. We called her Madhupishi [auntie Madhu]. It was said that she had no family. She would often come to our house. We were apparently all she had—there is no counting of the number of times she would say this. Never did the thought arise in our minds that Madhupishi was Muslim. She would often bring for us



presents from her house or fruits and herbs from the field. We would receive them with eagerness and joy. Not only this. A group of Bihari people, villagers from Bihar ... had become people of this village, sharing our soul.... Are they still there in my village?... In our childhood we noticed that the Muslims' joy at Durga Puja was not any less than ours. As in the Hindu households, new clothes would be bought in their houses too. Muslim women would go from one neighbourhood to another to see the images [of Durga]. (Shabhar, Dhaka, pp. 8, 13)

The moment the college closed for the summer vacation, my mind would be restless to go to the village. Barisal is full of waterways. When would the steamer arrive at the Gaurnadi station?—with what anticipation I would look forward to it. As soon as I reached the ghat, Shonamaddi, the [Muslim] boatman, would smile his ever-familiar smile and say, 'Master, so you have arrived? Come, I have brought my boat. Of course, I knew that you would come today!' (Chandshi, Barisal, pp. 131-2)

The Goddess Kali was a live goddess in this region. People used to come from many distant villages to worship [her] ... for fulfilment of their desires. I have seen Muslim brothers make pledges [to the goddess] with folded hands.... I cannot recall seeing an instance of devotion to Kali that was so independent of caste or religion. (Shonarang, Dhaka, p. 58)

'Babu, so you have come back to the village?', asks the Muslim peasant out of an ordinary sense of etiquette.... A strong pungent smell assails my nostrils as I approach the house of Syed Munshi. He works both as a kaviraj [an ayurvedic doctor] and as a teacher.... He got calls whenever anything happened to children in our village. There was no demand for 'visits' [fees] but often he would receive [gifts of] home-grown fruits and vegetables. Even today I consider them the closest of my relatives. For so long we Hindus and Muslims have lived together like brothers—we have always felt a strong connection with everybody.... But today? (Dakatia, Khulna, p. 258)

In this idyllic home it is the Muslim of the Muslim League who erupts as a figure of enigma, as a complete rupture from the past, a modernist dream of 'junking the past' gone completely mad, a discordant image on a canvas of harmony. The following description of a Muslim man called Yaad Ali is typical.

They used to build the image of the goddess on our chandimandap [the courtyard of a well-to-do Hindu household used for communal worship]. Close to the time of the pujas, three potters would be at work late into the night, working by the light of lanterns. Until the time they were overwhelmed by sleep, a crowd of children ... would sit there making many demands [on the potters]: 'Brother Jogen, could you please paint my old doll?... My horse has a broken leg, Brother Jogen, could you please mend it?' 'You children, don't talk when it is time for work!'—Yaad Ali would scold the children from the other side of the courtyard.... 'Don't you listen to these rascals Mr Pal, concentrate on painting, after all, this

is all god's work,' Yaad Ali would advise Jogen. But even before we left the village, we noticed that Yaad had changed. He is a leader of the Ansars now. He would not even say the name of a Hindu god, he now explains Islam beautifully! (Kherupara, Dhaka, pp. 27-8)

The story of Yaad's transformation into an activist Muslim and the utter incomprehensibility of that phenomenon to the authors of the essays of *Chhere asha gram* give us a clue to the problem of this discourse of value within which the Hindu authors sought to place their Muslim brothers. These essays, being instances of public memory, eschew the low language of prejudice and produce instead a language of cultural value. The home that the Hindu refugee has lost is meant to be more than his home alone; it is the home of the Bengali nationality, the village in which in the 1880s nationalist writers had found the heart of Bengal. But in doing this they illustrate a fundamental problem in the history of modern Bengali nationality, the fact that this nationalist construction of 'home' was a Hindu home. It is not that the Muslims did not share any of this language—after all, the national anthem of Bangladesh is a song of Tagore's that powerfully expresses the nostalgia I have discussed. The point is rather that for all of their talk of harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims, there is not a single sentence in the memories described in *Chhere asha gram* on how Islamic ideas of the sacred might have been of value to the Muslims in creating their own idea of a homeland or indeed how they might have helped create a sense of home for Bengalis as a whole. The Muslims did not do it, but nor did the Hindus. There are passages here that even saw—at a time when the Muslims of East Bengal would have been savouring their new-found independence (not always nicely)—Eastern Bengal as dead without a vibrant community of Hindus:

The villages, markets, settlements of East Bengal are today speechless and without life, their consciousness wiped out by the horrors of the end of time [kalpanta: the measure of a day in the life of the supreme Hindu god, Brahma]. In that land of 'thirteen festivals in twelve months' [a Hindu-Bengali saying], no conchshell is blown marking the advent of the darkness of evening, no ululation in the hesitant voice of the housewife is to be heard on Thursday evenings, the time for the worship of [the goddess] Lakshmi. The *ektara* [a musical instrument] is silent at the gatherings of the Vaisnavas, the string of the *gobijantra* [an instrument played by hauls] has perhaps acquired rust, while mice and cockroaches have probably built their worlds cutting into the leather of the drums of devotees of Harisabha [meeting-place for Hindu devotional singing] (Kherupara, Dhaka, p. 22)

In other words, without the sense of a Hindu home, East Bengal is simply reduced to an eerie emptiness!

This is where Chhere asha gram leaves us, with the central problem of the history of Hindu Bengali nationality. Hindu nationalism had created a sense of home that combined sacredness with beauty. This sacred was not intolerant of the Muslim. The Muslim Bengali had a place created through the idea of kinship. But the home was Hindu in which the non-Muslim League Muslim was a valued guest. Its sense of the sacred was constructed here through an idiom that was recognizably Hindu. What had never been thought about was how the Hindu might live in a home that embodied the Islamic sacred. It is in this sense that what spoke in public life of value also spoke, ultimately, of prejudice. In looking on the Bengali Muslim's ethnic hatred as something inherently inexplicable, their own variety of prejudice is what the essays in *Chhere asha gram* refuse to understand.

## NOTES

1. Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency During Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 April 1993; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 'Recovery, Rupture, Resistance—Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 April 1993; Veena Das, *Critical Events: Moments in the Life of the Nation* (Delhi, 1994); Gyan Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness' in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds). *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 8 (Delhi, 1994); Anne Hardgrove, 'South Asian Women's Communal Identities', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 September 1995.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in his *Untimely Meditations*, R.J. Hollingdale (trans.), (Cambridge 1989), pp 57-124.
3. Dakshinaranjan Basu (comp. and ed.), *Chhere asha gram* (Calcutta, 1975). I am grateful to my friend Gautam Bhadra for drawing my attention to Chhere asha gram and for lending me his copy of it. I am grateful to him, Anthony Low and Anne Hardgrove for helpful discussions of the issues raised here.
4. Ahmad Kamal, 'The Decline of the Muslim League in East Pakistan, 1947-1954' (Ph.D thesis, Australian National University, 1989), ch. 1; Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict* (Berkeley, 1994).
5. See Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men* (Calcutta, 1990).
6. The names in brackets at the end of each quotation refer to the village and the district respectively. The page reference is given at the very end.
7. P.K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*.
8. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1899) (Delhi, 1986).
9. See the discussion in Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago, 1977), p. 7.
10. Chhere asha gram, p. 30 (Dhamgar village, Dhaka district).
11. The italicized lines bear a literary allusion. They quote a well-known line from a nationalist poem on Bengal written by Satyendranath Datta.
12. I have discussed this question in more detail in a forthcoming essay, 'Nostalgia, Epiphany and the Cultural Training of the Senses' (unpublished). See also my 'Afterword: Revisiting the Modernity/Tradition Binary', in Stephen Vlastos (ed.), *Japan and the Invention of Tradition* (forthcoming).

13. Girijasankar Raychaudhuri, *Bangla charit granthe Sri Chaitanya* (Calcutta 1949) p. 89.
14. See S.N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Myth and History* (Calcutta, 1978).
15. This text is discussed in my *The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal*, in Arnold and Hardiman (eds) *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 8 (Delhi, 1994).
16. Dinabandhu Mitra, 'Sadhabar Ekadashi', in Kshetra Gupta (ed.), *Dinabandhu rachanabali* [Collected Works of Dinabandhu (Calcutta, 1967), p. 136.
17. Bhanu Banerjee made his first comic recording using bangal accent in 1941. Personal communication from his son Pinaki Banerjee.
18. See Tagore's essays on 'Loka Sahitya' (Folk literature), in *Rabindrarachanabali* (Calcutta, 1961), vol. 13, pp. 663-724.
19. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Chhinnapatrbali', in *Rabindrarachanabali* (Calcutta 1961) vol. 11. p. 90.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
22. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand. Great Anarch.* India: 1921-1952 (London 1987), pp. 205, 207-8.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.
24. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, *Pollisamaj in Saratsahitya samagra* (Calcutta 1987), vol. 1, pp. 137-84.
25. See the discussion in Clinton B. Seely, *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das* (Newark, 1990), pp. 89-90.
26. Chatterjee quoted in Taraknath Ghosh, *Jibaner panchalikal bibhutibhushan* (Calcutta, 1984), p. 38. It goes to the credit of the filmmaker Satyajit Ray that he could convey a sense of the generic Bengali village, essentially literary and linguistic construction, through the visual medium.
27. Tagore. 'Chhinnapatrbali', p. 82. See also elsewhere in this book.
28. N.C. Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand*, pp. 208-9.