

The testimonies of the third generation of families, who migrated from West to East, after the 1947 Partition, embraced both regions of Bihar and West Bengal. This has lent itself to a multilayered and complex experience-sharing that has given us tremendous insight to the social and political realities of the time and region.

The inherited memories are of 4 male and 6 female subjects and hence the gendered perspective has been apparent. Below are some of the main points which stand out in these testimonies.

- Forced Migration perpetrated by Violence – Patna Riots, Kolkata Riots
- Economic opportunities and its actualization
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- Formation of new identity politics: Indian, Pakistan, Bengali, Bihari
- Gendered perceptions
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Forced Migration perpetrated by Violence: The Patna Riots and Kolkata Riots

Political violence appeared in these testimonies mostly in the form of two major events, known as Patna Riots and the Kolkata Riots. The memorialization of violence in the testimonies is both direct as well as indirect. Some of the memories passed down to the next generations were quite graphic in their description talking of ‘rows of dead bodies which one had to pass by as one fled to safety’. Others spoke more of the terror that reigned which caused a general feeling of dread and fear to seep into every household whether they were directly attacked or not.

Memories passed onto the third generation spoke of the hatred that became suddenly imminent between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, shocked the Muslim households who had been living in peace and harmony with their neighbors for so long. Some were also deeply entrenched in the Indian body politics and yet the violence made them suddenly feel estranged from the society they were raised in, so much so that their sense of belonging became ruptured and they took the difficult option to leave. Those who did leave however did not only remember the hateful incidents, they also related stories of how they were saved by Hindu neighbors who locked them up in their puja ghars, the last place that fanatic Hindus would think of looking. They also passed down to the next generation the concerns they felt towards their old school mates, as did their school mates in the letters they exchanged after Partition.

Economic opportunities and its actualization

In the Bengal border, forced migration was not the only way that people left for East Pakistan. The situation often compelled families to take the option that was given to service workers. This meant that many of people who came to East Pakistan took the option to switch their jobs to the new state of Pakistan keeping intact their posts and salaries. Although this was a lucrative offer, in practice the process was far from being smooth and as people related, full of struggles. Many were made to travel in rail wagons, and as no housing was prepared for them yet, they had to spend weeks living in the wagons, till a living space was found for them. Others arriving at the Chittagong port by ship were taken all over the country in all kind of postings, till they got the one that was considered equivalent to the one they held in their country of origin. Many found difficulties in adapting to the conditions of work in the new country as both infrastructure and technology were less developed here compared to West Bengal.

Dispossession – 1947 and aftermath: processes and impact

Partitions in the sub-continent have not only been marked by actual violence but also by dispossession of a middle-class who has been estranged from their ancestral property. Many left behind their ancestral homes to look for security and a new life in a state that they did not feel any belonging to, at least not initially. Families too were scattered. Those who came from Bihar found one brother going to West Pakistan, some remaining in India and others coming and settling in East Pakistan. As the open border gradually became restrictive, there was no going back. Many had not returned to see their relations for a long time, many in the third generation has never been there. Memories of the good times were often passed down to the next generations, but the struggles they had to undergo were hard and in many cases they were stripped of their dignity. Those who owned land in the homeland found themselves selling boiled eggs for their living. The parity of income which was promised to those who took the option, did not always work out in the new social circumstances.

Dispossession – 1971 and aftermath: processes and impact

The testimonies of the third generation of migrants bear evidence to the fact that there was more than one partition that created havoc in the lives of several generations of migrants from Bihar as well as from West Bengal. The second partition which also resulted in dispossession of property in many families especially those from Bihar was the Liberation War of 1971 which brought about the new state of Bangladesh carved out of the territory that was formerly East Pakistan. The War was fraught with extreme violence of genocidal proportion and hence left a whole trail of cumulative violence behind it. The new state based on Bengali nationalism appropriated the property owned by West Pakistanis who fled to Pakistan as well as those owned by Biharis sometimes indiscriminately regardless of whether they supported the Pakistanis or not.

What affected many people was not the war itself, but that in the aftermath of the war the way in which their own neighbors could come and take away their possessions straight from their homes; possessions which had a sentimental value like a dolls house, or a favorite chair and without a blink of an eye. It is such social behavior that left deep grudges in the memories of a generation who through successive story-telling passed it onto the next, something that was not uncommon in other dispossessed communities in Bengal. It was also the reason why many Biharis had to leave the comfort of their own homes and congregate together in camps set up for them as transition points for repatriation to Pakistan. These camps in the long run became a haven for security as it became more and apparent that Pakistan would not take any more than the first few batches. In this way the migrants from Bihar had their sense of belonging twice ruptured; first in 1947 when they lost their land of their birthplace and second in 1971 when they lost the allegiance they felt to the country they migrated to. In this way they could be identified as stateless. The third generation struggled with this identity and found a way to overcome it through fighting for their citizenship rights in court and gaining it.

Formation of new identity politics: Indian, Pakistan, Bengali, Bihari

The people of Bengal had to experience incomparable bouts of identity politics from the 40s onward. First, the movement for a Pakistan which was to be a safe haven for Muslims and then to the Language Movement for Bengalis that later matured into the movement for an Independent state. People residing within this region found themselves being hurtled from one nationality to the other within a span of 4 decades: from British Indian to Pakistani to Bangladeshi. This has wreaked havoc in the personal lives of individuals and families, especially those who had to migrate due to such divides. It is precisely for this reason that we find among third generation testimonies of struggles and pains of adjusting to new realities.

Those who migrated from Bihar and West Bengal were torn asunder by their estrangement from the place of their birth. In addition from Indians they had to get used to be called Pakistanis. When it came to living a life after the independence of Bangladesh, both communities interrogated their change of identity. Those from Bihar started to call themselves Indians by origin, while many from West Bengal asked why Bengalis have to be divided into Bengalis and Bangladeshis. As far as they were concerned they were happy when Bengalis were considered to be by just one group, whether from West or East.

Gendered perceptions

Testimonies of third generation male and female reflected the gendered dimension of remembering.. Women often remembered the more emotive aspects of loss, of land or home. For some it was the loss of her favorite doll house, others remembered the fight she had to put up with authorities to own a piece of land which was rightly hers but which the authorities denied her because the signature was in Urdu. When family members grumbled that the process of recovery of the land was way too demanding and expensive, she insisted that it was for the memory of her lost husband.

Women's stories also reflected on the impact that the Partition has had on the daily lifestyle and lived realities of families. Women who came from Bihar would often object to taking marriage of their children to Bengali families, to the extent that it was forbidden territory during the life span of the mother. Those who did get married across the cultural divide had to live separate lives initially until the older generation gave social acceptance. Despite this, women expressed curiosity about their new lives and circumstances. Enjoying the rural scene in Bengal, experimenting with a different cuisine, speaking different languages within the same family formed a nexus from which a new form of cosmopolitanism could also blossom.

Cultural transformation, integration

The perspectives of the third generation was expressed most stridently when they spoke of their integration with their contemporary setting. They linked first and foremost to the land of their birth and the culture it offered them, and that meant Bangladesh. Despite linguistic and cultural divides they participated in Bengali events like celebration of the Bengali New Year. Though they sometimes called themselves Indian by origin, but not by citizenship and felt strongly about the division of their lives by multiple Partitions, they felt the estrangement on their first visit to India and came to realize that there was no place like "home", i.e. their birthplace! They laughed that it has taken them so long to realize that! Yet on reflection they still feel that they have the right to know and link up with the families that live across the borders. One of the interviewees said that the decision to migrate was often taken suddenly, without understanding what it would mean for future generation. One of the things she wanted to learn from this was not to replicate those situations or conditions in life where one is forced to take such decisions that would affect ones family negatively for generations to come. But to speak out against those forces which makes you take such decisions. This is a lesson she would like to impart to her children.