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# EXPERIENCE OF EAST BENGALI REFUGEES ON PARTITION: UNFOLDING LIMINALITY THROUGH NARRATIVES

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**Abstract:**

The term 'liminality'-- derived from the Latin word *Limen* meaning a threshold, introduced by Arnold Van Gennep in the context of analyzing rituals in small-scale societies, and theorized by Victor Turner in the late 1960s, has gained popularity in the field of contemporary refugee studies and has been considered by various scholars to be one of the distinct characteristics of the diasporas. On the backdrop of the historical partition of the Indian subcontinent and consequent mass migration, present work tries to understand how the notion of class-status-power-authority and especially gender played crucial roles to create the disjuncture into the habitual way of being of the East Bengali Hindu people during and aftermath of the partition. These East Bengali Hindus fled their homeland, became refugees in the newly formed province of West Bengal in India, and continued thereafter, living through an almost life-long passage, which remained betwixt and between 'what they had been' and 'what they came to be'. Based on the fieldwork experiences of the author in a refugee settlement of West Bengal, this article tries to analyze refugee accounts on dislocation to shed light on how life in limbo challenged the agency of the refugees pushing them into a stage of continuous contestation and negotiation; and thereby started for them the process of shaping and reshaping their way-of- being, and structuring and restructuring of 'self' and identity.

## 1.0. Introduction

The term 'liminality' was introduced by Arnold Van Gennep (1960/1908) in his *The Rites de Passage*, while describing rituals in small-scale societies. In the late 1960s, Victor Turner(1967) also presented a theory of "liminality," to analyze rites of passage within the socio-cultural system of tribal groups. He used the phrase "betwixt and between" to describe the quintessential spirit of the stage. Referring

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especially to the ritual of *rites de passage*, Turner (1967) suggests that it involves some changes to the participants, especially their social status. In this ritual, the first phase happens to be the phase of separation that comprises symbolic performance signifying the disconnection of the participant...from his/her previous stage of life or status in the social structure (Turner 1969: 80). Their status thus becomes liminal. The vicinity inside which the transition unfolds is an “in-between” place that bridges “what is” and “what can or will be” (1981:159)-a symbolic area that has few or none of the attributes of [the participant’s] past or coming position in the social order (1974:232). Turner (1970) later concentrated on the second segment, i.e., transitional or liminal stage. He argued that the liminal stage is structurally, if not physically, invisible. Liminality is, in fact, both the source and antithesis of structural assertions and ‘a realm of pure possibility’ when new ideas may originate, and new relations may arise (Turner 1970: 97). The strength of Turner’s view of liminality is its emphasis on ambiguity and possibility. It is a state in life from which individuals can develop new statuses and forge new identities. It focuses less on constraints and cultural imperatives. According to Gennep, liminal rites (or transition rites) involves the formation of a *tabula rasa*, through the deletion of previously customary forms and limits. The destructive nature of this rite allows for considerable changes to be made to the identity of the person being initiated. This second phase (when the shift occurs) implies the true movement through the passage/ threshold that signifies the limit between two phases, and the term “liminality” was introduced in order to characterize this passage (Szakolczai 2009:141-48). Thomassen (2006: 322) argues that in such a liminal situation, the participants live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the prevalent social order through a sequence of rituals that often entail acts of twinge: the participants come to feel nameless, spatiotemporally dislocated and socially unstructured. In this sense, liminal periods are destructive as well as constructive (Thomassen 2006:322), because the seminal experiences during liminality will prepare the participant (and his/her group) to occupy a new social role or status, made public during the reintegration rituals, i.e., the final phase of the ritual.

In this article, I would like to use the term ‘liminality’, which has been considered to be one of the distinct characteristics of the diasporas by various scholars (Dam, Eyles 2012; Barkley 2011), in order to analyze the experience of East Bengali Hindu refugees, who were the victims of forced migration during and aftermath of the historical partition of the Indian sub-continent. As stated earlier, the concept of liminality has been used by various scholars in describing, analyzing, and understanding the experience, behaviour, and identity formation of the refugees. The liminal stage, i.e., the stage of formative experiences, which forges new identities on individuals, is never simple. As Rosaldo (1993) remarks, there is a struggle over who or what has narrative power in liminal states. Some groups may not challenge the power of assimilation and may well use dimensions of the pre-liminal stage or specific phenomena during liminality to forge identities. These past and contemporary strategies and institutions may help define the self

as non-transitional and not dangerous. Yet as Thorat (2010) argues, migrants must negotiate their identities in an ambivalent cultural space. Cultural boundaries are always in a situation of unrest. This unrest/flux – the in-between spaces (Bhabha 2004) – leads to the constant creation and re-creation of cultural meaning, potentially made more intense by relocation through migration.

## **2.0. Objective, rationale, locale and methods adopted**

In this article, I intend to understand and analyze how the concept of liminality- a situation of being at the threshold, stepping outside of which will be transgression and stepping inside is somehow prohibited-hovers and often remains at the core of the narratives of the East Bengali Hindu refugees about their experiences starting from dislocation in the homeland, the crossing of the border, and continuing through out their initial days as refugees in the land of West Bengal. I intend to explore some of the experiences of refugeehood as narrated by some East Bengali Hindu refugees<sup>3</sup>, who had lived through the partition, and are now spending days in Deshapriya Nagar Colony, one of the oldest squatters' colonies of north 24 Parganas in West Bengal. With a particular focus on the narratives relating to dislocation, my aim is here to understand the 'loss' and the 'trauma' that are embedded within the oral accounts and memories. I want to analyze the refugee narratives in order to understand how this sense of loss, the fear and anxiety, individual desires and collective fantasies (Sarkar 2009: 10), all together in their multifarious verbal and corporeal expressions, constitute nothing short of a psycho-social matrix- a structure of attitudes and sentiments; which mark the emotional ground of partition discourse as a critical and constitutive element of history. In this course, I also intend to understand how the notion of class-status-power-authority and especially gender played crucial roles to create the disjuncture into the habitual way of being of these East Bengali people, who therefore and thereafter continued living through an almost life-long passage, which is 'betwixt and between' what they had been and what they have come to be.

Refugee issues are never new topics of research in contemporary social science arena; a scholastic criticism against the official account of partition of Indian subcontinent and consequent forced migration entails a long academic tradition as well. Analyzing refugee narratives in light of the concept of liminality, however, is gaining popularity among social science researchers studying forced migration, refugeehood, lives in exile, asylum processes and practices etc. Studying refugee accounts from the perspective of liminality vividly opens up the gap between the official history of partition and everyday experiences of those, who lived through partition; and thus emphasizes the importance and scope of narrative analysis as a method of studying refugeehood in order to bridge the essential gap- epistemological and ontological- in existing body of knowledge. An in-depth analysis of liminality inherent in refugee accounts, broadens the scope of

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<sup>3</sup>All the names of the respondents are fictitious to stand by the ethics of confidentiality.

unfolding the wider psycho-social matrix of a community, or communities in interaction in a particular space - each intersection of grids in the matrix representing uniqueness in terms of the variables interacting in different quantity, degree of intensity and dimension and thus producing enormous heterogeneity. It thereby serves as a tool for challenging the state produced popular notion of refugees as a homogeneous category of hapless victims, who always remain at the receiving end.

Before proceeding to analyze refugee narratives that I could collect from the field, it is necessary to say a few words about the selection of field and methods adopted for the study. The data for the present study were gathered during the period when I was engaged in fieldwork for my Ph.D. research project. After visiting several refugee settlements under the jurisdiction of Kamarhati Municipality in North 24 Parganas, meeting and interviewing people there, I finally chose Deshapriya Nagar Refugee Settlement or Deshapriya Nagar Refugee Colony, as it is popularly known in the locality, as the field for the present research study. The colony comprises a vast area of land that measures around 157 acres and falls under the jurisdiction of Kamarhati Municipality. In this colony, I found several first-generation refugees (those who were at least at 5 years of age while fleeing from their homeland), who were of prime interest to me. The colony bore all the features that could be associated with a refugee settlement, i.e., forcible occupation of land, struggle against eviction effort, and the everyday struggle of the refugee settlers for maintaining livelihood in a new land replete with oddities. Third, access to the colony people was easier for me than other colonies as I had many friends and relatives there; and I knew several people who were in many ways related to the colony people. For a detailed and in-depth understanding of the problem, I had to build up a kind of relationship with the field and the respondents so that they could open up without hesitation. This needed a kind of style/ practice very much similar to that of ethnographic fieldwork. Considerable time had been spent with people in the field. I had to spend sufficient time with the colony people talking to them about their experiences, activities, emotions, and feelings through long and repeated slots of qualitative interview sessions. The accounts of the settlers were the important sources for the present research study.

The original fieldwork was done in two phases. In the first phase, I adopted the method of sample survey, judgemental or purposive sampling technique, and qualitative interviewing with the aid of unstructured schedule as the tool of data collection. In this stage, I classified the population primarily on the basis of generation and gender. The first generation of refugees were those, who had direct experiences of crossing the border and were at an age not less than five years. The second generation of refugees were the off-springs of the first generation refugees. The third generation consisted of the off-springs of the second generation refugees. Then each generation of refugees were classified by their gender (effort was made to keep the gender representation almost proportionate for each generation). However, my primary interest in this study was on the direct experiences of the refugee people, and thereby on the first generation refugees, who numbered one

hundred and fifty four (seventy nine male respondents and seventy five female respondents) in my sample. Present work is based on the data collected from the first generation refugee respondents. These first phase interviews helped me to select several cases of interest (thirty cases from the first generation refugees) pertaining to my study. Later, i.e., in the second phase of fieldwork, these selected cases were followed up more extensively with qualitative interviews yielding unique life narratives of the respondents. For this phase of interviewing I prepared one interview guide (the list of topics to be asked) rather than an interview schedule. Most of the respondents in this phase were interviewed severally. As my intention was to know more about respondents' personal experiences, I used to put forth such questions that would help people tell their stories.

### **3.0. Narratives of Dislocation: unfolding ambivalence and liminality**

Partition existed as the dominant reference in refugees' accounts of displacement. Like Chatterjee (2002: 10), I also found that the answer to the question, "why did you leave your homeland?" invariably started with the term "*Deshbhag*" (a division of homeland or partition) for every refugee respondent; and then came other factors like a riot, fear, loot etc. by the Muslims. Refugees' accounts on communal violence revealed variations in the extent of aversion to the other community. This ranged from emotional ambivalence to serious and generalized negative attitudes. However, the majority of the respondents were found to mention that 'all Muslims were not bad', and this indicated the East Bengali refugees' tendencies to distinguish between the 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims'. Often I found them recalling their Muslim neighbours, friends, or their subjects, who had offered them shelters, avowed them protection, and helped them to escape during that critical moment of communal turbulence. *Deshbhag* (partition of the homeland) on the purely sectarian (communal) ground, had pushed the East Bengali Hindus towards a liminal space, a place where boundaries between 'my own land' and 'the land of others' dissolved a little. They stood there, on the threshold, getting ready to move across the limits of 'what they had been' into 'what they would be'. It was a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation (Turner 1974), a period of ambiguity, of marginal and transitional state; a space between the world of status that these people had been living and the world of status into which they were being inducted. This spatial liminality in the obvious 'unhappy consciousness' (Kaviraj 1998: title) of the Bengali Hindus percolated to influence the interrelationship of the two communities, whose transactions with and perceptions of each other too fell into a liminal state evoking strain, tension, and anxiety, especially for the Hindus, the minority community, who sensed grave marginality of their being in an Islam-dominated state.

In the light of the above analysis, one can interpret the account of Amiya Kumar Majumder, a septuagenarian, living in Deshapriya Nagar for more than fifty-five years, who said,

... My father was a doctor in Aamgram. ... Muslims lived in our village, and most of them were like our subjects. ... My father was respected by all in the village. ..In our village, we did not see anything that could make us afraid of the future. ... But one day, we heard that the night before a meeting was held in the house of Rahamat Ali, a wealthy Muslim of the locality. People from outside the village took part in the meeting. .... Two days later, my father suddenly rushed to the in-house from his dispensary with a grave face. He called his brothers and said, "We can't stay here. We should leave the place as soon as possible if we want to keep our honour." ... My father used to sit on a wooden cot in the *baitthakkhana* (visitors' room in outhouse); and the patients used to sit on the wooden benches placed near the cot. He said, "Today Rahamat came....He came straight to my cot and sat on it. With a smile, he said, "*Daktarkotta* ('*kotta*' is a colloquial Bengali term for '*Karta*', meaning 'the master; and *Daktaris* a colloquial Bengali term meaning the doctor, the physician) is everything all right? The time is not good. Come to see you. Now we are the brothers. You've nothing to worry. We'll keep care of your family, women, children." My father said, "Rahamat was grinning at me! Why did he say those words? Today he sat on my cot, tomorrow they will enter the in-house." And after this, my father left the village with the whole family within the next two or three days. We had no enemies, no rivalry with anybody in the village. ... (Respondent Statement 1, 06 July 2009, Interviewed by author)

The above account reveals East Bengali Hindus' concern for *maan* (Chatterjee 2002: 13-20) i.e., honour that led a majority of them to flee towards West Bengal. But it also denotes the kind of habitus that the high caste and middle-class or upper-middle-class Hindus had been used to in the eastern part of undivided Bengal. They possessed landed property, had received some education and enjoyed a masterly status in the village, whereas the majority of the Muslims were poor landless people who survived on the patronage of the wealthy Hindu families. Amiya Kumar Majumdar's father served the village as a self-taught medical person. The lack of medical infrastructure in the villages of East Bengal rendered him the status of a 'saviour' among the poor masses. The mutual love and respect between the two religious communities in the village, as found in the above account, was based on a master-servant/subject relationship. From generations, these wealthy Hindus had perceived the structure of village society in East Bengal as a pyramidal form, where they were positioned at the apex; and where the Muslims were treated as 'inferiors', 'polluted', and sanctioned to maintain a safe distance from them. But a change had been ensuing with the hint of partition in this familiar habitus of the East Bengali propertied Hindus. This change was severe in some places, but in the countryside of eastern Bengal the change had a trickling down effect and took time to become a stark reality. Hence in the account of this respondent, we find the family initially feeling quite comfortable with the habitus at hand. But Rahamat Ali's apparently harmless positional shift from the bench to the cot was interpreted as a symbol of intrusion, or audacious crossing of the stigmatized border between the two communities and that created a turmoil in the so long perceived and interacted upon habitus, which now resulted in the dislocation of the Hindu family. Rahamat Ali's seemingly venom-less words created fear in the family. Foucault (1992, as cited by Santos 2009: 103-17) says, in any society, the discourse is built in a process that configures the struggle for power. The sedimentation of positions in the social hierarchy is consolidated at the

discourse level. The speech becomes an object of control through the explicit and well-known proceedings of interdiction on it, so as to ensure that it never implicates the subversion of power positions. So, discourse becomes a constitutive element at the social construction of reality (Volter 2003, as cited by Santos 2009: 103-17). Foucault's approach seems to indicate that individuals stay somehow captured by an interpretation conditioned by exclusion processes operated in a society (Foucault 1992, as cited by Santos 2009: 103-17), to which they submit inexorably. The habitus that the East Bengali Hindus, especially the upper-caste, and middle-class Hindus could locate themselves in was as Chakrabarty (1995) says, essentially Hindu in content, which was not intolerant of the Muslims, but the Muslims were included within the fold through the idea of kingship. As Chakrabarty (1995: 129) says, in undivided Bengal, the Hindu habitus did include the Muslims as their valued guest, but only the non-Muslim League Muslims, that is, the Muslim who did not demand Pakistan. They could never think of the situation just reversed—a situation where the Hindu might live in a home that embodied the Islamic sacred. A kind of deafness to the need, demand, and voices of the 'others' was very much present in the relationship between the two communities. Hence it was this Hindu-centred habitus, which was the target of the said RahamatAli/s to distort.

But *Amiya-babu* (the British used to refer to the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* as *babu*, which later came to be used after the names of a Bengali gentleman to express general respect and honour) continued,

Even now, I cannot understand how and why they could hurt us. ... Sometimes often I wonder whether my father read too much into Rahamat Ali's behaviour. ... I still can see Jabber *chacha* (uncle) weeping incessantly holding the feet of my father when we were leaving. (Respondent Statement 2, 06 July 2009, Interviewed by author)

*Amiya-babu's* family, like other Hindu *bhadralok*(gentleman) people of East Pakistan, was put into a liminal situation, where margins between "my homeland" and "the land of the Muslims" dissolved a little, and standing on the threshold, passing through a phase of separation and reincorporation, they were suffering from a kind of "suspicion, uncertainty and cognitive paranoia about the identity of the ethnic enemy" (Appadurai 1998: 913). The news and large scale rumours of riot, abduction, brutal atrocities on Hindus by the Muslim fanatics imploded (Appadurai 1996: 149-57) the otherwise peaceful locality of *Amiya-babu's* native village in East Bengal and created an undercurrent of tension and uncertainty among the Hindu families. Hence, a little breach of the norm in Rahamat Ali's behaviour (as depicted in *Amiya-babu's* account) was interpreted as the premonition of violence. But there were also people like Jabbar Ali, who were comfortably included in the normative world of these Hindu *bhadralok* people, who thereby further suffered the liminal position, an emotional ambivalence, a crisis of uncertainty while describing their experience about and with the "other community" in their homeland. In reality, the notion of Hindu-Muslim fraternity, closeness, and intimacy in undivided Bengal was based on the unquestioned

acceptance of the Hindu 'sacredness', which seemed to these East Bengali Hindu people as obligatory for the Muslims to accept and maintain. The Islamic sacredness was never a part of the Hindu's habitus. When this uncontested 'superiority' of the Hindus in their homeland faced opposition from the once perceived inferiors, they experienced dislocation. There were obviously people like Jabbar (as we find in the account of Amiya Kumar Majumder), who survived by offering labour to Hindu households and became an intricate part of their master's habitus. These poor East Pakistani Muslims, being enmeshed in their own struggle for a diurnal living, had the least scope of questioning their position within that habitus. These people also sensed a colossal change in their habitus as their masters/ patrons left the homeland. The East Bengali Hindus did not pay heed to the other kind of Muslims, the kind of the Rahamat/s (found in the account of Amiya Kumar Majumder), who had accumulated grievances against the all-pervading authority and superiority of the Hindus. They took partition to be the opportunity to alter their position in society by breaching traditional behavioural norms or by harassing the Hindus. Therefore, the East Bengali Hindu refugees like *Amiya-babu*, fell into the trap of liminality- an 'in-between' space or situation, a metaphoric realm where ideas and concepts (political, cultural, social or otherwise) were in constant states of contestation and negotiation -choosing between Jabbars' tears and Rahamats' hit- while they recollected their experience about the division of their homeland.

Amarendranath Dutta, an old man in his mid-seventies, was narrating why their family had left their homeland in Barishal:

The year was 1950. In our village we the Hindus and Muslims were living peacefully together till then. Most of the Muslim men used to work in our land. ....The Muslim folks assured us that they would even stake their own lives to protect us if a problem arose. ... One day a rumour broke out that Huqsahib(AbulKashemFazlulHuq, popularly known as *Sher-e-Bangla*) had been butchered. Tension spread. There was every possibility of attack from the outside of the villages. Our Muslim folk also got frightened. They pleaded my father with tears in their eyes to leave the land.They said, "many unknown faces are seen in the village. ..The place is not safe anymore. We have eaten salt from you; hence we cannot be traitors....." They helped us to cross the river safely and reach the town in the dark of that very night. (Respondent Statement 3, 01 October 2010, Interviewed by author)

The claimed 'peaceful living' in *Amar-babu's* account in his native village after partition, is, as I see it, itself a product of liminality on the part of the Hindu family. A small village could never escape the pangs of transition induced by partition in the very structure of the state. *Amar-babu's* family was also its natural prey, which is revealed by the fact that they had to reincorporate or reconstruct a safety structure, which they never needed before. The temporality of the said 'safety-construction' was proved by the fact that a single rumour had shaken it, and the family escaped at the dark of the night. Naturally, the Muslim people, who helped the family to escape, constituted the 'good Muslims' for *Amar-babu* and the said 'goons', who caused fear, constituted the 'bad Muslims'. This conceptualization of good and bad Muslims sometimes took a one-sided notion where gratitude for

Muslim saviours was erased and a hegemonic discourse about 'bad Muslims' took an all-encompassing dominance in the East Bengali respondents' memories (Chatterjee, 2002:8). Further, the feeling of these refugees towards their Muslim saviours also stands in-between the feeling of gratitude and a sense of right as 'payment for the debt of salt'. Gratitude is admitted to a person of equal status. For the East Bengali Hindu *bhadralok*, a Muslim subject had been a debtor who stood so low in the social hierarchy that he hardly remained worthy of such thankfulness, and his beneficial act was likely to be perceived in terms of repayment of the debt.

I had respondents whose narratives about displacement revealed severe hatred against the Muslims, the alleged perpetrators of violence against the Hindus.

How much blood- clotted on the roads, often flowed down the earth! So many corps-mutilated, parts of the human body spread here and there. People are running in fear-screaming! The Khan *Senas*(the Pakistani Army) were the real Devils. They used to shoot at the Hindu folk, any time they wished. They used to set on fire the Hindu houses, snatched the women... (Respondent Statement 4, 23 January 2010, Interviewed by author)

In such expressions of anger and aversion against the other community, I found another dimension of difference incorporated, i.e., of mother tongue. In mention of "Khan *Senas*", i.e., the Urdu-speaking Pakistani army, as the heinous perpetrators of violence, or in saying "they came from outside of our village" or "many unknown faces were seen in the village" etc. there was an effort to distinguish between the non-Muslim League Muslim folks, who were included and were 'comfortable' into their native Hindu-centred habitus and the 'outsider others', who were League-supporters and differed linguistically so as to be found as 'intruders' in their familiar habitus. This construction of 'bad Muslims' and its association with linguistic difference in the memories of my respondents were structured as much by experience as by a hegemonic pro-nationalist discourse about the Pakistan-supporters in Indian national culture. The educated East Bengali Hindus were the active proponents of such discourse because their nationalism at a gross was hurt by the political labeling of 'Pakistan' (the term is also of Urdu origin) on their homeland.

Partition invoked violence was marked particularly by the abduction of and sexual assaults of Hindu women, and it continued to taint the post-partition scenario in Bengal. Women were used as objects of hate campaign against the other community (Bandyopadhyay 1997: 6). All of the respondents in the present study invariably spoke about the sexual torture on women- rape, abduction, mutilation of sex organs and such like, during the periodic communal violence that occurred in East Bengal from 1945 to the 1970s. The life and position of women had witnessed drastic distortion as a consequence of partition. Minati Das, a colony settler, narrated how she, with her two elder sisters, suffered captive lives in their homeland.

My parents stopped us from going to school. My elder sisters were not allowed to step outside the house. In the evening all the lamps were put out in order to pretend that no one lived in the house. We were not even allowed to speak at night. My father was waiting for a passport. It was almost a captive life. I never saw my mother behaving as rudely as she did in those days, especially with my elder sisters, as if they had committed some offense. ... My mother's irritation increased particularly whenever my father had to go outside. Actually, sheer panic changed our lives. (Respondent Statement 5, 08 July 2010, Interviewed by author)

Minati Das's account reveals that women suffered dislocation not simply due to direct use of physical violence by the other community; their experience of violence and thereby dislocation needs wider understanding. Women lost their freedom of movement and had to live a captive life within the four walls in order to hide their existence from the eyes of the Muslim fanatics. This transition also caused women to lose their "living space," the social, material, and psychological centre of their day-to-day lives, and this loss directly had a bearing on their emotional and mental health. Partition also caused a deterioration of the position of young women within the household and society, and consequently lowered the self-esteem of many of the women (Farha and Thompson 2002: 15). The mother's behaviour in the above account seems to reveal a trauma-syndrome arising out of a 'limit-situation' (Martín-Baro: 1994: 109), which refers to those politically repressive events when the individual faces life-threatening situations. The mother's panic for her daughters' sexuality, which was constantly in the trap of 'body politic', and could invite destruction for the whole family, generated the abnormal irritation and harshness in her behaviour towards her daughters. Minati's account reveals that she, along with her sisters, experienced dislocation not directly from the violence commissioned by the Muslims, but through the everyday interactions with their parents (mother).

But there were different stories as well, where women did represent agency, leadership, perseverance, and intelligence, typically considered as possessions of men, to combat the otherwise vacillating situation at hand. Narayan Debnath, another refugee respondent of the colony, was describing his experience enroute towards India.

We walked through the rugged fields in the darkness of the night. ..*Baba*(father) was terribly frightened. But to my surprise, I found my mother to be very strong. *Maa*(mother) was ignorant about the outside world. Upon hearing that the Pakistani army was shooting Hindus indiscriminately, *baba* lost his composure. It was my mother, who, from under her *ghomta* (the veil that the Hindu woman uses to cover her head with sari), started guiding him in a quiet but steady voice, "now take a halt here, and hide in the paddy field. Let them stop. Then we can move further." *Baba* followed her commands. .. From the day we left our home we saw her acting as *Debi Durga*. (Respondent Statement 6, 28 February 2010, Interviewed by author)

Narayan-*babu's* account is portraying a woman as a firm, intelligent, rational person, and having intuitive agency and leadership qualities, which were all associated with men in patriarchy as opposed to the general perception about women's nature being emotional and fearful. The woman was adept in exercising authority over her household matters, in managing and deciding over the

allocation, distribution, and consumption of household resources and responsibilities so as to ensure the smooth functioning of the household. Since all these household duties that she practiced had conformed to the patriarchal notion of women's role, her expertise in the so-called 'masculine' domain was overlooked or hidden under the veil of traditional womanhood. Partition compelled her to extend her role from the private to the public sphere. Despite all its adverse consequences, partition was successful in breaking the barriers between the men's world (the public space) and women's world (the private); and however painful it might be for most of the women, it at least created a scope for them to prove their agency, their potential to fight in the same physical world with men for survival. But Hindu social patriarchy was still not open to the idea of women's equality, let alone women's superiority to men in public life. Hence, I found Narayan-*babu* describing the mother figure in his account as *Debi Durga* (the Hindu Goddess of power, the protector of man from all evils), not as any 'normal' woman, but a woman with super-natural quality that easily could demand subjection of men to her commands. This tendency of myth-making regarding women is very common in partition related history, narratives, accounts, and memoirs, which cruelly seize women off their common agency and potent to lead and fight in the public sphere by attributing mythical '*Devi*' (Goddess) identity to their characters. Here also, I found gender ideology to play its typical role. The refugee men were suffering from a state of limbo, a position 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967) the tradition ordained status of protectors, providers, and bread-earners and their objective situation as a fleeing community- helpless, defenseless, bereft of material resources, jobless and above all perplexed and confused. This further produced in them a fear of their masculinity being stripped of. By unauthorized grabbing of the colony land and development of the settlement, they might have started rebuilding their lost masculinity. In such a situation, acceptance of women as active agents helping the family to survive even in the public space would indicate changing role-relation in society and would have been destructive in their effort at relocating lost masculinity. Therefore, denial of women's role as active, struggling, decision making, rational members or devaluing the presence of common women in the public sphere, were perhaps strategies of the refugee men to help protect their own male identity, to come out of the limbo-position and thereby reorganize the hold of patriarchy.

Santilata Nandy, a septuagenarian refugee respondent, narrated her experience of living in a rented house during the initial stage of their refuge. The landlord was native West Bengali and the women of the landlord family used to humiliate them on whatever occasions found at hand.

I felt so much humiliated as they referred to me as '*bharatebou*' (the married woman of the rented room'). Initially, I used to tolerate everything silently. Who would understand our agony? How would they know what we were and what we had in our *desh*?..They used to say that people living in other's house should feel too ashamed to speak. One day I returned the assault in public, saying, "If we live in rented houses, we pay for it. It is you, who live on our rent." The women from other refugee families also

stood by me. After that day, they used to say, of course, in my absence, that we, the *bangals*, were not only shameless creatures, but had caustic tongues also. (Respondent Statement 7, 07 February 2011, Interviewed by author)

The above account indicates the development of an archetypal agency within refugee women- the agency to face and fight, to unite and fight in order to take control of the situation even with one's back against the wall. Santilata, a modest woman from rural East Bengal, turned out to be a loud-tongued woman, in the course of her struggle to adapt and reconstruct her life in an alien and hostile atmosphere, which perhaps instigated the belligerent mood that the East Bengali refugees are historically associated with. Her position betwixt and between "what we were and what we had in our *desh*" and "what we have become" was evident in her account. But what interested me most was the transition she had gone through and the new status that she evoked, which was not only different but quite the opposite of what a gentle East Bengali Hindu middle-class wife was supposed to have; and the new identity that was created thereby; all of which depicted the essence of liminality.

#### 4.0. Conclusion

The memories of these refugee respondents, their oral accounts, thus, served as the captured reminiscences of the uprooted people, a rich archive of experiences of the displaced. They made us realize how "memory begins where history ends" (Bose 1997:85). The above narratives focus on how partition threw the lives of common people into a space in-between. Not only did they stand at the threshold between 'my own land' and "the land of others", but it also influenced the entire interaction system, the interrelationship of two communities, which stood in-between the feelings of trust and treachery, mutual respect and revulsion, fraternity and enmity. This liminality being perpetuated, constructed and reconstructed in the psycho-social matrix through memory and narratives of common people, did play a part in shaping the future modalities of interactions and interrelation between the two communities living side by side in the nascent state of India, advocating secularism by its constitution. In-depth studies in this aspect may enrich the future researches relating to the often spark of communalism here and there in India and studies relating to inter-ethnic relations in other host nations flooded with refugees during the last few decades. The narratives also focus on how the limit-situation disrupts even the everyday interaction within the family and thus leads to the destruction of previously acknowledged self by inducing heightened desperation, acute humiliation, rupture of previous emotions and trust. This destruction further creates immense possibilities for restructuring the self through the agency of conforming, contesting, and negotiating situations with varying degree and intensity; which forms the identity of refugees either individually or in groups, but in case of the latter, never reduce heterogeneity of the self for individuals. In view of these heterogeneity and agency of refugees, future studies on refugee issues may focus on and challenge the state sponsored refugee policies that largely deal with refugees as a homogeneous category.

Moreover, the refugee narratives displaying how gender as a discourse is constructed and reconstructed in a state of limbo shed light on a relatively less explored area in gender studies. However, it is important to note that the micro-histories of partition are a way to negotiate with the present and past that has been created by the partitioning of the subcontinent. "Once displaced, always displaced"- is the popular imagination and the narratives of these East Bengali men and women served as the proofs of how this was the reality for most of the refugees.

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