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Kallol Gangopadhyay
Assistant Professor,
Department of Bengali,
Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri
College, University of Calcutta,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

A Critique on the Reflections of the Compelling Search for a New Homeland in *Deshbhager Smriti* by Adhir Biswas

Kallol Gangopadhyay

Abstract

It has been sixty seven years since the partition of India in 1947 and our country still toils to regain from the aftermath. Years have been lived with the pangs of Freedom and the incidents have carried its visible toll on suffering millions.

Textual evidences show that the gamut of writings available on Partition refers to the exploitation in the western frontier and very little has been written about happenings in the eastern frontier in India.

This paper attempts to critique on one of the most vivid personal accounts of a refugee writer descending to India from Bangladesh in his book *Deshbhager Smriti* (a series of 4 volumes) written between 2005-2010.

Keywords: Partition, aftermath, homeland, traverse, time, poverty, unsettled, nostalgia.

1. Introduction

1947 witnessed the most disastrous incident in the history of Bengal - Partition. One Bengal divided into two. Even after so many years, writings and stories surrounding one of the world's largest Partitions in history, remains inadequate. And this inadequacy is primarily seen in the case of eastern part of the country, which refers to the Partition of Bengal. Only few memories are found – stray and rare.

Some incidents in its own might get embedded in our minds and traverse time. Partition is one such incident. The aftermath of Partition was too severe. Today those accounted Memoirs of Partition are from people who have lived childhood and youth in their homeland which they have left far behind. And those years are the most valuable for accepting, nurturing, preserving and associating. So relentless 'days, thousand days, birthdays all vibrate time and again in memories ...'.^[1]

2. Recollection

When we look into the spectrum of literature on divided Bengal we see fruitful writings during the first decade of the twenty first century. Adhir Biswas wrote 'Memoirs of Partition' (*Deshbhager Smriti*) during those years. In four slender volumes he pens down a life-sketch of leaving behind his village Darimagura (in district Jessore) and beloved river Nabaganga in 1967. "The village dog which stayed back will roam around as usual the next morning. Playmates will come to know that they have left, when school teacher would hear he would perhaps once say – they left!" (Biswas 1:14). This is how immediately after his mother's death Adhir Biswas leaves behind the reminiscences of Nabaganga and moves towards the Land of River Ganga. When most of life's journey is over, as he has aged from a young boy to his fifties in kolkata, he remembers the little river Nabaganga and his village Darimagura. "Standing in the dark I have opened and closed my clenched fists repeatedly. I desire to call my Mother at least once in my slumber. Now in the dark I only close and open my clenched fists" (4:54). As if desperate to hold back the last straw of the past. But there is little respite in recalling memories and moreover present generation's apathy towards these old accounts warns the author not to repeat forgotten reality. Often the mind goes on a blackout – yet all memories do not get erased, some of it remains and roam around. Then chords of memory are strained again and again as the heart yearns for the song back home-wards.

3. Early accounts

Memories crowd around – some happy, some sad, memories of losing and achieving - his memories wander in and around 1967.

Correspondence:

Kallol Gangopadhyay
Assistant Professor,
Department of Bengali,
Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri
College, University of Calcutta,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

At times we traverse down the lane to his childhood days in Bengali new years day (*Poila baishak*) when his mother used to water the banyan tree in a wet *sari* after her bath, the sound of drums (*Dhak*) or here in India the missionary sisters clad in white and blue in the platform of Sealdah station in Kolkata, worshipping Christ or cheap meat from the shop near the railway tracks, waiting in a queue for food in front of missionaries with his father – memories haunt him forever. Words rally one after another as if crossing time and boundaries, limitless in its hidden logic. “Let me travel by the river as my memories travel with it ... I sense a constant belonging. My mind is always in turmoil” (4:57). The writer had sailed on a boat when he had left his homeland as a child. The echoing sound of the river still haunts him at the dead of night. The author’s soul travel endlessly along with the blue flowers adorning the water hyacinth which travel boundless sailing across through the confluence of Jamuna it reaches Ichamati or to any river in Bangladesh. Adhir Biswas dedicates the recollection of his memories to the small river Nabaganga which flows through the village Darimagura in the district of Jessore, which is the birthplace of his parents. On reading his memoirs we realise how inevitable the tribute is.

4. Timeless departure

Adhir Biswas had come to India quite some years after Partition. The memories of motherland are still laden heavily in his heart like layers of silt. Time and again he returns to his childhood memories of his father, mother, elder brother, relatives, neighbors, his playmates and even the village dog. Most of his stories bear an association of his mother. A life where the banyan tree branches bend to touch the water of the river Nabaganga, where the rays of dawn sneaking inside from the bamboo thatched walls of huts blend with the chirping of Wagtail (*doel* bird). Leaving all these familiar memories and journeying to a distant land seeking a new identity is like losing one’s mother. “I have lost my mother and mother land when I was quite a child and perhaps this haunts you for the rest of your life” (4:53). The writer yearns and sheds tears.

5. New country, ‘new’ home (mother) land

Yet for the first time when one thinks of departing to India, “it is like a dream come true for everyone” (1:14). Like others the author’s family also travels to Kolkata, a city which represents Howrah Bridge, Museum, Zoo and Double deck buses. After years of ailment his mother dies and he comes to the city of Kolkata with his father and brothers and takes shelter in Sealdah station platform. “It is not that I loathe Kolkata but cannot comprehend what many people speak” – even if he tries to communicate in ordered manner (2:27). The writer understands it will take time to speak like a resident of Kolkata. He is rebuked by everybody – of being a Bangladeshi (*Bangal*). The only solace then was to pray like his father did – “Please teach me to speak like them, O God (*thakur*)!” (2:27). Everyday his father and brothers roamed the city in search for a place to stay, and at night they lit a fire on the brick oven beside the railway tracks to cook hotchpotch (*khichuri*). Hot *khichuri* immediately brought sleep to the droopy eyes of the little boy. “I am happy” he thinks (1:35). His mind yearns for Bhombol, the village dog who had accompanied them to the main road from the village on the day they departed. The dog stared at them relentlessly all through for a long time “just as young Nilu stares

persistently at Haroon’s eyes from the shade of the moving boat” in the book *Supuriboner Sari* (Rows of Betel-nut Trees) [2]. Gradually those eyes die away as Haroon fades and the entire village fades out into oblivion. Consequently that very stares of Bhombol makes young Adhir cry.

6. Journey backwards

Now he is in a new country, new city of double deck bus, tram and Kalighat temple. He often feels “if mother was here. Mother longed to see the mother- Goddess at Kalighat temple after a holy dip in the Ganges. We are all in that very city today” (Biswas 1:33). The author’s coming to India means leaving his mother way back in Bangladesh in every sense. “Before my mother was cremated in Satdoa burning ground her pillow and mat which were thrown away in the jungle are perhaps still there”, imagines the author (1:36). He can unmistakably visualise the condition of the mat and the shape of the pillow even now.

But “now we are in India!” (1:31). The only keepsake is the thin blanket hand – stitched by his mother. “Nice needlework all over it. Birds and trees stitched with threads red and green and a house like the mud hut we lived in” (1:33). Today when he has established himself in his middle age family life the author remembers his village days recurrently. “Exploiting my innocence my village reminds me of itself time and again” (1:57). Flight of memories feed on weed – the roving orphan’s spectrum of life – the crows, trees, river banks, the first lessons in Nandol School, Jainal Mollah angling by the river, the row of boats, the shelter by the banyan tree, village festivals, collecting dry fruits (*haritaki*) under the tree and the fair during chariot festival (*Rathyatra*) – he remembers all. As if all is wrapped in his mother’s thin blanket. He feels that his country has not left him. It lives within his lean thin body and will live till eternity.

7. Dilemma strikes

So the author traverses through the by lanes of nostalgia at ease. These transiting moments are so smooth that the reader is unwittingly drawn into the labyrinth of paucity. “Poverty is the key cause which forced us to leave our ancestral land. Many had come with profound sadness suppressed within, for us it was only dearth of livelihood” (1:14). Even if this was his initial statement, gradually the grim picture gets revealed. No agricultural land, no pond, there was nothing. Only a bit of land and two rooms with thatched roofs was all they had. Lack of bamboo had made the roofs bend and almost touch the ground. Mother’s sickness, insufficient food and also search for various options of earning from a very young age gave the child an unusual mental happiness. At the end of the day palm sugar from the local village market (*haat*) and warm bread (*rotis*) made by his father was their much desired meal. The sound of dry leaves burning by the warm fireplace and the cry of foxes nearby brought sleep to the dreamy eyes of little boy. “Amidst all this we four brothers spent day and night free of worries” (1:24).

Then the senses were strong so memories still remain: March-April (*Chaitra* by Bengali Calendar) is the month of festivities. Carrying mud pots women folk encircle a banyan tree and pour holy water. The cemented base of the tree gets a cleaner look. Festival of colour (*Dol*) begins in villages (4:50).

In the porch of our village house the neighbour’s calf is dancing with trinkets on. It is bathed, garlanded with

marigold and its forehead smeared with vermilion. Its mother also has a garland and vermilion smeared on its head. Cow, which is the carrier of Hindu Goddess (*Bhagaboti*) is worshiped on this day. Bengali New-year's day (*Poila Baishak*) then commences in the village (1:26).

The colors of the sky change as the days go by. From the banyan tree by the bank of the river the golden sun shines and casts its hue on the ripe paddy fields. With the onset of dusk the gramophone from Somnath's house starts playing historical audio plays. In such a nick of time I hear the uneven rustle of leaves and someone walking past aplomb carrying home new clothes made at Shyam tailor's shop for his brothers and sisters. With the smell of it I understand the ushering in of the Festival of Spring (*Durga puja*) (4:16-17). This very festival again becomes painful for some people, for those who had told their friends about English trousers and Terylene (Dacron) shirts. Shattering their hopes for new expensive clothes they receive inexpensive ones. Their rich friends use to rebuke them, "Where are your English trousers?" (4:19). Friends became divided into groups and distanced. In a painful observation of the writer, "with the onset of the Festival of Spring (*Durga puja*) the factor regarding affordability of clothes created a division amongst friends" (4:19).

Often the then little boy carried a deep felt anger towards his deprived financial status. They could not survive the entire year with his father's earning as a barber. During the monsoon they used to cut grass and sell it for an extra living. Hands and feet would swell and stink with boils because of mud and dirty water. Classmates would often complain about the stink. "I used to close both my fists. As if I have not heard my friends and my entire concentration was only on what was being taught in class. The monsoons made me friendless" (1:24-25). Such a naked statement of the author rocks the apparent secure, unaffected, unperturbed existence of the readers.

The author had to do various menial odd jobs to survive; he also had to take to a lot of insult from his fellow mates when he used to work as a daily wage earner with his father in some of their households. The little boy who was author's classmate supervises his chores as the junior landlord. Even if the work was all in order, disgust was expressed – "you cannot work with lame dumb fellows!" (3:26). We the readers observe young Adhir was getting to understand rich people living in towns cannot be intimidated. "The owner of the house cannot be answered back on his face", poverty means accepting insult without retorting (3:25).

During the harvest season digging into rat holes in search of food was also not unusual. "God we are very poor. If we get paddy we can fill our stomach a bit with the new rice" (3:70). Yet a sense of guilt pervades Adhir – "Rats have collected paddy stalks which is their food for the entire year and I have cleared it all in a jiffy" reminiscences the author (3:72).

The severe approach of the society towards poverty is perhaps often reflected in smell. 'Friendless' yet the writer embraces life, "we are still alive. We do not have any unhappiness. Let our hands stink with sores because of cutting grass" (1:25). The smelly small crammed room where his ailing mother lay did not deter the sensitive young author, though "no one else enters the room fearing the stink." He thinks "I do not feel the smell! I am not saying this because she is my mother, but the way friends pull their noses I do not feel such a stink" (2:15). The reader's eyes

swell with tears. Again just before festivals (*pujas*) "the smell of new clothes in front of Toyeb's Star Tailors" intoxicates Adhir (3:36). The poor young boy squats and gathers pieces of new cloth from wastes of the tailoring shop. His happy face floats in front of our eyes, we can even smell. "Heart warming pieces of cloth, truly I love every bit of it. On my way repetitively I inhale the smell of piece of cloth. Perhaps herein I find my full sleeve shirt and English trousers" (3:39).

Many more aromas remain unexpectedly entrenched in the memory of the author. Things that perhaps remain forever embedded and hidden is something that the author desperately wants to pour out in his writings. "There were many things hidden and there still is. But now I am not scared, so I try to own a few" (1:40-41). Those like his father's travel by bus without a ticket or the suppressed fear of being molested by his neighbour (Gour). "As days go by, the censored true stories within me desire to come out – inhibition free and painless" (1:41). Often next door neighbour Gour's mother called the author for a plate of rice and boiled potatoes with oil and green chilies. He had to sneak into their house with a sly. The call of sumptuous food was irresistible and the author had to succumb to Gour's unrelenting lewd demands for a platter of nice smelling food. When greed strikes amidst poverty it is an intoxicating phenomenon. "As I succumbed to Gour's demands I use to feel like being cast with death as my mother was. When I use to return home with a soul filled with pain and sorrow and sit lonely by the porch of the house I felt as if my home was asking me to leave its shelter forever" (2:22). Then he too longed for the banks of the river Ganga like his mother. "All sins will be washed away by the river" (2:17).

8. Dreams displaced

Adhir Biswas's father had hoped that situations will improve once they are in India, but then a new struggle began. Father became unwell and his earnings almost stopped. His eldest brother's factory workshop was at Covent road at Entally in Kolkata. His youngest brother worked as a security guard in a house. His duty was for day and night. His second eldest brother lived outside the locality as he was a political party worker. Yet there was dearth of money. So he and his eldest brother took control of the footpath and its adjoining walls for temporary shop keeping after school – as the business happens while pedestrians return home during the evening. "We have to survive on leftovers", his eldest brother caressed Adhir's head while telling him this (2:51). Even after this Adhir conducted tuitions and sold sweets and savories. Perhaps "my father will not be able to see any of us well settled" (2:57). The sick man (his father) moved out of the slum house with a walking stick every day and returned with something or the other. Once when the young author was coming back home from his school excursion at Botanical Gardens by bus, he chanced to see his father begging on the streets from the bus window and understood where his father procures money from. Adhir writes "my eyes become wet. Am I trying to hide something? My eyes or something else I know not" (2:33). But Adhir did not want to hide. He did not cover the Grey haze behind the arc of poverty in colorful half truths. Thus his writings become the confession note of a refugee and an honest memoir of Partition.

9. Conclusion

In an uncertain dusk the author witnessed his tired eldest brother accepting the fate of life with an apathetic approach which enticed him with a sense of pity for his brother. The sense of hopelessness in his brother's voice also gripped the author. 'How easily it was said. To say means to stop us from thinking. My brother is on a relentless struggle with his fate and such living is the outcome of one's own action' – when Adhir thinks so 'we' relate to this as perhaps our own story (2:52). 'We' here denotes the readers who identify with similar soul-searching like the author. The structure of the memoirs is a personal 'one on one conversation', and, is perhaps the most apt way to express the mindset of the author. There could not have been a better way to express his feelings for his readers to understand. The warm thoughts expressed in words of Adhir Biswas branches out into the minds of his readers and heighten it, becoming a tree of grief. Like an endless shade of similar thoughts to rest on, this goes much beyond in time.

Bangladesh to India – the journey of the unsettled mind is obvious. The soul hovers to the village of the past while roving in the city of the present. His heart is wrenched as is ours while he walks the city today overflowing with nostalgia.

10. References

a) Primary text

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b) Notes

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2. Ghosh Shankha. *Supuriboner Sari* [Rows of Betel-nut Trees]. Aruna, Kolkata, 1990, 92.

c) Declaration

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