INTRODUCTION

The fact and memory of the Partition of India in 1947, even over half a century later, continue to sear the consciousness of many Indians, especially those from Punjab and Bengal, where generations have grown up living with and hearing about tales of this permanent separation. But it is only in the last three decades that the Partition has re-emerged as a major area of inquiry in South Asian Studies. The new inquiry has tried to explore it differently in the sense that it has moved away from a “nationalist account” of the event to what could be called a “people’s history” lived, experienced and recalled in ways that conventional history has ignored as being “ahistorical” and outside its purview. So claimed, it has “hovered at the edges of our consciousness, never frankly confronted or unravelled” and we’ve never really come to terms with it. “It is too huge”, says Ritu Menon “too unwieldy, too messy, even to be sewn up neatly and laid to rest” (2002, 84). As rightly stated this is “one conversation that can have no closure, one memory that refuses to go away” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, xiii).

I think women are central to the whole discourse of Partition. This is owing to the fact that their sexuality “as it had been violated by abduction, transgressed by enforced conversion and marriage and exploited by impermissible cohabitation and reproduction” was at the centre of debates around national duty, honour, identity and citizenship in a secular and democratic India” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 20) during and even long after Partition. Yet, in the historical records, they figure only as objects of study and as numbers and not as experiencing subjects and individuals. The national debates around women exposed “the multiple patriarchies of community, family and state as experienced by the women” (1998, 20) and had significant gender implications. But their voices hardly ever made it to mainstream history writing. Butalia appropriately states that for women as a group, their only collectivity lay in silence.
The increasing polarisation of society along ethnic and religious identity lines and the growing influence of communal forces in the subcontinent have once again created the grounds for the re-examination of the history of Partition, a re-examination that is deeply rooted in the concerns of the present. Butalia says “certain kinds of historical exploration become important at certain times,…particularly explorations of the past are rooted in particular kinds of experience of the present. It is the present, our involvement in it, our wish to shape it to the kind of future we desire, that leads to revisit and re-examine the past” (1998, 348). It is particularly important to make audible the voices of those who have been marginalised by society, marginalised in history, and whose history has itself been marginalised in the broader world of history-writing, to bring out the contradiction between the history of Partition that we know, that we have learnt, and the history that people remember. Women’s history in this context occupies a special significance in the re-examination of Partition history.

This study is based on oral narratives of 116 people from different districts of erstwhile East Bengal who were interviewed by me in various colonies and camps existing from the time of the Partition of 1947, spread across various districts of West Bengal. The effort is primarily to foreground voices of women and their experiences of Partition.

Memory occupies a centrality in this whole work, which is based on the workings of memory in the recollection of events of violence, displacement, loss and survival. This study primarily explores how women remember in ways different from men. The effort is to understand these differences, and through them the differences in the ways in which men and women connect to the world, perceive situations, and recollect. This is, however, not to evoke any kind of biological determinism or essentialism. It is rather an effort to understand how one’s positioning in society determines/shapes the different ways in which one relates to the world and tries to negotiate with it.
Partition - The Scenario in the East and the West

Urvashi Butalia, trying to describe the havoc caused by the Partition writes:

The political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or since, have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly. In the space of a few months about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West of the newly created Pakistan…Estimates of dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two millions (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted (1998, 3).

To borrow further from the estimates used by Butalia in her book The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India, about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religion other than their own and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion. Over thousands of families were divided, disintegrated, separated; homes were destroyed; villages abandoned. (1998, 3)

The partition of Bengal differed from the partition of Punjab except from some obvious areas of “political and existential convergences” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2002, 12). Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta in their essay “The Problem” list some of the marked points of divergence.

While the partition of Punjab was a one-time event with mayhem and migration restricted primarily to three years (1947–1950), the partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuous process. Displacement and migration from East to West, that is from former East Pakistan and Bangladesh to West Bengal, is still an inescapable part of our reality, as the most recent exodus following post-election violence in Bangladesh in October 2001 illustrates (2002, 12).
Secondly, they argue that the “extent and depth of sheer violence and cruelty leading to a massive two-way exodus in Punjab was not repeated in the East.” Ashis Nandy in his essay “The Invisible Holocaust and the Journey As an Exodus: The Poisoned Village and the Stranger City” points out that along with Sikhs, almost the entire Punjabi Hindu community was eliminated from West Pakistan and nearly the entire Muslim community from what was the former East Punjab whereas in East Pakistan, the proportion of Hindus was reduced from about 29% to 12% (1999, 307). Half of the pre-Partition Hindu population still remains in Bangladesh, while in West Bengal the Muslim population is now higher than what it was in pre-Partition days. On the other hand, the proportion of Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan’s Punjab and of Muslims in Indian Punjab is nearly zero today, claims Nandy in his essay “The Death Of an Empire” (2002, 5). Here I would like to point out that there was no exchange of population in the East as in the West. Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Khwaja and Atif Mian rightly point out in their essay “The Big March: Migratory Flows after the Partition of India” that while in Punjab the Indian government had facilitated an “exchange of population”, in Bengal it wanted to prevent precisely such an exchange, and took a number of initiatives to this end (2008, 45).

Bagchi and Dasgupta comment that even after considering the carnages in Kolkata and Noakhali in 1946, Dhaka–Narayanganj in 1962, and Bhola and Jessore in 2001, it needs to be said that the “‘one fell swoop’ in Punjab was far more bloody and destructive” in contrast to the partition of Bengal which “produced a process of slow and agonising terror and trauma accelerated by intermittent outbursts of violence on both sides in 1950, 1962, 1964, 1971 and 2001” (2002, 12). Even events such as the introduction of the passport between the two countries would prompt large scale exodus in the East. Comparing the scale of the exodus Ashis Nandy claims:

In Punjab, communal violence reached the interstices of the villages society, something that had happened in Bengal only in
pockets, in places like Noakhali….Once the Punjab violence begun, all other instances of violence paled into insignificance. The violence in Bengal and Bihar were brutal, but it had taken place partly outside span of vision of the media and middle-class consciousness. The upheaval in Punjab—with its forty-mile long caravans, thousands of abducted women, spectacular self-destructiveness, and large-scale ethnic cleansing—was something for the whole world to see….The Bengalis in most cases had not seen the worst; for most of them, Noakhali was hearsay. The exchange of population in eastern India was a slow bleeding wound; it was not a one-time ethnic cleansing which affected each and every family (2002, 5).

The two way exodus in the West often led to very specific spectacles of migration where caravans of refugees stretched for miles. Nandy in his essay talks about such four or five mile long “kafilas” which, in turn, “attracted marauders eager to plunder not only the often-pitifully-small amounts of belongings the refugees could carry but also the young women among them.” At places such journeys turned “pathetically low-key too” as in Bengal and Bihar comments Nandy. But in both the places, be it in the West or in the East, the refugees used whatever mode of transport available to them—planes, ships, trains, bullock carts, camels—but most of them simply walked to the borders. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin too describe such convoys “The estimate is that in 42 days (September 18 to October 29) 24 non-Muslim foot columns, 8,49,000 strong, had crossed into India” (1993, WS 3 ). In Bengal we do not get to hear about such huge caravans stretched over miles and also the ensuing looting killing and abduction but what haunts most of the refugees is the memory of the ‘search’ by the ‘Ansar Bahini’¹ at the borders and harrowing train journeys. Large scale looting and extortion followed at the borders as people were not allowed to carry away any valuable while leaving East Pakistan. Tridib Santapa Kundu in his essay “Partition

¹. A non-official Muslim Military organization set up in 1948 to ensure border security.
Experiences of the East Bengali Refugee Women” highlights the plight of women in East Bengal as being similar to that in Punjab. He quotes from an important Bengali daily:

They were also tortured and humiliated on their way to West Bengal in the form of search by the Pakistani customs officers and staff. For example we may site how some female passengers of Barishal Express were harassed and humiliated by the customs officers at the Benapole station, the last station of East Pakistan bordering West Bengal on March 4, 1950. A staff reporter of the Ananda Bazar Patrika reported that the female passengers were taken to a room in the station compound one by one. The room was almost blocked and light was very dim there. They were forced to strip and were searched in front of two male custom officers. One lady custom officer was there but she stood silent. Virtually the search operation was made by the male officers. Another report of the same newspaper (March 27, 1950) showed the fate of two young women who protested against the misbehaviour of the Pakistani custom officers at Darshana. Those two women were driven out naked by the staff of that department (2009).

Also the account in the East abounds in stories about journeys by the waterways. As both the countries shared numerous water bodies journeys through waterways were very common form of migration and people often reminisce about perilous boat, ferry or steamer rides. Walking across long distances was also a very common form of migration in the East.

Another distinction between the two sides lies in the nature of the states carved out of the two sides, claim Bagchi and Dasgupta:

While history and politics have been constant and definitive in the context of Punjab, the partition of Bengal has been refracted through conflicting prisms during the last six decades. For example, the two nation theory which proved to be sacrosanct in Punjab was challenged for the first time in East Pakistan by
the historic language movement which erupted in 1952. A series of determined resistance against the rulers of West Pakistan followed, ultimately leading to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 (2002, 12).

However, they argue that this emergence of “secular” and “democratic” Bangladesh did not signal the end of an era and the “irony” was repeated when the party in power shared electoral interests with fundamental forces and gained combined electoral victory in October 2001. Bagchi and Dasgupta point out how the very nature of the carved out states becomes evident if we compare the border and boundary of each of them.

In the West where political, strategic and military considerations have converted the entire region into two rigid divisions, the dividing line in the East is porous and flexible. So much so, constant cross-border movement and migration impelled by human and economic considerations have given to this specific, along-the-border region a composite character of its own which questions the strictly demarcated preconditions of nationalism and the nation state (2002, 13).

Another issue which cannot be overlooked when we are considering differences between the East and the West is the refugee question. If we consider the inflow of refugees into the newly created state of India and the massive exodus in the East and the West due to Partition, we will find figures which show that by far the largest proportion of refugees crossed the Western border, which divided the state of Punjab immediately during or after Partition. Joya Chatterjee, however, points out to the contrary when she states:

The migration out of East Bengal was very different from the rush of refugees into India from West Pakistan, which was immediate and immense ….Unlike those from the west, the refugees from the east did not flood into India in one huge wave; they came sometimes in surges but often in barely
perceptible tickles over five decades of Independence (2001, 74).

According to her, in the half century since India was partitioned, more than twenty five million refugees have crossed back and forth between the East Bengal and the state of West Bengal.

In the East, the trickle started in 1946, gathered momentum, and became a deluge after the partition of the country (Government of West Bengal 2001, 1). Between the year 1946–1949, 1,100,000 people migrated to India from East Bengal. Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty in his seminal book on Bengal partition, *The Marginal Men: the Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (1990, 282), categorises the kinds of refugees who migrated to India. “350,000 belonged to the urban middle classes, 550,000 belonged to the rural middle classes and over 100,000 were agriculturists and a little less than 100,000 artisans. The concentration of refugees varied from district to district.”

The second phase of the exodus started in 1950 with the Mulaadi and Bagerhat riots. There were mass scale exodus to Tripura, Assam and West Bengal. The number of people who migrated alone to West Bengal in 1950 was 3,500,000. From April to September 1950, around 25000 refugees were accommodated in government relief camps every month (Chakraborty 1990, 3). According to Chakraborty, these refugees who came and took shelter in government camps during the disturbed fifties were mostly agriculturists, and craftsmen and artisans allied to agriculture. In October 1952 Pakistan introduced passport, India reciprocated. The introduction of passports created a renewed panic as people saw it as sealing of a route of escape and as a result a new exodus followed. So a few months before the passport system came into effect, the exodus increased reaching a formidable proportion in the second week of October. For a time, the number of migrants almost equalled the figure of the great exodus of 1950.
Chakraborty next describes the third phase of the migration:

The next phase began after 1960–61 although there had been a rise in the influx in 1955 and 1960 due to communal disturbances in East Pakistan. During the period 1961–65 there arrived in West Bengal at least a million refugees. The exodus was the result of widespread minority killings in Rajsahi and Pabna districts in 1962 and in Dacca and other areas in 1964–65 (1990, 4).

This was followed by the massive exodus in 1971. According to the Government of West Bengal Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Manual “An estimated 58 lakhs refugees came to India by 1971, excluding those of the 1971 exodus who stayed on. The census figures of 1971 put the population of displaced persons in the state at nearly 60 lakhs as reported to the Planning Commission in 1974 by the Government of West Bengal” (Government of West Bengal 2001, 1). To further refer to the figures in the Manual, the migrants till 25 March 1971 were broadly divided into two groups vide the report of the working group formed by Government of India in 1976: those who migrated between October 1946 and 31 March 1958 are known as “Old Migrants” and those who came between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971, are known as “New Migrants” (Government of West Bengal 2001, 1).

Out of 31,32,000 old migrants, 7,92,000 were admitted to Camps/Homes, about 1,39,000 families inhabited the urban areas. Comparing the rehabilitation scenario in the West and East Chakraborty states:

By 1970 there were only 15 P.L. Camps /Homes in the Western region spread over Punjab, Delhi Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and there were only about 3000 inmates in the Camps/Homes of the permanent liability category. In other words, all rehabilitated inmates had been dispersed and rehabilitated (1990, 282).
In West Bengal, there were still 25,000 inhabitants in P.L. (Permanent Liability) Camps and Infirmaries in 1970. Here it may be mentioned that to this day there are thousands of people living on government doles living in the various existent Camps/Infirmaries/Homes in this part belonging to different categories like the P.L., the R.G. (Rehabitable Group) or the B.L.C. (the Border Line Category). As per the *Screening Committee Report*, a report submitted by a special committee set up by the Government of West Bengal for screening the state of existing Camps and Homes in West Bengal in 1989, “While previously there were scores of homes all over the state, presently the figure has come down to ten Homes only through the gradual process of winding up” (1989, 1).

The following is a brief glimpse of the latest figures from some of the existing camps:

1. In Nadia district there are five camps. These are Champta Women’s Home (Krishnanagar Sub-division) with sixty families living on Government dole; Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary (Krishnanagar Sub-division) with 127 existing dole families; Coopers Camp (Ranaghat Sub-Division) has twenty-nine families; Ranaghat Mahila Shibir (Ranaghat Women’s Home) (Ranaghat Sub-division) has eighteen dolee families and Chadmari Permanent Liability Home (in Kalyani Sub-division) has ninety-four such families.

2. In Hooghly District two camps can be cited Bansberia Women’s Home having approximate twenty-six dolee and Bhadrakali Women’s Home which has thirty-five families living on doles.

3. In the district 24 Parganas north there are Habra Asoke Nagar Composite Home Nos. 1 & 2 having twenty-six dolee families. The Titagarh Women’s Home having ninety-nine women has been recently wrapped up in 2008.

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2. Based on my interview of the Deputy Director of Camps and Homes at 10 Camac Street, the office of the Commissioner of the Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of West Bengal on 16 July 2009.
It would be naïve to overlook these figures even though they give just an approximate estimation of the people still languishing in these Camps/Homes. Another major area of concern remains the fact that women constitute a majority of the population of P.L. in these Camps/Homes. A P.L. or Permanent Liability is indicated by the official definition as follows: “Normally PL category indicates the inmates/families who are physically and/or mentally handicapped, who are too old (70 years and above) and infirm, and who will remain on dole in the Homes permanently till death” (Government of West Bengal 1989, 8).

There are also major differences in the way the refugee question was tackled in the West and in the East. Joya Chatterjee elaborates the attitude of the government towards the same. The Government decided that the crisis in Punjab was a “national emergency, to be tackled on virtually a war footing” claims Chatterjee for which by September 1947 it set up the Military Evacuation Organisation “to get Hindus and Sikhs out of Pakistan in a swift and orderly fashion.” This shows that the Government accepted the transfer of population across the western border with Pakistan as a fact, “inevitable and irreversible” and therefore readily committed itself from the very start to “fully and permanently” rehabilitate the refugees from the west. The influx of refugees into Bengal, on the other hand was seen in an “altogether different light” comments Chatterjee though as she states, that the migration out of East Bengal in much larger number and over a much larger time span, was more complex. She elaborates how the migration in the East was prompted by many different factors:

Minorities found their fortunes rapidly declining as avenues of advancement and livelihood were foreclosed; they also experienced social harassment, whether open or fierce or covert and subtle, usually set against a backcloth of communal hostility which, in Hindu perception at least, was sometimes banked but always burning. Another critical factor was the ups and downs in India’s relationship with Pakistan which
powerfully influenced why and when the refugees fled to West Bengal (2001, 74–75).

The “elemental violence of Partition in the Punjab” and its large scale was absent in the case of Bengal except in the violence of Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali riots notes Chatterjee, and cites that according to the Government of India the “conditions in East Bengal did not constitute a grave and permanent danger to its Hindu minorities”. Their out migration from East Bengal as a result was tagged as “product of fears, mainly imaginary, and of baseless rumours, rather than the consequence of palpable threats to life, limb and property”. They continued to believe that the exodus could be halted, even reversed provided that the two governments could deploy “psychological measures” to restore the confidence of the Hindu minorities. Thus the Inter-dominion agreement followed. The relief for the refugees from East Bengal was taken up as a stop gap measure since permanent rehabilitation “was judged to be unnecessary; indeed it was something to be positively discouraged”. (2001, 74-75)

Chatterjee further points out the attitude of the Government towards the Bengali refugees:

The official line was grounded in the belief that Bengali refugees crossing the border in either direction could, and indeed should, be persuaded to return home…. Even after the number of refugees in Bengal had outstripped those from Punjab, such relief and rehabilitation measures as government put into places still bore the mark of its stubborn unwillingness to accept that the problem would not simply go away on its own (2001, 75–76).

Thus, though the Partition still lingers very tangibly in the collective memory of a generation uprooted in western India as numerous studies show, the refugee problem is a
closed case there, with refugees getting assimilated into the mainstream. In the East, however, the sense of being uprooted has “overtaken the psyche of Bengal” (Bagchi 2002, 15). In the East, the word ‘refugee’ still has an immediacy with many families still grappling to come to terms with it, both in socio-economic terms and also in terms of a sense of loss and separation. This is especially true for the large number of people still languishing in existent Camps/Homes which were set up post-1947 Partition. Without going into the debates about the lacuna in the rehabilitation and relief of the Bengal refugees I would rather focus on elaborating the human dimension of this existence of a large section of population on the margins even after over sixty years of Independence. This population is constituted not only by the vast majority of people who are now above the average age of seventy, but also includes the next two generations who made it to India as infants or were born within the camps. Still living on cash doles as “permanent liability” of the State, these individuals existing below subsistent level, almost in a condition of complete destitution are denied even the basic rights to human dignity and self esteem. The term “permanent liability” and other words used in conjunction with it such as “inmate” itself speak about the state of doom and helplessness that is attached with this state of existence. The term bespeaks the charity of the State, and reduces one’s identity to a mere burden. They continue to exist in the periphery.

However, in the whole issue of the refugee question in the East, one positive aspect that many like Bagchi and Dasgupta have pointed out in particular, is the “historic assertion of the refugee woman as the tireless breadwinner” which changed “the digits of feminine aspiration and irrevocably altered the social landscape”(2002, 14)) Urvashi Butalia, tracing a similar “emphatic advance” in Punjab comments, “Just as a whole generation of women were destroyed by Partition, so also Partition provided an opportunity for many to move into the
public sphere in a hitherto unprecedented way.”3 Without denying the undoubted resilience shown by a whole generation of women in the face of adversities and their progress from trauma to triumph, I would nevertheless say that this creation of opportunities for women that many propose, may not be accepted without raising questions about the ‘real’ choice and space it meant for the women and in the formation of their self identity. Nita, the female protagonist’s famous cry at the end of Ritwik Kumar Ghatak’s legendary film Meghe Dhaka Tara epitomizes this irony/dichotomy where Nita, allowed the space to become the breadwinner for the displaced family (a space denied to the other male protagonists), is nevertheless denied her agency and her self-identity as a woman for daring to transgress her gender role and venturing into the male domain. In this context, also addressing the question of choice and agency of the women in the Homes and the Camps, and that too primarily as permanent liability of the State, becomes imperative.

One compelling similarity between the experiences of Partition in Punjab and Bengal is of women being targeted as objects of persecution. Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alvis talk about the implication of violence for women at times of communal strife:

Communalism, operating within patriarchal structures of power, implies the advocacy of violence; often sexual violence, towards women. Communal violence frequently resorts to the violation of the ‘Other’s’ woman for,…a woman’s modesty signifies the masculinity of her community. She becomes “the symbol of violence as the shame and subjection of her community is represented in her” (1996, xvii).

This is not only true for the Partition violence in Punjab and Bengal but in all other countries, as Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta point out, “where two communities incited by religion, race, colour or language fall upon one another, women are

3 Quoted in Bagchi and Dasgupta 2002, 14.
identified as the main object of ruthless conquest … ‘the female womb becomes occupied territory’” (2002, 13)) During Partition the acts of transgression on women’s bodies were somewhat more conspicuous in Punjab through accounts of rape, abduction and honour killing. These are also widely represented in the literature dealing with that part of the sub-continent. “In Bengal, abduction of women had become a highly sensational issue in the wake of the Noakhali outrage months before Partition. In Noakhali, as it is too well known, the violence was marked particularly by abduction of and sexual assaults on Hindu women.” (Bandhopadhyay 1997, 6) During the course of my interviews, I too came across people mentioning abduction of women and honour killing (at least preparations for the killing) especially from the regions such as Noakhali and Muladi which witnessed some of the worst massacres. Abduction of women continued to taint the post partition scenario in Bengal though in much smaller measures than had happened on either side of Punjab at the time of Partition. In Bengal, however, aside from a few exceptions, the issue of persecution of women is seldom talked about in public discourses or represented in literature.

Veena Das in her essay “National Honour and Practical Kinship: Of Unwanted Women and Children” points out how a conscious state policy on abducted women and on children born of sexual or reproductive violence was first initiated in the session of the Indian National Congress on 23 and 24 November 1946. This came in the wake of the terrible violence between Hindus and Muslims in parts of eastern and northern India, in which the Congress expressed grave concern and anxiety for the happenings in Calcutta, in East Bengal, and in some parts of Bihar and Meerut district, where incidents of “murders on a mass scale as also mass conversion enforced at the point of dagger, abduction and violation of women and forcible marriage” happened ((1995, 60). She elaborates on the operative part of the resolution which stated the obligation of the Congress party towards these women.
The immediate problem is to produce a sense of security and rehabilitate homes and villages which have been broken and destroyed. Women who have been abducted and forcibly married must be restored to their homes. Mass conversions which have taken place forcibly have no significance or validity and the people affected by them should be given every opportunity to return to their homes and the life of their choice (1995, 60).

The situation worsened from March 1947. An Inter-Dominion Conference was held where the two Dominions now agreed to the steps necessary for the recovery of the abducted women and children and the implementation of the decision led to a large number of women being recovered from both sides. To quote Veena Das, “Between December 1947 and July 1948, 9362 such women were found in India and 5510 in Pakistan.” Both the countries passed ordinances, India on 31 January 1948 and Pakistan in May 1948. The Indian ordinance was renewed in June 1949. In December 1949 the Constituent Assembly passed the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949 which remained in force till 31 October 1951. Das in her essay mentions some Constituent Assembly legislative debates where it was stated on 15 December 1949 that 33,000 Hindu or Sikh women had been abducted by Muslims, and that the Pakistan government claimed 50,000 Muslim women had been abducted by Hindu or Sikh men. During the joint efforts made by both the governments to recover women, a large number of women were brought back from both the territories; 12,000 women were recovered in India and 6000 in Pakistan. Das mentions a civil servant Khosla who had access to the reports of the Fact Finding Organisation on Communal violence and who had personally interviewed Liaison Officers of the Military Evacuation Organisation which was in charge of the large-scale evacuation of minorities from one Dominion to another. “The figures given by Khosla”, mentions Das, “on the basis of the Fact Finding Organisation, were that 12,000 Hindu or Sikh women were recovered from Punjab.
and the frontier regions in Pakistan, and 8000 Muslim women from the districts of Indian Punjab (1995, 59).

Thus, what is interesting to note here is that though the first efforts by the government in the form of a conscious state policy on abducted women and children was first initiated or was sparked off in the wake of the terrible communal violence primarily in Calcutta, in East Bengal, in Bihar and parts of Meerut, in the subsequent discourse of the State and the interventions to recover the abducted women and children, the scenario of eastern India seldom got addressed. Even the facts and figures give an overall picture and often as Khosla’s report mentions, state the figures only of the West. In my study of different sources, I have not come across mention of the abduction or recoveries done in the eastern side of the partitioned nation state except as described by Sandip Bandhopadhyay. What happened to the women and children who were recovered in the East is also not known. In the writings on rehabilitation in Punjab one comes across the mention of recovery homes and shelters for deserted women or women who were victims of sexual violence and their children and also of orphanages that were started to address this great schism. There is hardly a passing mention of such efforts in the eastern border.

Smt. Ashoka Gupta, a social worker of great repute from Bengal, who had volunteered to participate in peace-keeping and rescue operations in Noakhali under Mahatma Gandhi’s initiative in the aftermath of the Noakhali carnage, recalls the ground reality in her book *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*.

After much persuasion I could convince a husband and a wife to come with me to the police station to lodge an FIR. It was quite late at night. With much caution, along with me, the woman her face covered fully under her saree stated how even two months after the riots every night the woman would be forcibly taken away by two–three men and returned every morning. Such were daily occurrences in the village. But out of fear the
husbands or the family members were not ready to protest or lodge an FIR with the police (2003, 30). [My translation]

Unlike Punjab there was no official programme for recovery of the abducted women in the Bengal partition. Sandip Bandhopadhyay, however, mentions a similar initiative taken in 1950—the year that witnessed large scale riots in some parts of East Bengal and had its repercussions in West Bengal in a relatively smaller proportion. Both East Bengal and West Bengal witnessed large scale migration. Following the Nehru-Liaquat Agreement in April 1950, the West Bengal Government set up a Search Service Bureau to enquire about the women abducted and arranged for their rehabilitation. A Bureau of similar kind was found in East Pakistan too. Sandip Bandhopadhyay, referring to the findings of the West Bengal Search Service Bureau as published in a Kolkata monthly *Modern Review* (Nov, 1950), quotes the number of abducted Hindu women in East Pakistan at 185; of them only forty-seven cases could be probed and nine cases of religious conversion were identified. The number of Muslim women abducted in West Bengal was found to be 105; of them, however, only one woman could be identified (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 7). These reports thus show only the inadequacy of such findings and how they fall short of being authenticated.

Ashoka Gupta in her account of Noakhali mentions a few temporary recovery centres of that time for affected women and children in East Bengal, such as the Kasturba Trust and Abhay Ashram in Coomilla and the Prabartak Sangha in Chattogram. After 1950 some camps like Chadmari, Bansberia, Bhadrakali were set up in West Bengal exclusively for women. Various homes in Kolkata such as Ananda Ashram, All Bengal Women’s Union and Uday Villa took in some women. Ananda Ashram accommodated young girls. The Home run by the All Bengal Women’s Union at Elliot Road, Kolkata provided shelter to the abducted and outraged women. The website of All Bengal Women’s Union even mentions how “in 1949,
new premises were provided by the Government and a maternity centre was started for refugee unmarried mothers from Pakistan who were largely victims of the riots” (2009). However, while these women continued to live in these Homes and Camps already marginalised from the mainstream, their trauma and plight failed to invite the concern of the larger population and the bureaucrats alike. It was an issue best forgotten. Also the conditions of these camps and homes remained like those in detention centres, with the inhabitants having little access to the outside world and vice-versa. There was strict vigilance on these women who were in most cases the only ones who could testify to the sexual violence they may have faced, or could talk about that which other women like themselves in the camps may have experienced. Here I would like to mention that the general inaccessibility of these Homes continues till date. Bolan Gongopadhyay, a freelance journalist, trying to retrieve the history of Uday Villa was denied access. Commenting on her methodology of interviewing people associated with Uday Villa in an attempt to trace its history she writes “I am conscious of the shortcomings of such a methodology....But after being denied access to the official documents of the Home by its Receiver, I have had no opportunity to combine the experiential with the recorded” (2000, 98). Similarly, my request to the All Bengal Women’s Union in 2008 to go through their collection of documents from the times of Partition was summarily rejected. It is an irony that all other accounts of violence on women in Bengal, too deal with it with a kind of distancing and disavowal that pre-empts the possibility of identifying the victims. In this context, the effort on part of the State to isolate these women in the Homes and Camps and to seal all possibilities of communication with them need to be questioned.

There is a veil of silence about rape and abduction in Bengal; and “there is a general belief that rape was less marked a presence in the Bengal partition” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2002, 14). Yet the “fear psychosis” of rape and abduction had a “free play” in the Bengal
partition, and the fear or suspicion of a woman having been raped or abducted was enough to “marginalise women and to prevent them from being accepted by their own community” (2002, 14). As mentioned earlier, literature too hardly captures this silence, with the only exception being, as Jasodhara Bagchi points out, Jyotirmoyee Debi’s *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*. “Written in 1967, and published in book form a year later, it is a rare example of a Partition novel in Bengal written by a woman” claims Bagchi. It is a book which dwells on themes of “violence and possibly, rape of a girl in East Bengal, and her subsequent marginalisation by her own community” (Bagchi 2002, 15).

In order to express her anger, the author takes recourse to various narrative strategies to break and expose this hypocritical stance of history and society and its silencing of these great violations. *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* was first published in 1967 as *Ithihasher Stree-Parva* in the pages of the autumn annual of the reputed Bengali periodical, *Prabashi*. “The *Stree Parva* of the *Mahabharata* was no conventional chapter on women: for Jyotirmoyee it contained the potential of cross-cutting ‘myth’ with ‘history’, the great ‘open secret’ that is kept carefully hidden from the public eye by a manipulative patriarch” states Jasodhara Bagchi (2002, 17). The author locates indirect strategies for bringing to the surface hidden truths in the “Stree-Parva” of the *Mahabharata*, however, not forgetting to point out its limitation. To quote from parts of the preface of Jyotirmoyee Debi’s work as translated by Bagchi:

> I do not know of historical writings in any other culture except the *Mahabharata* which has a chapter called Stree-Parva....In actual fact, even Vedavyas could not bear to write the real stree-parva....Cowards do not write history. There are no great poets among women, and even if there were, they could not have written about the violation of their own dignity....Hence there is no recorded history of the real stree-parva....The stree-parva of humiliation by men? The stree-parva of all time? The chapter
that remains in the control of husband, son, father and one’s one community—there is no history of that silent humiliation, that final pain...The stree-parva has not yet ended; the last word is not yet spoken (2002, 17).

As already stated, the fact is not that women are altogether absent from Partition histories or even from official records; it is just that they figure in the same way as they have always figured in history: as objects of study rather than as subjects, as numbers not individuals. It is this silencing of the women’s voices that I have address through my work.

**My Story**

In context of the Partition, being a woman of the third generation belonging to a family uprooted by Partition, it has never stopped intriguing me how memory and recollection have been vital in shaping individual and collective memory of an entire generation and of the next few generations that followed.

Being a child of working parents, a considerable period of my childhood and adolescence was spent in the company of the elderly at home, especially my maternal grandmother. Accounts of her ‘desh’ and Partition comprised a considerable proportion of the stories that I heard from her. Having lived in East Bengal for a considerable period of her life, being involved in the national movement, having witnessed the Partition and been uprooted by it, my grandmother provided me with valuable facts to connect to the past.

The families of my paternal and maternal grandparents were both families of Partition refugees. I grew up hearing these tales steeped with nostalgia, memory, recollection and a sense of separation. Partition figured as a recurrent theme in the anecdotes that were shared by my grandparents and the second generation of elderly uncles and aunts. Recollection of
every family event happy or sad, of the past would be punctuated by references to ‘then’, ‘now’; ‘there’, ‘here’; ‘before Partition’, ‘after Partition’.

As I grew up, it intrigued me increasingly as I tried to understand its implication while it lingered in the collective memory. I tried to understand its conceptualisation by generations who had not actually witnessed the event but had conceived an abstract notion of what actually happened. Thus memory and remembrance determined the way it was remembered half a century later, constantly informing the ways of perception. In our case, in this whole process of perception and recollection, my grandmother’s agency/memory remained central and it would mediate between the past and the present.

My Grandmother (Dida)

I remember that once in my early childhood when we all had travelled with my maternal grandmother (dida) to Agartala (Tripura) where my grandmother had some relatives residing, she sat near the bamboo pole flung across two poles to mark the border between Bangladesh and India and wept. That is my earliest recollection of an event which had to do with something called “Partition”. She could not understand how the land that stretched far and wide beyond the pole was any different from the one she was squatting on? Why she was not allowed to go any further? A man, a local, came by from the other side, a Neem stick still dangling from his mouth, his morning mouthwash halfway. He had ventured out casually to the other side like all other days, a part of his daily morning strolls. My grandmother sat there squatting on the ground, still insisting that she wanted to cross over at least once to the other side as the man passed us with a sadistic grin.

Finally, my grandmother had her say and she was allowed to take a few steps inside the territory of that foreign land which till few decades back was her very own. She took some baby steps to the other side, alone, on her own, and clutched a handful of soil and then
followed a long howl for some unknown sorrow. She eventually pulled herself together and stepped back to the side we were standing, the soil still clinched in her hand and tears rolling down her eyes.

This is just one of the innumerable incidents of tears and joys that I witnessed amongst my family members in relation to the whole association with the words like “Partition”, “desh”, “desh bhag”, “takhon”, “akhon”, “ekhane”, “okhane” and everything that had to do with meeting, separation, memory, recollection, loss and survival.

The soil she carried from there travelled all the way back to Kolkata, to No 1 Motilal Colony, a resettlement colony, my maternal grandparents’ home ever since after Partition, and found its place in the sacred space reserved for her idols thakurer ashon and was worshipped every day. Deshermati (soil from the motherland), something auspicious, divine, precious in the sense of not to be found again, was always there after that and would be taken out of a dibey (case) every time there was some special ceremony, be it marriage, new employment, new venture or even exam. No blessing was complete without it being pressed to the forehead or no luck fulfilled without it. Later Dida mixed it with her souvenir, a handful of soil, from Kedarnath and Badrinath. She felt her pilgrimage was now complete. The dibey with the mix is perhaps still there long after my Dida is dead. It only no longer makes any more appearances in the daily life of the family.

In all her efforts to rebuild her new house and the new existence the effort to recreate her past was always there. Dida had planted the tulsi plant (a plant considered to be sacred and bringing well being to the Hindu home stead) right at the entrance to the house. Its sides were cemented, a privilege no other tree in the courtyard enjoyed. I remember my Dida made sure that everybody would pay their homage there before they left home for whatsoever reason. “Tulsi talay pronam kore ja” (pay your obeisance at the tulsi) she would say even while lying in her bed after her cerebral attack in her later years. Till my Dida was alive
every evening an oil lamp would burn there. Now the plant is gone but the place remains, the
cemented area, and everybody has just let it be.

My Dida planted all sorts of trees in the courtyard. That was the most endearing place
in the whole house, where even outsiders, neighbours, relatives would come and sit. It was an
effort on her part to recreate the space she had left behind. There were trees such as that of
Coconut, Guava, Mango, Jamun, and smaller plants of Shiuli, Togore, Phurush and Shthal
Padma (staple trees and plants of East Bengal households). The latter seemed most
enchanting to me as it had the ring of an oxymoron—Shthal Padma” (the lotus of the land).
Shiuli was also an anytime favourite, and Phurush had the quality of being effervescent.
Another flower, which still whenever seen transports me back to my grandmother’s
courtyard, was the huge creeper Madhabilata which when in full bloom emanated an
intoxicating smell. The hibiscuses she grew or the white creeper rose, or the marigold beds,
all somehow reflected the care that went into this effort of creating a home away from home.

I found the same nostalgia about the flora of the lost land amongst the women I later
interviewed in order to understand their experiences of Partition. This nostalgia somehow
always finds a special mention in their remembrances and becomes a very recurrent image.
For instance, one Dr. Shanti Basu⁴ sitting in her spacious apartment room in her Dhakuria
residence recalled the Togore tree beside their gate in East Bengal which she said she still
cannot forget and Atashi Halder⁵ another respondent from a crammed government colony in
Behrampur, similarly recalled “jeta sabtheke mone pare seta hocche chotobelay barite kato
rakamer gacch chilo, aam, jam, kathal, kato gacche utcchi, gato jam, kato aam khetam”.
[What I recall most about my childhood is that our house had so many varieties of trees,
Mango, Jamun, and Jackfruit. We climbed so many trees; we ate so many Mangoes and
Jamuns (my translation).]

⁴ Dr Shanti Basu, Interviewed by Sudhanya Dasgupta Mukherjee, Dhakuria, March 2001.
My Dida also kept pigeons and a very clean pen of hens. Another thing very special about her was her cooking. In the entire list of very unique items she was capable of making, I remember some as very special ones which intrigued me more as they were the ones I realised later which were born out of an impulse to survive amidst times of extreme scarcity and yet carried that touch of very personal care that marked everything she did.

My tactile senses are still triggered whenever I recall her cuisine. It was one born out of scarcity like any other “Bangal” homes. Displacement, uprooting and the following struggle all gave birth to a whole body of foods born out of scarcity. Allur khosha bhaja (fried potato peels); laouyer khosha bhaja (fried peels of gourd); kachkalar khosha bata (mashed peel of unripe bananas); thankuni patar jhol, kachur saag, lau saag, kumro saag (the leaves and stems of different edible creepers); shutki mach (dried fish); ata bhaja (roasted wheat powder); gurer cha (tea made of jaggery); shukno ruti shanka (dried chapattis roasted). While the first few made it to the main course, shutki was a treat as the smell itself was enough to devour an entire platter of rice. The latter all figured in the evening or morning snacks.

The purchasing power was nil but the mouths to feed were so many. Thus the things like Saag became an important ingredient in the menu, which could be grown and collected from the wilderness around the squatters. All these dishes had become rare with the second generation taking charge of the kitchen. But once in a while their re-appearances made my day. I still remember them with a fondness, cherish the taste and feel the need to at least talk about them, the cuisine which defined the meals of such a teeming population and was so close to their identity and everyday struggle. I found repeated references of such food in the remembrances of my mother, father, uncle, and aunt. Mention of similar experiences of food
also figures in the accounts of families of friends and relatives of that generation who grew up on such scarcity cuisine.

My Dida hailed from Bidyakut Village, Brahmanberia subdivision in Tripura District, East Bengal. She studied till Class IV in the Faizunnissa Girls School, but throughout her life she remained a great motivator for the education of all her seven children. In fact at a point of time she refused to stay back in the village and decided to move to the Coomilla town with her husband as her stay in the village hindered the further study of her elder daughter. Every time she would remember her School with great pride as two girls from her school Shanti Ghosh and Shuniti Choudhury had killed the English Magistrate of Coomilla. She also remembered how at different point of time the girls would participate in the ongoing movement for India’s independence. She belonged to a wealthy family, her father being the cashier of Tripura Maharaja. She would often talk about how they would take rides on the elephant while going to school. She recalled her music lessons with Sachin Dev Burman, the famous lyricist and composer from Bengal. I was always amused by her recollections and stories, as for her life, time, space was a continuous flux. ‘Time past’ would easily flow into ‘time present’ and she recalled her initial childhood days and later days of struggle when managing one proper meal was a struggle, with the equal composure. I always talked to her, listened, asked questions but never felt the need to record her interview except the only one which I did when she was very unwell, just before she had a cerebral attack. This was the last time we talked and thus I wish to include excerpts from that interview\(^6\) here as a tribute to her memory as she is the one who is the prime inspiration behind my work.

I always remember those early days. During the time of partition, I do not know from where, a siren used to blow. When

\[^6\] Parul Bala Burman, Interviewed by Sudhanya Dasgupta Mukherjee, No.1 Motilal Colony, Dumdum, in March 2000.
they saw the Musalmaans coming they used to blow the siren. Then all of us, all the women folk used to run inside the palace of the king of Coomilla. All the girls and wives would run inside that office. From where the siren used to blow I do not know. But we used to initially fear that the aeroplanes were coming. They would drop bombs. I do not remember the year. This was before partition when there was a slight hint of disturbances. Then we were beginning to hear bits and pieces about the disturbances.

The siren would go off usually in the evenings. I could not hear it as I was hard of hearing. Others would hear it and tell me about it. Then all in the locality would go to the office of the king’s palace. It had huge gates. Only women folks would go—girls, wives and children. No men folks went there. Everyone used to run in and then the iron gates were closed. The men of the locality would guard it from outside. As all the people of the locality would come and take shelter there the men in the locality would go and keep a vigil on the neighbourhood. They would assemble at the entry of the locality/lanes. All the men would be there and the girls, wives and children would be at the office of the king’s palace. Ours was a Hindu locality. The Musalmaans stayed in another locality. Say, this is the Hindu locality and there across the street was the locality of the Musalmaans. That was called Mughalpuri and this was called Rajgunja. All Hindus used to live here. Across the road, in Mughalpuri, only Musalmaans used to live. We had good relation with them. Many Musalmaans saved the Hindus. My hairs still stand on ends when I try to remember those days.

When the siren would sound then all the women would leave home and rush out, but not the men. The men would stand guard. The Musalmaans used to say “why are you running away? Why are you afraid? We are there”. The Musalmaans of Coomilla were very decent. They saved so many women, gave
shelter to many a Hindu family. There was some fear for the men too but not so much as the women.

When we were told that the Musalmaan planes were gone, the Musalmaans were gone we returned home. We never stayed there at night. I was quite grown up then. I already had one son and two daughters. My father used to work at the Coomilla king’s palace. All of us, the women folk, used to hide at my father’s office. My husband used to work in Bihar, Jamalpur during that time. My in-laws used to stay in a village Bidyakut in Coomilla. All their sons worked outside Coomilla. I used to visit my father’s house in Coomilla town.

When the riots took place I was married by then. I had the children with me then. The trouble started slowly. We came here before partition. We used to know the Musalmaans and interacted with them also. We used to talk, come and go. I have seen many of them save the Hindus. They would hide them in their own houses. When other Musalmaans came looking for them they would shut the gates of their houses and did not give these Hindus away. They were Musalmaans themselves so who would force into their houses. There were very rare incidents of riots in Coomilla. We heard about isolated incidents here and there on the streets, but not on a very big scale. But Noakhali witnessed a great deal of violence. We heard the news. I had my aunt in Noakhali. She had two daughters Chanpa and Mongola, very beautiful young girls of your age. They were abducted by the Musalmaans. They never came back. How could they if the people who had abducted them did not let them go? They took them away and married them. The girls were forcefully taken away. They tried to resist but how could they? They were taken away by Musalmaans of a different locality, not from their own locality. The local Musalmaans tried to guard the locality. When my aunt’s house was attacked, everybody ran here and there and amidst that confusion they took away the girls. They later married them. Who knows, now if they are dead or alive!
Such incidents happened to many a Hindu family in Noakhali. Many girls were being taken away and married. They did not torture them as such.

After Noakhali riots we came to India. We heard about the riots in Noakhali from people who somehow escaped from Noakhali. Coomilla was not affected. But people started running away in fear. My neighbours can tell you a lot as they are from Noakhali, the old man and his wife. On the way nothing happened. The people of Coomilla fled only in fear. When we left we could only take only some clothes with us. We never returned there after that. All my in-laws, my parents, we all came here. We came on ship and train. On the way we saw many people coming with their women folks. I came here and stayed in a small house in Beniapukur Lane near Park Circus. Disturbances sometimes continued even here. The men guarded the locality. The Musalmaans used to attack sometimes.

Here, to this house in Dumdum, we came much later. One of our relatives had gone to Coomilla after the disturbance ended. I have heard that nothing of our house exists. Only some trees stand...nothing else is there (Parul Bala Burman, interview). [My translation]

What intrigued me most was the telling, the way she narrated the events not as factual evidence but as an experiential happenings; as she perceived them. She had her own way of remembering space and time relating to it more intimately in relation to things happening to her in her life. The apprehension and the whole threat of ‘us’ and ‘them’ built into the psyche of the common people by the larger community, to spread the rumours of division, is manifest in her account. She does not know why her ‘neighbours’ whom she perceives as ‘very decent’ would be called her persecutors. She remembers them rather as those who saved many Hindus. She admits abduction in her family. Her coming away and her later struggle becomes evident from her referring to how they fled only with some clothes and her
staying in a very humble place in one of the lower income quarters of the city and later moving into a resettlement colony. She has a strong nostalgia of the past and a sense of loss, which she tries to hold on to by her efforts to recreate the present, at least spatially, temperamentally and culturally in terms of the past. Thus her long talks and later brief recorded interview in a way epitomise for me the recollections of most of the women that I met and interviewed later in course of my present work in an effort to understand women’s experiences of Partition.

The neighbourhood—No. 1 Motilal Colony, where my grandmother’s house is, with its distinct feature of a refugee colony, with the houses made of bamboo structures (*berar ghar*), open drains, public taps or hand-pumps, unorganised squatters et al also—deserves a particular mention here. The place somehow always fascinated me in terms of the struggle that was writ large in every aspect of the life in those quarters. Equally fascinating was the nostalgia of the people who in every way lived a life which always oscillated between the past and the present, between ‘there’ and ‘here’ and between ‘then’ and ‘now’. It was not only an effort to relive the time past but also recreate the past space. Scarcity gave birth to a whole attitude to life there where every bit had to be saved, everything was to be kept as nobody knew when it could come handy, everything was ever recyclable. Survival became an everyday challenge and identity a constant negotiation. There was certain ambivalence while negotiating identity as it was the only thing the refugee families were left with as a carry forward from their past lives and thus at times the refugee identity became an agent of solidarity and assertion and at others it created its own constraints of being accepted into the mainstream. It was a perpetual oscillation between the past and the present, a double existence, a constant negotiation with one’s past and present identity.

I feel the spaces that were created as a result of the refugee settlements also deserve to be documented as they bear witness to a whole history of struggle yet unrecorded or
represented in mainstream history. I therefore include the details of the Colony which in a way shaped the lives of so many in my family.

The Colony

Motilal Colony extends over the area from the right side of Jiban Ratan Dhar Road to Sarat Colony, Mahajati Nagar etc. It has many sections—No. 1 Motilal Colony (Ak No.), No. 1½ (Der No.) Motilal Colony, No. 2 Motilal Colony (Du No.), No. 2½ (No.) Motilal Colony, and No. 3 Motilal Colony. Motilal Colony is spread over three *moujas*—Dumdum Cantonment, Jail No. 13; Sultanpur, Jail No. 10 and Jangalpur, Jail No. 11.

No. 1 Motilal Colony is the oldest of all the others of the same name and the foundation of the colony was laid from here. The others came up subsequently in the years to follow. No.1 Motilal Colony is in 24 Jessore Road and falls under the Dumdum Cantonment *Mouja* and is on the 2001 mark on the map of the area. It is in Jail Number 13. The total area of Dumdum Cantonment *Mouja* is 22,035 acres approximate. This area has a concentration of many refugee colonies of that time most of which are ‘jabordakhol’ (forcefully occupied) in nature like Kamalapur *Purbo O Pashchim* (East and West), Kalidham Colony, Motilal Colony, Nehru Colony, Christian Colony, Royal Barrack Colony to name some. Most of them were established around 1949–50. Till 1971 those which were formed got government accreditation. The total area of Motilal Colony is fifteen–sixteen acres. Motilal Colony was established ten–fifteen days before Kamlapur Colony was established.7

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7. See Map I and II.
MAP NO 1: DUMDUM CANTONMENT MOUJA (RECOVERED FROM A DAMAGED MAP)
MAP NO 2: NO 1. MOTILAL COLONY (RECOVERED FROM A DAMAGED MAP).
According to Ramranjan Dey, a ninety-six year old founder resident of Kamlapur Colony:

All these colonies were founded during the same time. All the colonies had link amongst themselves. If something happened to someone from one colony, thousands of people would get assembled at a place, with the very spread of the word, there was no need to call even. (R. Dey, interview) [My translation]

The entire area of No. 1 Motilal Colony, was initially ‘jabordakhol’ (forcefully occupied) and did not have any purchased land within it. The three feet road that separates the Motilal Colony from East Kamlapur, another ‘jabordakhol’ colony, is a narrow winding road which is called Jibon Ratan Dhar Road. This is an accredited road. The two sides of the road were identical with thatched roof houses, open drain, open taps et al and one of the houses was that of my grandmother’s. This road was previously known as Hospital Basti Road as the Class Four staff from the military hospital nearby used to stay in slums on both sides of the road. Jiban Ratan Dhar was a refugee who later became a minister and the road is named after him. It has been named so, much later, after the colony was formed. Most of the original residents of the area in and around these ‘jabordakhol’ colonies were the inhabitants of West Bengal or Muslim labourers from Bihar who were employed in the Jessop factory and lived in the slums from which the primary road of the area derive its name ‘Hospital Basti Road’. The slum is still there and people still know it more by its earlier name.

The area was initially with the British army who abandoned it after the Second World War. There was also a very small airport some distance away amidst rice fields all around which is now known as the Netaji Subhash International Airport. The area where Motilal Colony stands was a developed land as compared to many other colonies nearby which were found on agricultural land or low lying areas. From Jessore road to 300 feet inside all was military acquired land. The first residents however, found the place in ruins as it lay vacant for the intermittent years when the military abandoned it and when the refugees arrived.
There were few empty barracks, some bunkers were also found during later construction work. The first inhabitants arrived in late 1949 and early 1950s. The place had shrubs, thick sugarcane growth in some portions, poisonous snakes like crates, pythons etc and foxes. Even during the day one could hear the cry of the foxes. For the first settlers it was a constant struggle with nature. However, the inhabitants were never ousted from the area, and unlike other ‘jabordakhol’ colonies for instance in South Kolkata, no force was used against them.

Ram Banerjee, Biren Banerjee, Jiten Bose and later Dr. Naren Chatterjee were the common names in the region who initiated the setting up of many of the colonies in the area. The former two were from Motilal Colony, Jiten Bose was from Kamlapur Colony and Naren Chatterjee was again from Motilal Colony.

The initial founder settlers having a Congress allegiance named it after Jawaharlal Nehru’s father Motilal Nehru. Also this colony was near the No.1 gate to the Airport and thus is known as No.1. Motilal Colony. The one near No. 2 gate of the Airport is called No.2 Motilal Colony and so on. Motilal Colony has a concentration of people mainly from two districts of East Bengal, Dhaka and Barishal. According to one of the oldest residents of the area Swapan Das Sharma, “These two districts witnessed the maximum disturbances and thus also the major exodus of people happened from these two districts.” He further mentions that the Colony had a majority of Brahmin families, some of who were into business while their stay at Barishal. Besides there were Nattos, Sahas, a few Namasudras and Vaishas, and four Baidya families. The total number of plots/holdings is 252. The number of families who have come from outside in recent past and settled here is twenty–five.

According to Das Sharma, the people who came and settled here were the poorest of the poor. The people in the nearby colony, Kamlapur, were comparatively more organised and better off in the sense that they had been able to save some of their things while coming
to India whereas the people of Motilal were complete destitutes, and had to start from scratch. Initially, the few families who arrived came spontaneously and started living here. Gradually when more and more refugees came to settle here, the colony people decided to allot each household three *kathas* of land and charged Rs. 200 from each allottee. Accordingly distribution happened. But there was no land left for the thoroughfares, the roads and the alleyways and thus in the later years each had to give up small portions from their three *kathas* to build the following. There were allotments for less than three *kathas* also but not more than that. The only proper road was the one near the old Mosque, which was there since much before the colony was set up. On one side of the Mosque, towards the colony, there were water bodies and on the other side there were the residences of the locals, Muslims from the milkman community and some other lower castes amongst them who had been living here for long before the refugees arrived. These Muslims later shifted to the Kaikhali area when the entire region was eventually taken over by the refugees. According to Ramranjan Dey:

All these areas had a Muslim majority and there were very few Hindus living here. After the riots and arrival of the refugees all the Muslims left after 1950s. The area called R N Guha Road, the area which goes till Nager Bazar had a Muslim majority population. There was not a single Hindu found in this area. Here there were non Bengali Muslims too. They had bought land, made houses and lived in this area. But later they abandoned the area in 1950. Kaikhali now has a concentration of Muslim population, mostly the people who all shifted from this area (R. Dey, interview). [My translation]

Initially under Bidhan Chandra Roy, the refugees here were given two kilograms of rice and two kilograms of wheat per head per family to adult members and half the amount to the minors free of cost every week. But later after his tenure this ended. From No.1 Motilal Colony one had to go as far as the Airport to the ration shop which was housed near the Old
Quarters to get one’s quota of ration which often did not last a refugee family for the entire week. Their condition worsened after the ration was discontinued since one year before Bidhan Ray’s death.

According to Swapan Das Sharma:

Most of the families did not manage to eat two square meals. Families like us would often boil locally available plants and leaves. We went to the local market to collect the thrown away leaves of the cabbages which Ma would boil for us for dinner and lunch. Sometimes the entire family would starve and sometimes seven of us would survive on 250 gms of puffed rice. We would survive on puffed rice for days together. Almost eighty percent of the families of No.1 Motilal were like us (S.D. Sharma, interview). [My translation]

There was no source for drinking water within the colony. There was a tap on the outer boundary of the Jessop factory near HMV gate and one had to go till there every day to collect drinking water. That tap is still there to this day claims Das Sharma. Much later a source of water was detected near the school while digging for some purpose and the refugees made a makeshift water hole out of it. Since then each family was allowed to collect two tins of water each day for drinking only and for any other work one had to use the water of the local pond. There were initially initiatives by the Red Cross to distribute tinned milk etc amongst the refugees, and sometimes private charity organisations would also come in and distribute one time food aid like biscuits, ghee, etc. The only proper road was Jessore Road and only bus route was till HMV Factory. The area where the VIP road exists today used to be water bodies.

In the initial years Congress Sheba Dal was active in the colony. Gradually UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) took over. The residents actively took part in the refugee movement and the food movement. Eventually the colony became a strong hold of the CPIM.
The colony went through very turbulent times during the Naxal Movement. It became the battleground for the Naxals, the Congress and the CPIM. There were several political murders and it remained under article 144 for two months during this period. Not more than five persons could congregate in an area together at any given point at that time. The year 1972 was a dark period in the history of the colony claims Das Sharma.

The colony has one school, two parks and one pond within its area. The school, in No.1 Motilal Colony, the Dumdum Motilal Bidyapith, is the oldest school in the entire locality, established in 1950. It was started inside an abandoned military barrack, initially as a primary school but now it has till class 10th and in the 11th and 12th standards it has Commerce and Business Management. Satyaranjan Sen Majumdar was the founder of the school. Swapan Das Sharma narrates the initial efforts of Satyaranjan Sen to begin the school:

He used to spread a rug and sit with small nothings like a button, a candy, a rope etc. That time the colony people were amidst extreme poverty. He used to lure kids with these and say while stitching a button on ones shirt ask him to come again. This way he started classes in his house. His vision later translated into the school when later an abandoned barrack was cleaned and the classes started with kids sitting on torn gunny bags. He did not marry and dedicated his entire life to teaching. 90 percent of the kids of our generation and the next have received their primary education from this school (S.D. Sharma, interview). [My translation]

Motilal colony got Government recognition as a colony as late as 2000 though they got their ‘arpan patro’ (free hold title deed) much earlier in 1961–62. In 1966 municipality took over and the residents got voting rights. From its inception the colony celebrated social occasions like various festivals of Durga puja, Saraswati puja et al.
Over the years the area has become a posh locality with many apartment blocks mushrooming inside the colony. Many original residents, unwilling to carry the refugee baggage forward once they were settled, sold their land and moved out of the Colony. Those who have moved in are strangers to this area and are completely unaware or uninterested about the history of the place. They have remained as outsiders and altered the original composition and way of life of the colony.

My mother’s family arrived in Motilal Colony in the mid fifties. They arrived in India in the year of Partition; not persecuted but leaving out of apprehension and without any belonging. My elder aunt, Sabita, the oldest of all the siblings soon after their arrival in India, took up the role of the bread-earner of the family like Nita in Ghatak’s film. After some years of the family’s arrival to India, my grandfather lost his leg in an accident and since then my aunt became the overseer of the family. She sacrificed her life to see the family find a foothold. She gave up her studies very early and took up a job, even before she turned eighteen. She neglected a problem in her ear and this later caused her to become completely deaf. She also married very late according to conventional standards, at the age of thirty-six.

The family struggled like the scores others who were affected by Partition. Initially they lived in a congested, lower middle income group locality in Central Kolkata, Benia Pukur Lane, sharing one room amongst nine members. My grandmother made paper bags and stitched blouses to earn some extra money. My mother, Nandita very fondly recalls the only two saris she had during her entire college life:

I had two saris I remember in my entire college life. One was blue with black border and the other one was yellow with green border-those saris were called either Begumpuri or Begumbahar. I used to wear one to college and wash and keep the other one under the mattress of our bed. In the morning it
looked as if it was ironed (N. Dasgupta, interview). [My translation]

She recalls how they never took a bus on their way to college or school to save money. After office both my aunt and my mom would do couple of tuitions before coming back late, tired and hungry. My mother too started working at the age of eighteen to support the family. She had a beautiful voice and shared on few occasions the stage with the noted Bengali singer Aarati Mukhopadhayay but could not pursue her singing career because of the circumstances.

Memories of struggling to live in a resettlement colony where everyday life was marked by a struggle to get a foothold and hold on to one’s identity is a common tale in all the stories of my grandmother’s family. But somewhere this struggle to hold on, to fight on and not let the spirit die is what overshadows the tales of loss and separation, the struggle and the self denial that mark the entire trajectory of the family’s struggle to build it from scratch. This resilience, particularly of the women in my family, is perhaps the single motivating factor behind my inspiration to work on Partition and women’s experience.

In this tale of struggle what is not forgotten is the contribution of the other women who made a mark in the life of the family. For example, the story of Rekha mashi, my aunt’s friend, who tore off her book from the half and gave it to my aunt before the exams as my aunt could not afford to buy. “I’ll read half while you finish the other half and then we can exchange the rest half amongst ourselves, but Sabita do not give up studying” she had said to my aunt which my aunt still remembers with tears in her eyes. They had met in a refugee colony as a teenager and after six decades they are still very close friends. Likewise my mother remembers the story of Rosy, the Anglo-Indian girl who was in love with her cousin brother who stayed with the family in the refugee colony for some time. Rosy worked in one
of the offices in Chowringhee and belonged to one of those Anglo-Indian families who stayed back after Independence but were in the departure mode. My mother’s cousin brother was a member of the then communist party and worked from underground. She remembers how he would come in the middle of the night and disappeared early in the morning. He would sometimes also be in disguise. She also remembers with fondness her attending the Gano Natyo Sangha’s meetings with her cousin brother and their inspiring cultural programmes. Herself being greatly drawn to music she was greatly thrilled to hear the likes of Hemanta Mukherjee, Salil Choudhury sing in front of her, artists who were to become legends in later day cultural world of Bengal. But her respect for her brother and his ideology could not justify to her his act of cowardice and the sacrifice of Rosy who sold her everything to send her brother to England when he got a job offer there. He promised to take her along after some time. But he never came back and nobody knows what happened to Rosy. This is one silence that the family let remain that way.

All these remembrances seemed to me out of the pages of a novel and one thing that linked all of them is the memory of the women and how they perceived those turbulent times and came out of it victorious. At least to me they are all great motivators and winners in their own way.

**Approaching Partition in the Present**

This fact of my grandmother’s memory and that of women of her generation providing the anchoring for the next generations to connect to the past took on a different significance with my initiation into Women’s Studies. The pre-occupation of feminist scholarship with the impact of gender, an insistence on the importance of the female experience and attempt to put right/redress what Elizabeth Minnich (1982, 7) prefers to call “a devastating conceptual
error” to expose androcentric thought, contributed towards this realisation and prompted the urgency to grapple with similar inquiries.

While working on an initial paper on women’s Partition experience in Bengal, I talked to people working on Partition and the Bengal experience and looked for similar sources to understand the Bengal side of the story. Where there were several documents giving us glimpses into the narratives from western India. I found a real dearth of documented material in Bengal, except in few literary works. This was the starting point of my inquiry.

Incidentally at an earlier date of my student life in 1992, I just felt the pulse of what polarisation of the society and rupture of the social fabric would imply at the time of communal violence in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

As a post graduate student of Film Studies, Ritwik Ghatak’s films with pangs of Partition as their underlying themes seemed to strike a familiar chord somewhere and the greatest connector was the poignancy of the woman’s experience in this historical upheaval.

The Gujarat genocide in 2002 provided the ultimate thrust and sense of an urgent need to inquire into perceptions of violence, displacement, survival and memory, especially since I am residing in Ahmedabad for the last eight years now and have felt polarization in different layers of experiences of daily life. In spite of my stay inside a National Campus of an education institute in Ahmedabad I have been unable to keep aside the memories and remembrances and this whole discourse of loss and separation. The mere sight of the blooming Madhabilata creeper outside my balcony leads to the resurfacing of my nostalgia of my grandmother’s house. The fact that I am so close to the divide, Pakistan being closer
than Delhi and the place of my stay being Ahmedabad, the centre of one of the worst cases of
genocide in South Asia, makes me more committed to the cause of raising questions about
the whole notion of borders, division, nationhood, citizenship and most importantly the
underpinning of gender in all these.

The concern expressed by Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alvis (1996, vix) holds very true in this context that today we watch with horror as wave upon wave of right
wing fanaticism, fundamentalism, bigotry and misogyny engulf South Asia, and chauvinist
forces make deep inroads into politics. In South Asia, fundamentalist agendas are
increasingly manipulating religious as well as ethnic and nationalist loyalties as a source of
cultural legitimacy and the most alarming concern that Jayawardena and Alvis state is the fact
that while a lot of the women are indicted in the ideology a lot more remain at the receiving
end.

While a significant percentage of South Asian women now actively participate as instruments of destruction in the military, in militant movements and as art of the strident forces of
communalism, an even larger percentage of the women continue to be at the receiving end of communalised rage and aggression. It is they who nurse their wounded, weep for their
murdered and seek their ‘disappeared’, who watch their houses burn, languish in refugee camps, support their household yet go on protest marches. It is they who are abducted, raped and
tortured, their scarred minds and bodies embodiments of one community’s shame and another’s rage. Yet they go on living and resisting (1996, viii).

In this context, I feel that understanding and addressing the women’s experience
becomes imperative.
The two most remarkable books on people’s history of Partition which have impressed upon my work to a great extent are *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* and *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* by Urvashi Butalia; and Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon respectively. Both the books have in the last decades altered the ways in which people’s history has been looked at and prompted a renewed interest and enquiry into the same. In both the books however, the authors while dealing with the human history of Partition with a special emphasis on gender, restrict themselves to the West of India because the partition of Bengal in the East, they too conclude, deserve a separate treatment. The dearth of writings on Bengal Partition has to some extent being filled by Prafulla Chakraborty’s book *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Chakraborty’s book remains a pioneering work till date providing a comprehensive history of the refugees from East Pakistan and their impact on the body politics of West Bengal in the aftermath of Partition. The book helps one to put into perspective the whole refugee question in Bengal. It is an indispensable reference for any further work on Bengal Partition. Three books by Sandip Bandhopadhyay *Itihasher Dike Phire: Chechallisher Danga; Deshbhag—Deshtyag and Deshbhag*; and *Smriti o Satta*, are works with significant research on the reasons of the division between the two communities of Hindus and Muslims of Bengal and provide insight into the socio-economic-political life of Bengal of that time. None of these two authors, however, deal with gender as their core area of enquiry. My work has to an extent tried to complement the gender focus absent in these works on Bengal Partition.

Even while talking about people’s history and people’s voices we tend to set a hierarchy and render the insignificant some voices which are otherwise also marginalized in the everyday life, such as the voices of the women, the lower\(^8\) caste groups, ethnic minorities,

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\(^8\) I am aware of the negative connotation and hierarchy implicit in the word ‘lower’ as used in the context of
gays, lesbians, children et al. Ravinder Kaur’s *Since 1947, Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, which is a well researched exploration of the phenomenon of migration and its aftermath in Delhi, does a good work in terms of bringing to the fore the whole issue of hearing the people from the margins recount their experiences of Partition.

About marginalized voices, in my work, I have highlighted the issue of those such as the lower caste groups from Bengal and the community of Christians, especially Bengali Christians and also to some extent Anglo-Indians. These two groups are hardly represented in Partition narratives and especially in Bengal Partition narratives. The essays of Sekhar Bandhopadhyay like “Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal: The Matua Sect and the Namasudras” and “Caste Politics and the Raj 1872–1937” and Swaraj Basu’s “The Colonial State and the Indigenous Society: The Creation of The Rajbansi Identity in Bengal” have been insightful but they are not particularly about the Partition experiences of these lower caste groups. Manoranjan Byapari’s essay “Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?”, translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee, is also important in the sense that it expresses the view of one belonging to a lower caste and addresses the problem of the lack of visibility of Dalit literature from his point of view. The issue of lack of representation and visibility of the lower caste groups is the major area of his engagement. I have dealt with a similar concern but addressed it in terms of the lived experiences of the people from lower caste groups. The full text of the resignation letter of Jogendranath Mandal, a Law and Labour minister of Pakistan and a representative of the Schedule Castes, has remained invaluable for its explanation of the reasons for the complete alienation of lower caste groups from the Bengal political scenario.

In trying to probe the presence of the Christians in East Bengal, I have come across very little material and in this context the works of Abanti Adhikari and Raana Haider tracing Caste but still used it in the rest of the thesis due to lack of a better term.
early Portuguese Settlements in East Bengal and the Project Canterbury Report, on the role and functions of the Oxford Mission in East Bengal have proved to be very handy. However, though they are valuable in terms of contextualising the presence of Christians in East Bengal they do not raise questions about the existence and working of this community vis-a-vis the others like the Hindus and Muslims and do not deal with the Partition experiences of this group too. Dorothy McMenamin in her essays “Anglo-Indian Experiences during Partition and its Impact upon their Lives” and “The Curious Exclusion of Anglo-Indians from Mass Slaughter during the Partition of India” talks about a community in India hitherto almost unrepresented in discourses on Partition—the Anglo-Indians. However, she does not touch upon the experiences of the Bengali Christians.

Ashis Nandy’s essay “The Death of an Empire” is especially important as in it he reminisces about his days in Kolkata during the Great Calcutta Killing and his experiences especially as one belonging to the Christian community. We do not easily come across the experiences of the minority (here the Christians) during the Great Calcutta Killing and it is especially relevant for putting the Chapter on Christians in my work into perspective. His essay “The Invisible Holocaust and the Journey as an Exodus: the Poisoned Village and the Stranger City” remains an important reading, dealing exclusively with Partition and its impact on the sub-continent. Nevertheless, the Bengal side of the story is touched upon sparsely.

The essay by Nighat Said Khan “Identity Violence and Women: A Reflection on the Partition of India 1947” has been particularly significant for understanding the Partition experiences of the women from Pakistan. I have been unable to reach out to people beyond our borders in Bangladesh and Pakistan and thus getting access to the voices of the women in Pakistan has been an enriching experience. They have proved that the gender implication of Partition on the lives of women on either side of the border does not have much in difference.
In works of fiction, the collection of Pakistani short stories, “Short Stories from Pakistan”, edited by Hussain Intizar and Farrukkhi Asif and Krishna Mehta’s *Kashmir 1947: A Survivor’s Story* bring to the fore different marginalized voices and thus relate directly to my work. Alok Bhalla’s anthology, *Stories about the Partition of India*, a collection of partition stories in three volumes, captures diverse voices and offers different positions in terms of dealing with Partition and provides a brilliant insight. The collection is really praiseworthy for the range of literary outputs it brings together. Rita Kothari’s *Unbordered Memories: Sindhi Stories of Partition*, helps us to hear the experiences of yet another group which has remained marginalized in terms of articulating their experiences. Bengali literature does not have a substantial output once it comes to articulation of such an unprecedented event like the Partition and its impact on the psyche and the larger socio-political cultural life of Bengal and its people.

Within fiction writing, the representation of the women’s story/voice or agency is limited to only a few works like those by Qurrantulan Hyder, Bhisma Sahani, Rajender Singh Bedi and Manto. In Bengal, Jyotirmoyee Debi’s *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* remains a rare exception. As I have mentioned earlier, this is one book which has actually let the woman speak for herself and also addressed issue like rape. In spite of the disavowal or the fact of disowning the knowledge of such crimes as rape and abduction in the interviews conducted by me, my work has been to some extent able to capture the significance of such occurrences in Bengal and its impact on the working of memory for these women who tell their stories.

The book *Train to India: Memories of another Bengal* by Moloy Krishna Dhar makes an interesting reading. It allows a microcosmic view of the dynamics of caste, community, nationalism, gender, politics, at work and gives a careful insight into the milieu in the village of East Bengal countryside.
The international collection of writings *The Oral History Reader* remains an essential reference covering a diverse range of issues pertaining to oral history like Contextualisation, Interviewing, Interpretation et al, presenting a selection of writings from North America, Britain, Australia, and Africa primarily and also a smaller number of articles from Asia, Europe and Latin America. The writing by the Personal Narratives Group *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* has also helped further in dealing with the problems of working with oral narratives. However, these theorizing originate more from a particular type of reading of experiences and events. I believe each region has its specificities in terms of dealing with society and culture and issues like remembering and forgetting and a reading rooted to the context of that very region can make it more meaningful and thus my understanding of the collection of narratives I have from my field work has remained central in this present work with oral narratives.

Similarly the essays dealing with memory such as Dori Laub’s “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, James E Young’s “Between History and Memory: The Uncanny Voices of Historian and Survivor” and “Reversing the Genocidal Mentality” by Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Markusen, all discussing the Holocaust memory, have proved to be very helpful in theorizing my work. But I have adopted them keeping in mind the context of the field of my study and the range of people I was interviewing. Though Holocaust narratives and Partition narratives have much in common especially in terms of the workings of memory and trauma and the study of the former has to great extent influenced the ways in which the latter is dealt with, nevertheless there are differences in terms of the way each has been investigated and given prominence. Holocaust is well researched and analysed while the impact of Partition of India, although almost an equally cataclysmic event, has not been fully gauged till date. Essays of Gyanendra Pandey such as “Community and Violence: Recalling Partition, Memory and History and the Question of Violence: Reflection on the
Reconstruction of Partition, India and Pakistan 1947-2002” and Veena Das’s work like *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* and *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* have helped in contextualising the problem in terms of its relevance to an South Asian experience. They have addressed the various complex questions of communalism, riots, violence, rupture, remembering and survival from the perspective of insiders. In their essays, we get to hear the reflexive voices of the ones who understand the context and the psyche of this subcontinent.

Lastly, Rita Manchanda’s essay “Gender Conflict and Displacement: Contesting ‘Infantilisation’ of Forced Migrant Women” uses “a gender sensitive perspective”, to analyse ways in which a woman as a refugee subject is configured as a non-person leading to an “infantilisation” and “de-maturation” of the refugee experience. It also raises question of women occupying a secondary status as citizens in South Asian politics. Rita Manchanda’s article raising a very pertinent issue, has actually intrigued me to explore, albeit briefly, the provision within the National and International regulations for refugees particularly with a focus on gender, and the significance and bearing of it on the question of the state of the women refugees. This is particularly relevant, I think, due to the fact that one of the major areas of my enquiry remains to be the state of the hundreds of refugees, especially the women refugees, living as Permanent Liabilities in the existing refugee camps in West Bengal.

The official reports of the West Bengal Government, *Manual of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Vol-I* and *Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Directorate. Problems of Refugee Camps and Homes in West Bengal (The Screening Committee Report, 1989)* have been particularly helpful in putting the facts and figures about the status of the refugees in West Bengal, right.

All these works have helped me to put my study into perspective and also to implore more, to specifically deal with the gender question in relation to the issues of memory,
violence, survival, displacement and loss in reference to the Partition and its implications for women in the East.

My work is primarily based on fieldwork and a reference to the print media of that time would have enriched it to a great extent, but it unfortunately remains outside the purview of the work.

**Methodology**

One of the major concerns of contemporary feminist scholarship has been that of “women’s history”. It has argued about how History has systematically silenced, absented, missed, failed to observe, failed to credit the female voice and the female existence, though purporting to be factual or neutral. Feminist historiography, according to Joan Kelly (1984) has focused attention on the dual goal, “to restore women to history and to restore our history to women” (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 9). It is not a question of mere addition, however. The effort ideally is to include women in the process of rediscovering history itself and a “re-centering of knowledge” based on their experiences. Scholars working towards this end say that the task requires formulation of new concepts, new categories, need to locate new sources, fashion new methodological tools and encourage a new understanding. Feminist historians and activists frequently talk in terms of recovering “woman’s voice, women’s voice” (Personal Narratives Group 1989, 28) Listening to women’s voices, studying women’s writings, and learning from women’s experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of the women’s agency in reconsidering history and an understanding of the world. In this attempt, women’s personal narratives have become essential primary documents for feminist research, offering a critique of many academic disciplines.
Personal narratives can have several manifestations like biography, autobiography, life history (a life story narrated to a second person who records it), diaries, journals and letters. Understanding women’s personal narratives becomes more significant as “the dynamics of gender emerge more clearly in the personal narratives of women than in those of men” (Personal Narratives Group 1989, 4). According to the Personal Narratives Group, women’s personal narratives can provide vital entry points for examining issues like the impact of gender roles on women’s lives and the interaction between the individual and the society in the construction of gender. “Personal narratives of non dominant social groups (women in general, racially or ethnically oppressed people, lower class people, lesbians) are often particularly effective sources of counter hegemonic insight because they expose the viewpoint embedded in dominant ideology as particular rather than universal” (Personal Narratives Group 1989, 7). Some women’s narratives can be read as counter narratives, “because they reveal that the narrators do not think, feel or act as they are ‘supposed to’” (1989, 7). The Personal Narratives Group claims that such narratives can serve to unmask claims that form the basis of domination, the androcentric bias, and provide an alternative understanding of the situation. Other forms of narrative can provide insights of a different nature.

Many women’s personal narratives unfold within the framework of an apparent acceptance of social norms and expectations but nevertheless describe strategies and activities that challenge those same norms. Still others may allow us new insights into the lives of women who apparently thrive within the established norms and parameters or even assertively contribute to the maintenance of prevailing systems of gender domination (1989, 7).

The Group claims that rather than dumping such narratives as counterproductive to the spirit of women’s positive agency they may be considered to understand the manoeuvres
through which women are subsumed into androcentric world order. Women’s personal narratives “whatever form they take, can be thought of as part of a dialogue of domination. Women’s lives are lived within and in tension with systems of domination. Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics.” (1989, 8)

In this work I have restricted myself to the study of oral narratives/testimonies, particularly that of women from Bengal, in an attempt to understand their experiences of the Partition of 1947.

Oral history is a methodological tool that many feminist historians have found enormously empowering. Oral History can be defined as “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction” (Perks and Thomson ed. 1998, ix). In the second half of the twentieth century oral history has had a significant impact upon contemporary history as practiced in many countries. According to Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, the editors of The Oral History Reader, oral history’s most distinctive contribution has been to include within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been “hidden from history”. Especially, for the feminist historians, looking at women’s testimonies, and placing them alongside or against the official discourse of history have offered a new and different way of looking at history. Stree Sakti Sangatana in We Were Making History emphasizes the uniqueness of the orality in women’s lives in absence of their access to other formal means of communication.

Though women have traditionally been marginalised in written cultures, they have always told stories and sung songs. These are often stories or songs that uphold the norms of a culture and
serve to maintain the hold of its ideology. But they are also stories of those who resisted power and fought injustice. For each other women had always had stories that never saw the light of the more public mode of patriarchal cultures. Traditionally mothers have passed knowledge and expertise down to their daughters verbally. Fine tuned skills of resistance and survival,…have passed down this alternate line. Teaching and learning in this parallel culture is intimate, personalized, practical (1989, 28).

This is particularly true for women of the generation that is under my study, and also generally for women in this part of our world where literacy levels and access to other more accepted forms of communication remain at a staggering low, especially for the female population.

While acknowledging the potentials of oral narratives, however, we must be equally attentive to its complexities. Understanding the issues of context, interpretation and use become central when we are dealing with oral narratives. Context includes the considerations of the social and historical conditions affecting people’s life experiences and the family and community relations in which the life develops. Interpretation refers to the issues like the individual life story and the particular society where it is received, the narrator–interviewer relation, question of authorship. Use focuses on the ethical implications of researcher’s collecting and publishing life stories, as well the search for new forms for the responsible presentation of research results.

The Personal Narratives Group highlights the importance of understanding the context:

Neglecting the context from which a life is narrated invites the risk of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Acknowledging the centrality and complexity of context reveals
the range of experiences and expectations within which women live, and provide the vital perspective from which to interpret women’s ways of navigating the weave of relationships and structures which constitute their worlds (1989, 19).

The individual identity is shaped through constructs of race, class, gender. The individual is joined to the world through social groups, structural relations and identities. However, these are not inflexible categories but constitute a dynamic process through which the individual shapes and is shaped. Examining the context becomes indispensable in understanding women’s experience particularly in the third world context especially where women often have to play out multiple and overlapping identities. In this context it becomes problematic to arrive at general conclusions about women, history and their agential capacity.

Talking about questions of interpretation I would refer to the point raised by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin who state that feminist oral historians realize that traditional oral history is still grappling with the “separation of subject and object, interviewer and interviewee, thought and feeling and the political and the personal” (1998, 14). Scholars working with oral narratives have sometimes assumed an objective stance in their work, claiming that it was possible and desirable to be impartial observer and recorders of their subjects’ lives. Feminist scholarship points to the distortions that result from such a stance, and insists that the perspective of the researcher—in terms of gender, class, culture, disciplinary orientation—be taken into account and acknowledged. Menon and Bhasin discuss how “most feminists advocate empathy and mutuality, rejecting all the hierarchies inherent in the formal, impersonal, falsely neutral “interview” ” (1998, 14). They share the feminists concern about the uncomfortable fact of class privilege in almost all interviewing situations, the matter of material inequality between the researcher and her subject, enabling the old hierarchies and inequalities to get reproduced all over again. In interpretation there are
also related problems of accuracy and fidelity to the letter and spirit of the narrative, of interpretation, evaluation, selection and representation. Feminist scholars need to be cautious of both the implications and limitations of one’s own intellectual interest when working with women’s oral narratives. The expectations and understanding that the interpreter herself brings to the life story are themselves an essential element in the contextualization of personal narratives. It is essential to put aside one’s own framework and allow the connection to emerge in which the women see their own lives and the meaning and sense they make out of their lives.

Then there is the “troubling issue of ‘authorship’”. Whose story is to be told? Whose voice is to be heard? Feminist scholars are not comfortable with the traditional scholar’s assumption of the voice of authority in creation and interpretation of life stories. They instead feel comfortable with the idea of a shared ownership and control over the “narrative text” between the original “narrator” who tells her life story and the “interpreter” who records or analyzes various dimensions of the relationship between narrator and interpreter. They recognize that the interpreter is an active participant involved in distinctive ways with the shaping of a personal narrative.

In order to understand the configuration of the story—what it emphasizes, what it omits, what it may exaggerate— the interpreter must be sensitive to the narrator’s purpose for telling the story. This sensitivity demands a profound respect for the narrator and what she says. Rather than labelling any story as true or untrue, interpreters need to look for the reasons why narrators tell their stories (Personal Narratives Group, 203). The fact that in the end it is the researcher who controls the material, however participatory the research may have been, is also a matter of concern. While the interpreter may have thought of herself or himself in some sense at the receiving end of the narrative, the role
changes dramatically as soon as the actual production of the text begins. It is the interpreter who has the final authority in terms of the formation and publication of the narrative and the final power of decision-making in the production. Feminists claim that this complexity may be avoided if the sense of collaboration prevails and we understand that what we hear “is not a single voice, but a continuing dialogue about possibilities” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 16). They say that this imbalance can also be somewhat “redressed by returning the research to their subjects” or initiating some action that helps maintain some form of continuity with them. According to Lila Abu Lughod (1988), “Such attempts, at best, demonstrate a sincerity of purpose and sensitivity to the larger quest of power and control; they do little, in the end to resolve the ethical issues” (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 27).

The ethical and moral implications of collecting personal narratives in the first place and utilizing them for research, have troubled the scholars working in this area. There is the dilemma of “how much to tell” especially when confidentiality is enjoined and the experiences are deeply personal and traumatic. This has come up especially with regard to Holocaust, incest and rape testimonies. There has been considerable debate over the issue of ethics. One view (Daphne Patai 1991, 150) holds that as feminist ethnographers take the commonalities and differences between researchers and subjects into account, they contribute to the cause of feminism in special ways (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 27). Another view (Personal Narratives Group 1989, 261) says “…too much ignorance exists in the world to allow us to await perfect research methods before proceedings.”

Menon and Bhasin elaborates how the “reliability” of the personal narrative as historical document has been questioned on the grounds of its “ephemeral nature, its distance from facts, its flexible and volatile character, and its propensity to misrepresentation— by interviewer and interviewee, alike” (1998, 28). When talking about lives it is commonly
believed that people often lie, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused and get things wrong. Yet they reveal truths. According to the Personal Narratives Group these truths don’t reveal the past “as it actually was” aspiring to a standard of objectivity and as ‘there and given”. “Unlike the reassuring Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof or self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them.” (Personal Narratives Group 1989, 261)

Shared stories provide significant ways of understanding the world. In oral cultures, through exchanges of life stories knowledge about the world and how it functions is absorbed. “The significance of such exchanges for women in clarifying social realities and challenging hegemonic oppression has often been profound” (1989, 262).

The Personal Narratives Group criticises academic disciplines for elevating some kinds of truths that conform to established criteria of validity over others.

Generalization based on these elevated Truths, become norms which are rarely challenged for their failure to consider or explain exceptions. This elevation or generalization serve to control: control data, control irregularities of human experiences and, ultimately control what constitutes knowledge. Considered in these terms, the truth in personal narratives cannot stand the tests to which they are subjected, i.e., the tests of verifiability, reliability, facticity, or representativeness (1989, 263).

Using such a limited definition, truth admits only one standard at a time in place of multiple truths in all life stories that the feminists emphasize. Women’s personal narratives embody and reflect the reality of difference and complexity and stress the centrality of gender to human life and thought. As William Moss (1977) puts it, “The truths of personal narratives are the truths revealed from real positions in the world, through lived experience in social
relationships, in the context of passionate beliefs and partisan stands. They recount efforts to
grapple with the world in all its confusion and complexity and with the normal lack of
omniscience that characterizes the human condition” (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 28).
The Personal Narratives Group rightly claims that “it is precisely because of their
subjectivity—their rootedness in time, place, personal experience, and their perspective—
ridden character—that we value them” (1989, 263-262).

However, there are views which see little validity in individual stories representing
either group or collective interest. The “evidentiary value” of oral history has been challenged
on the ground of its’ being “raw, unprocessed data, highly selective and untested” (Menon
and Bhasin 1998, 28). William Moss cautions that recollection itself is a complex piece of
evidence. He says that it involves three factors—the initial event or reality, the memory of it
which is at least one step removed from reality and the testimony which is yet another
interpretative act. A fourth act of selection is that of the interview. Moss says that memory
itself is tricky (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 28-29). Butalia similarly comments
“Working with memory is never simple or unproblematic…There has been considerable
research to show that memory is not even ‘pure’ or ‘unmediated’. So much depends on who
remembers, when, with whom, indeed to whom, and how” (1998, 10).

However, she wisely adds that to her the way people choose to remember an event, a
history, is as important as what one might call the ‘facts’ of that history, for after all, the
facts are not self evidently given. They too are interpretation as remembered or recorded by
one individual or the other. Menon and Bhasin quotes Moss where he says that there is no
way of knowing from the testimony whether it is “distorted or accurate, deliberately falsified
or spontaneously candid.” Yet, he notes that, even as we move further from reality,
recollection provides “a corresponding abstractive value of fascinating richness” and that
recollections may, in their “very errors, provoke understanding and insight.” Furthermore, he
sas that, the aggregate recollections of many people can provide a rough means for approximating historical truth where no transitional or selective records exist (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 29). James Young (1988), known for his work on Holocaust testimonies comments: “the aim of testimonies can never be to document experiences or present facts as such. Rather it is to document both the witness as he makes testimony and the understanding and meaning of events generated in the act of testimony itself.” Oral history, he believes is a matter of memory, reconstruction and imagination. Unlike written history that tends to hide its line of construction oral testimonies, Young says, “retain the process of construction, the activity of witness.” (quoted in Menon and Bhasin 1998, 29)

“Hardly ever and hardly anywhere have women written history. They have left few accounts, personal and otherwise, and have committed much less to writing than men” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 14). Oral sources have thus proved invaluable for historians for retrieving women’s history. In the oral mode women still have access to some agency of communication. We get to hear their voices, listen as they “speak for themselves.” The gaps and silences in the telling can be tried and captured. Orality helps retain the plurality of voices. It is empathetically participatory rather than objectively distanced. It is situational rather than abstract. Orality can render an alternative to standardized language and can bring out the subtle nuances of speech. Challenging hegemonic oppression, contemporary political movements have capitalized on oral testimonies, in their effort to transform society and inequalities within it. Dr. Kavita Panjabi in her essay “The Generic Location of Women’s Testimonial Writing” traces one such trajectory in the context of Latin America and India.

In the last three decades, the testimonio has emerged as one of the most important literary sites for the generation of women’s collective and oppositional consciousness in India and Latin America. Through the political practice of recording historical
memory and eye–witness accounts, testimonies foreground a critique of oppressive state rule (1991–92, 58).

The emphasis of testimonies as intervention is seen as one of its chief characteristics. “Hence the testimonio is not seen as substitute for historiography, but as a work occupying a space distinct from the latter in terms of establishing a collective identity and consciousness, in terms of foregrounding voices as that have to be heard”, comments Dr. Panjabi.

However, she says that the situation within which testimonial literature is situated in Latin America and India is radically different. “In Latin America, with the publication of a large number of testimonios and their legitimation as a literary genre by Cuba’s cultural centre, the Casa de las Americas, in 1970, the testimonio has come to stay. She cites the examples of some of the pioneering testimonies from Latin America, like Sandino’s Daughters: Testimonios of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle; I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman In Guatemala; and Let me speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines. In the Indian subcontinent, however, she says “this genre is still in the nascent stage” and that it has yet to gain recognition as a distinct genre. “However,” she argues “the presence of important testimonios narrating women’s experiences of political struggles in the last two and half decades testifies to the growing significance of this genre in the sub-continent too.” She cites the examples of We Were Making History: Women and the Telengana Uprising by Stree Shakti Sangatana, the prison testimonies of the Naxalite movement Hanyaman and Jailer Bhetor Jail by Jaya Mitra and Meenakshi Sen respectively, and the diary of a Sindhi woman prisoner Akhtar Baluch’s Sister are you still here?” (1991-92, 58).

In recent feminist studies on the Partition of India in 1947, testimonies have proved to be a useful source for understanding women’s experiences of an event in recent history which marks a “watershed” as much in people’s consciousness as in the lives of those who
experienced it and were affected. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin state that there is no dearth of written material on the Partition of India—official records, documents, private papers, agreements and treaties, political histories, analyses, a few reminiscences, vast amount of newspaper reportage and reams of government information. While there is an abundance of these records there is an absence of enquiry into its cultural, psychological and social ramifications. They point out that “Partition fiction (and some non-fiction) is almost the only social history we have of this time” (1998, 22) because it is the only significant non-official contemporary record we have of the time and it is the only area where we find here and there women’s voices “speaking for themselves.” Official memory is after all only one of many memory. Different sorts of telling reveal truth and the “fragment” is significant precisely because it is marginal rather than mainstream, particular rather than general, (even individual) and because “it presents history from below.” It can offer “alternative” reading of the master narrative and what Butalia terms as the “underside” of this history. As she further points out that the endeavour should be to place these voices alongside existing factual histories rather than against them.

The Present Study

The Context

In the present study, I have relied primarily on total 116 interviews. All the interviews have been conducted by me. Though I have looked at all of them, I have drawn the extracts only from sixty-two interviews. Ninety-seven of these interviews were conducted under the aegis of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, between 2001–2002. Six of the interviews were conducted earlier in 2000–2001. Smt. Ashoka Gupta’s interview was conducted in 2004. Twelve more interviews were conducted later in 2008–2010.
The various districts in West Bengal where the interviews have been conducted are Kolkata, 24 Parganas-North, Hooghly, Nadia, Malda, and Murshidabad. They include rural and urban resettlement colonies and also existing refugee camps. In all these instances, the men and women who were interviewed were over the age of sixty-five, the maximum age of a respondent being ninety-nine years. The interviewees are mainly from lower income group, some are from the middle income group and only a handful are economically well off. There are also such people who were living in conditions of extreme poverty as in the Camps.

The educational background especially of the women range mainly from non-literates to below primary levels, with a few exceptions. The interviews include people mostly hailing from erstwhile East Bengal who had experienced Partition, people from various places like Noakhali, Barishal, Dhaka, Faridpur, Rajshahi, Pabna, and Khulna to name a few important ones. Majority of the interviewees are Hindus. There is one Muslim interviewee and twelve Bengali Christian interviewees.

All the interviews were conducted at the field, most of the conversations taking place in familial situation and not always on a one to one basis though that remained my primary effort. I identified people almost randomly for conducting the interviews once I reached the field; though the settlement colonies and camps were identified beforehand. Many a time, however, one person would lead me on to several others with similar experiences. While conducting interviews in the urban areas I had primarily relied on some kind of previous information from persons acquainted or familiar with the interviewee. In the former situation I faced some initial resistance, a degree of reluctance and suspicion, especially with the women, who hesitated to speak in the presence of the male members and also when the male members interrupted their telling and tried to take charge of it themselves. In few instances, I
could not make the person speak at all or I had to forego the interview half way through due to resistance put up by the family members or the respondents themselves. In none of such instances, however, I thought it ethical to pester the interviewees beyond their wishes. In the latter case, what helped me in my interaction was some degree of acquaintance that I had with these individuals and the help I got from those who introduced me to the interviewees. However, in both cases, another factor which helped tie a familiar chord was the very mention of the word ‘Partition’ which I was trying to enquire and which they were living with every moment of their lives all these years. The word immediately brought back associations, it seemed.

In spite of having a well-structured questionnaire in most cases (or even loosely-structured questionnaire in few cases), during the course of my interview, I did not follow a strict question-answer schedule, shutting off the spontaneous telling against my queries. The conversation was more free-flowing. It was more an interaction than question-answer session, without losing the focus of my inquiry. To me, it seemed that the chain of associations and the emotional involvement Partition memory unleashed, could not be captured within any rigid structure. What was of immediate concern was that of listening. It was an exercise in listening and an effort as in Butalia’s words “to learn how to lay our urgencies temporarily aside and allow this emphasis on the ‘telling’ as against the ‘asking’ to emerge”, without losing the focus. Learning to listen to the women was particularly challenging. Butalia too points out how oral historians have often written about “the difficulty of speaking to and with women, of learning to listen differently, often of listening to the hidden nuance, the half-said thing, the silences which are sometimes more eloquent than speech” (1998, 16).
I conducted the interviews in Bengali. I used a Dictaphone to record the accounts and also took some notes. All the interviews have been transcribed and have been translated from Bengali to English. All translations are mine. I feel, however, the process of translation takes away much from the quality of speech, the specificity of the dialect. As Butalia rightly says that the transcription of any interview can never be an unmediated text. “In transferring word to text so much is lost. The particular inflection, the hesitation over certain thoughts and phrases, even certain feelings, the body language which often tell a different story from the words” (1998, 12). Therefore, any claim of the testimony being presented in the “pure” form, would be a falsification. I have tried my best to understand the gaps and silences. I maintained the chronology of the accounts, as narrated. I did not do away with the repetitions, as I thought they were an essential part of the telling. I also tried to maintain the specificity of the dialect. As the women went on narrating their experiences, what occurred to me of utmost importance, was the urgency of documenting such accounts. Memory seemed to fade and in many instances, some of the women of whom I had heard and went looking for were already dead. The women whose accounts I have included here are in no way mere samples. They are the agents who helped me with an understanding of their lives and times as they ‘spoke for themselves.’

Without going into the historical events, causes and effects that led to Partition, here I focus on the experiences of ordinary women, as they perceived it and its implication in their lives. I feel that the Partition marked a rupture not only in history and over geographical/physical space but more deeply within the psyche of millions of those who were displaced, and a whole generation of people uprooted. The physical displacement, the loss, its reasons and results are much accounted for but what remain largely absent, is the perpetual schism people suffered and internalised and its implication in terms of memory. I have addressed this absence in my work.
The Structure

This study is divided into four Chapters preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion.

The first chapter explores the workings of memory and the connection between memory and violence; how violence is conceived, internalised and how it is remembered. Norms of community shaping perceptions of violence and the structure of ideas within which violence is perceived and issues of representation and signification of the perceptions of violence are the areas that the chapter elaborates.

The second chapter deals with Partition and the notions of community. Understanding the notions of community becomes central for developing insights into how people perceived and retained the memory of Partition and its aftermath. The formulation of the ‘other’ vis-à-vis one’s own community and the structures of ideas within which it is perceived and represented are vital for understanding the experience of Partition and its articulation. Beside the two communities who are most talked about in Partition history, the Hindus and the Muslims, here I have dealt with the experiences of a community hardly represented in Partition history and especially in Bengal Partition— the Christians, particularly the Bengali Christians and to some extent the Anglo-Indians.

My third chapter deals with yet another marginalized group, people from the lower caste groups from Bengal like Namasudras, Malos, Barujibis, Rajbansis et al, whose voices, like that of women, remain obscured from the main discourses of Partition. In this chapter, I have looked at caste as a major factor shaping experiences of violence and resistance, displacement/migration, resettlement/rehabilitation, reconstruction of life (vocation, skill upgradation, exposure, access to resources et al)/place in the mainstream and caste and
identity politics in Bengal in relation to the Partition. I have tried to explore whether caste hierarchies broke down as a result of Partition and its workings or whether they got reinstated, and whether the caste question was addressed in any form at all in this whole discourse on nation building.

The fourth chapter examines issues like experiences of loss, displacement and survival and its recollection; sense of loss and the methods to cope/live with it; impetus for survival and strategies of survival and the whole issue of reconstructing life and negotiating with memory. My main attempt is to understand the different ways in which women recall and relate to events pertaining to loss, displacement and survival.

Finally in the Conclusion, I have tried to raise several issues which remain unresolved in my mind as a researcher working on Partition, like the implication of Partition for us as third generation members—belonging to a refugee family; the issue of yet another group who hardly finds any mention in Partition history—the children of Partition; issues of obliteration of presence and of memory; issue about the ethical dimension of probing painful memories; and the issue of whether there is any way out of this perpetual schism. The presence of a large number of refugees in the Camps in West Bengal from the Partition times and the quality of life they lead also made me to look for the national and international legal implications binding on the Indian state vis-a-vis the refugees.

Notions of memory and violence and issues of displacement, loss and survival remain the underlying focus of all the chapters. Based on oral narratives of people recollecting their experiences of Partition, and having a distinct gender focus, the issues of agency, subjectivity and memory remain some of the major concerns of the thesis.
One of the greatest contributions of oral history has been to allow people, often marginalized from mainstream history writing, to “inscribe their experiences on the historical record” and offer their own interpretations of history. More specifically, they bring out “particular aspects of historical experience which tend to be missing from other sources, such as personal relations, domestic work or family life, and they have resonated with the subjective or personal meanings of lived experience” (Perks and Thomson 1998, ix). The agency and the subjectivity of the narrator get to be exercised very actively in the whole process of historical reconstruction. In many projects the whole aim centres around empowering of individuals or social groups “through the process of remembering and interpreting the past, with an emphasis on the value of process as much as historical product” (1998, ix).

Urvashi Butalia in her essay “Community State and Gender: On Women’s Agency during Partition” shows that it is difficult to arrive at general conclusion about women, history and their agential capacity. Women have often played out multiple and overlapping identities. An understanding of agency also needs to take into account notions of the moral order which is sought to be preserved when women act, as well as the mediation of the family, community, class and religion. Butalia raises questions about the agency about such women who were vocal but were in fact “allying with the interest of her community, however patriarchal, male centred, oppressive it may have been” (Butalia 1993, WS 13). Such women problematise the entire issue of agency and call for a re-examination of the complexities of the roles of women.

Luisa Passerini, talking about the value and validity of oral history, most significantly highlights the role of subjectivity in history—“the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered.” (1998, 3)) Talking about the specificity of oral material she states:
We should not ignore that the raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of cultures, and therefore includes not only literary narrations but also the dimension of memory, ideology and subconscious desires (1998, 54).

She claims that “irrelevancies and discrepancies must not be denied”, and that the influence of public culture and ideology upon individual memory is actually revealed in the silences, discrepancies and idiosyncrasies of the personal testimony. For, “Oral sources seek to be taken as forms of culture and testimonies of its change over time.” suggests Passerini. Another Italian working with oral history, Alessandro Portelli observes, “the unique and the most precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker’s subjectivity” and that “Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible ‘facts’” (1998, 67).

For me the greatest agency that was forged by these women was when they agreed readily to speak out for themselves, sharing their lives’ experiences with me, a considerable number of them doing so for the first time in their entire lifetime. That they were hearing their voices and were actually giving words to their experiences, their feelings, their perceptions of the event of Partition for the first time in nearly fifty years was a big exercise of their agency. The telling itself, and the fact that they survived the trauma, the dislocation and reconstructed not only their lives but lives of their families was proof enough of their exercising their agency.

I have enumerated in almost all my chapters how the women played pivotal roles in the entire process of dislocation, survival, reconstruction of the families. Their agency, I feel has been exercised at all levels right from surviving trauma and displacement, to managing food and shelter in the aftermath of the event, to becoming the bread winners as in case of the majority of the refugee women in Bengal, and also in keeping this memories alive. Their
telling of the event speaks of their subjective reception and interpretation of the happenings, a process extremely important to my reading and analysis of the narratives. The subjectivity that these women bring into their understanding of the circumstances that they lived through is vital in understanding the event and its historic significance in shaping the perceptions of an entire generation or two which bore the brunt of its impact, and in determining the nature of the memory that is passed down to the subsequent generations.