Chapter - 4

Narrativizing Partition: Abandoning Bhite and Desh: The Recollection of Pre and Post-Partition life of the Sylheti Refugees in Cachar

*Mamatabihin Kalosrote Banglar Rastra Sima Hoite*

*Nirbasita Tumi Sundari Sreebhumi*

*Bharati Ashan Sunnya Hote Banglar Hridhoyer Sathe*

*Banimalyo Diya Badhe Tobo Hiya*

*Se Badhan Chirodiner Tore Tobo Kache*

*Bangalir Ashirbad Gatha Hhoye Achey*

--- Rabindra Nath Tagore

Bhattacharjee 2011: Appendix

The Partition of India was accompanied by the Partition of Punjab, Bengal and Assam. One observes that the Partition of Punjab and Bengal has dominated much of the academic discourse on Partition. However, a similar engagement with the Partition of Assam and the subsequent forced migration from Sylhet to Cachar has been lacking. More than sixty-four years have passed since Partition, but the issue of forced displacement and rehabilitation of refugees is yet to gain any serious academic engagement. It would not be wrong to say that it remained a hidden chapter in the history of Partition.

Sylhet referendum, through which the Partition of Sylhet was carried out, did manage to stroke the minds of a few historians. However, such studies were limited and inadequate. In fact, the concentration was more on political aspects of Partition than the social and psychological aspects of the forced displacement,
which perniciously affected the lives of a large number of refugees. It is important to mention here that even the historians and littérateurs of Surma Valley (present Barak Valley) who experienced the brutality of the Partition and whose families were involved in intensive relief work chose to remain silent. Such self-imposed muteness, as Purnendu Choudhury a refugee who migrated from Sylhet to Cachar, explains were conscious efforts to avoid more conflicts (My interface with Purnendu Choudhury on 30 August 2006). Another refugee who migrated from Sylhet to Karimganj describes his experience in the following lines, “The traumatic experiences of leaving behind my native home and then discrimination by the Assam Government prevented me from writing anything about the consequences of Partition that changed our lives almost overnight. The fear pushed the entire refugee issue into stoic silence” (narrated by Amalendu Chakrabarty in an interface on 12 June 2006).

As Partition of Sylhet remained unattended in the Partition historiography, it was but natural that Cachar remained an invisible Partition theatre in the entire process of nation building in post-colonial India. It can be said without exaggeration that missing the accounts of the Partition victims of Cachar has expunged it from historical records. Hence, we assume that, by listening to the victims of Partition, it may be possible to construct, what Ranabir Samaddar calls, “The History that Partition Creates” (Samaddar 1997: 1).

We need to make it clear at the outset that the “human history” of the victims of the Partition who took refuge in Cachar is not a reconstruction of something that happened in the past. Rather, it is a dialogue with the present as we still have a number of surviving victims of Partition. In this regard, let us quote Sukrita Paul Kumar here who observes, “Since Partition is recent history and many from amongst the affected people are still alive, to narrativize Partition is not really a reconstruction of the past, it is in fact a recording of a continuous present” (Kumar 2000: 231).

Built on the oral testimony of the surviving victims, an attempt has been made in this chapter to explore the hidden histories of the Partition victims in Cachar with the tools of the memory and oral history. In “Remembrances of
Narrativizing Partition: Abandoning Bhte and Desh

things past”, Marcel Proust believes that “it is possible to recapture the past through the actions of memory. Memory is the ability of brain to store, retain and subsequently recall information” (cited in Chakrabarty 2000: 174). “The domain of oral history has prompted some of the most interesting analyses of memory work as an alternative to archive-based history” (Portelli, cited in Saint 2010: 34). Susannah Radstone points out, “there has been a veritable explosion of interest in the sphere of memory in different disciplines in recent years, including history, sociology, literary criticism, cultural studies and film studies, each approaching the subject through the methodological lens deemed appropriate” (Radstone, ibid 2010: 34). “The problem of persistence of traumatic memory and the crucial significance of survivor testimony has been at the forefront of discussions of the ‘Final Solution’, as exemplified in numerous studies in recent times, such as that of Levi, Friedlander, Lifton Felman and Laub, Caruth and LaCapra amongst others” (ibid 2010: 36).

Sharing of inner sensibilities and experiences could have some limitations because memory cannot always be pure and unmediated. Much depends on who remembers, when, with whom, to whom and how (Butalia 2002: 141). Keeping in view the limitations, we intend to construct the narrative on Partition based on the experiences of the refugees who migrated to Cachar. We would take into account their experiences of pre-partitioned life and subsequently compare it with the trauma caused by violent displacement. Since Bengalis are emotionally attached to their home and homeland, we also attempted to study their feelings about their lost native home. The experiences of the refugees interviewed were relatively varied because they migrated in different waves and from different socio-economic backgrounds. We need to note that a lot depended on their economic status, gender and hostile environment created by the Partition and communal violence.

4.1 Narratives of the Novelists and Literatures

The fictions written on the Partition of India largely represent the Hindu-Muslim community life in pre-partitioned India. The stalwart writers on Partition like Saadat Hasan Manto, Intizar Hussain, Alok Bhalla, Qurratulain Hyder, Rahi
Masoom Raza, Krishna Sobti, Mushirul Hasan and others recounted the commonly shared childhood, a reasonably harmonious society which could function despite the reservation, tension or disturbances. In his introduction to *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home* (2006) Alok Bhalla articulated that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis, are culturally a single people with different languages, religions and customs. He observed that the idea of Partition to the fiction writers was “nothing more than a mean, ungenerous, and grotesquely inaccurate idea of separate and religiously defined civilizational habitats. An idea that left behind millions of people who were broken and deceived, bewildered and homeless” (Bhalla 2006: 53). Mushirul Hasan believes that “Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent formed a single people, sharing a culture in which linguistic, regional and fraternal bonds crossing religious communities were socially foundational, and indeed in which folk religious worship was frequently a fusion of Hindu and Muslim practice” (ibid: 381).

Kanti B. Pakrasi in his excellent piece of work “*The Uprooted: A Sociological study of the Refugees of West Bengal* (1971) observed that Partition should never merely mean the physical division (territorial) of this great subcontinent, it cuts through the “corporate living” of many thousands of people who had and still have scores of cultural similarities. Political and religious decisions happened to overpower cultural and economic considerations to divide overnight the people concerned into two distinct groups having contending passions (Pakrasi 1971).

The novels or literature written on Partition in English also represent the enriched community life people enjoyed in pre-partitioned India. Khuswant Singh’s *A Train to Pakistan*, Kartar Singh Duggal’s *Twice Born, Twice Dead*, Chamal Nahal’s *Azadi* etc. pointed towards a rather romanticized picture of communal harmony in pre-partition days (Kumar 2002: 233). English novelist Amitava Ghosh in his The *Shadow Lines* (1988) “uses recollective or episodic memory (also called personal memory) to understand the communal past” (Chakrabarty 2000:175). “Apart from the matter of worship the two lived a
common life, social, economic, cultural and intellectual. Fear of each other had once been absent almost completely (Rao 1967:7). Tathagoto Roy in his book My People Uprooted: A saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal pointed out that in Sylhet probably as a result of higher literacy among the Muslims, communal amity prevailed (Roy 2003).

Novels written in Bangla like Dibendu Palit’s Alam’s Own House portrayed the Partition memory and nostalgia. Narendra Nath Mitra’s Palanka (The Four Poster) is a powerful portrayal of Hindu-Muslim quotidian life (Cowasjee and Duggal 1995:17). In a story A tale of Muslim Woman Rabindra Nath Tagore through the central character Habir Khan epitomised composite culture wherein the boundaries created between the communities were unreal. The voice that the poet sought to create was neither Hindu nor Muslim, but of humanity (Assaduddin and Hasan 2000:52). Mahesh, a short story written by Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay represents inter-communal relations in Bengal (Chakrabarty 2003:79). Shyamolesh Das in his Srihatter Gonovote Bharat Itihaser Kolonko in Bangla also highlighted the Hindu-Muslim amity in Sylhet. He observed that in Sylhet, communal amity prevailed between the Hindus and the Muslims from time immemorial (Das 1996: 13). In her novel Phera (2003) Taslima Nasrin depicted a sense of belongingness for the homeland and its loss (Chakrabarty 2000: 174). Sushasini Das in her Partition Diary also acknowledged the ‘beautiful relationship between the Hindus and Muslims’ (Das 2003: 169). Amitava Choudhury in one of his articles Nirbasita Tumi articulated an unique Hindu-Muslim ambience in Sylhet (Choudhury 2002:156) [Translation mine].

4.2 Narration of the Refugees

The refugees who were interviewed during the course of this study recollected their meaningful shared community life in the unique socio-cultural ambience in pre-partitioned Sylhet. Given the long established modes of living within a syncretic culture, most of them narrated that they interacted in their day today life not as people from any religious community but as members of society in a reasonably well ordered world. The refugees narrated that in pre-partitioned
life religion was essentially a faith of private domain. They could hardly recollect any such carnage that could shape their identity rigidly as Hindus or Muslims. In fact, they never denied the slim spurt of violence that occurred at times, considered intrinsic to any society. They largely shared the similar language, culture, social tradition, and usage. People from both the communities participated in the festivals of each other with zeal and enthusiasm and the children enjoyed their childhood without much prejudice. In between the conversations, the refugees repeatedly used the prefix “before Partition” in almost every time they spoke. This quintessentially indicated the rooted-ness of their present life in their ancestral home in Sylhet. The shared community life between the Hindus and the Muslims helped the people to negotiate the uniqueness of their social and cultural life. They fondly hold the memories of their old home. The ties between the communities were vividly represented in the family tales, in everyday conversation of the refugees and the displaced (My conversation with Girban Kar on 10 June 2005).

Case 1

Ajit Nag (85) migrated from Baralain village of Sylhet district to Ram Krishna Nagar area of Karimganj. The terror of communal violence in 1950 drove him away from his homeland. He later worked as a field investigator of relief and rehabilitation department of the government in Ram Krishna Nagar. As he recounted the pre-partitioned reality of his ancestral place, he emphasised on having lived a community life in a serene and peaceful ambience in Sylhet. In his recollection, it was focused that even when Dhaka witnessed a worst communal violence in 1926 and onwards, in Sylhet fraternal feelings existed between the communities (My conversation with Ajit Nag on 16 June 2005).

Case 2

In the same spirit Sunil Bhowmic (86) of village Chulkhai of Sylhet district who migrated to Karimganj narrated that they lived a simple life in Sylhet. He reiterated that people reciprocated each other enthusiastically; particularly the rich people helped the poor. Their life in their ancestral village
was emotionally more satisfying. But the Partition was a total breakdown from that civil amity (narrated by Sunil Bhowmik in an interface on 23 June 2006).

**Case 3**

Birendra Deb (85) of village Kaujpur in Sylhet district who migrated to Karimganj recalled that they were happily settled in their ancestral land and experienced no tension or ill feeling. The whole ambience was one of tranquility and friendliness where love and affection was marked by mutual reciprocation. His interview magnified a sincere expression of friendship that prevailed among the villagers (My interface with Birendra Deb on 12 June 2006).

**Case 4**

Girban Kar (96) who migrated from Sylhet and a present resident in Ram Krishna Nagar, Karimganj recollected that in pre-partitioned Sylhet, the relation between the communities was amicable and brotherly. But Partition drenched people into the ocean of sorrow. He candidly narrated that the Sylhet Referendum was imposed without popular mandate. On the eve of the referendum, district population was polarised by inciting communal passion in a land of Hindu-Muslim fraternity. The Hindus of Sylhet panicked due to the situation of fear created by the communal violence. They apprehended that their life and dignity were at stake in the Muslim state and the only option available was to migrate. During freedom movement, he was involved in the movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi like Non-Co-operation and Quit India etc. and was arrested by police while hoisting the Congress flag in Maulavi Bazaar Government High School in Sylhet. People fought the freedom struggle together. No one bothered who was Hindu and who was Muslim (Interviewed Girban Kar on 17 June 2006).

**Case 5**

Sushil Brahmachari (80) who was a student during Partition and migrated from Sylhet to Patharkandi area in Karimganj recollected that he had a couple of school friends from the Muslim community. The ties of friendship were unbounded by any kind of rigidity and hence there was enough give and take among friends. No one bothered about each other's religion. They celebrated
each other’s festivals with enthusiasm and zeal (My conversation with Sushil Brahmacari on 12 June 2006).

Case 6

Debopradsad Chakrabarty (82) of Lamabazar, Sylhet and presently residing in Dohaliya area of Karimganj recalled that in the pre-partitioned Sylhet there was essential amity among the people of different communities. The friendly and peaceful association meaningfully enriched the community life. Even during the turbulent time of communal violence, the friends from the Muslim community helped them to cross the border (interviewed Deboprasad Chakrabarty on 18 June 2006).

Case 7

Nipendra Deb (85) of village Balisahasra of Sylhet district, who migrated to Karimganj, recalled that they lived happily and peacefully in their native village which was inhabited by the people of different communities. A happy and calm admixture of the diverse cultures indeed enriched the ambience of social interaction. In fact, it was the connectivity and inter-dependence of their everyday lives that they learnt to respect each other’s culture and way of life. He asserted that in Desherbari they enjoyed security which was relatively absent in the new place (My interface with Nipendra Deb on 22 May 2006).

Case 8

Dilip Purkayasta (96) who migrated from Louta village of Sylhet district to Vaterband area of Karimganj recalled that in their village, both the Hindus and the Muslims lived in peace and essential amity. One could even get pure milk during those times. In addition, fishes were found in abundant quantities in the water bodies flowing vibrantly through the villages. The lush green beauty enveloped the villages and the surroundings induced delightful elegance. But in the canvas of harmony, the intrusion of sudden and cruel violence disillusioned them. He lamented that the Partition of Sylhet was premised on narrow minded politics which divided the hearts of the people (My conversation with Dilip Purkayasta on 22 June 2006).
Case 9

Sibani Das (85) who migrated as a refugee from Sylhet to Karimganj recalled that they lived a peaceful life in their ancestral land and learnt to respect the other’s otherness. Even when the news of Partition was in air, there might be growing distance between people at the political level but at the social and cultural level both the communities were close. She asserted that Partition disillusioned the ordinary people as they did not experience violence in Sylhet before the referendum (My conversation with Sibani Das on 14 October 2006).

Case 10

Rasomoyi Devi (90) of village Alamdin of Sylhet district and a present resident of Vaterband area in Karimganj district recalled that the Hindus usually visited the mazzars of pirs and other Muslim shrines to receive blessings. They shared their life with their Muslim neighbours. But they never coerced into each others domain, rather they learnt to respect others moorings and way of life. The dream-tinged green villages continued to charm them. She reiterated that their neighbourhood was reliable (Interviewed Rasomoyi Devi on 4 June 2006).

Case 11

Shanti Bhusan Dey (88) from village Akhaliya in Sylhet district who migrated to Karimganj after communal violence narrated that his father was an employee in the judge court of Sylhet. They had two houses in Sylhet district. Some of their family members resided in their home at Sylhet town and the others in Akhaliya village. They lived a reasonably harmonious life and enjoyed their childhood without any prejudice. As members of the extended family, they enjoyed the warmth, affections and care of their family members which was lost due to the disintegration of their family after Partition. The enchanting songs of boatmen during the ride charmed them. In such rides, the boatmen narrated them many exciting stories which captivated their mind. He expressed that their Muslim neighbours extended all sort of co-operation to them in times of need. As Bengalis are known for Baro Mashe Tero Puja (thirteen pujas within twelve months) the Muslim friends and neighbours participated in such Pujas. They too
bought new clothes on the occasion of the *Durga Puja*. The active participation of the villagers added luster and vigour to those festivals. On the other hand, the Hindus celebrated the festival of Id with their Muslim neighbours (My conversation with Shanti Bhusan Dey on 27 May 2006).

**Case 12**

Jyotshna Chakrabarty (81) migrated from Mirabazaar, Sylhet to Karimganj during communal violence in 1950. There were four members in her family during migration. Her husband was a driver in a government sector in Sylhet. She narrated that they enjoyed peaceful and simple life in their native place. The relation with their Muslim neighbours was cordial and mutually exclusive. They were happy amid the pastoral beauty of their village and mutual interaction between the communities enriched their social life. In Sylhet, there were large water bodies with abundance of fishes. The villagers grew vegetables and almost each household reared cows. They were contended with whatever means they had (My interface with Jyotshna Chakrabarty on 13 June 2005).

**Case 13**

Nirmalendu Purkayasta (80) of Dandapanipur, in Sylhet district who migrated to Maizgram area of Karimganj recollected that their village was predominantly a Hindu village with three Muslim families. The neighbouring villages were inhabited by the people of the Muslim community. They enjoyed cordial relations with their neighbours. He expressed that in those days, people did not identify themselves on the religion of their birth. But Partition defined people as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs etc. which according to him, was extremely ridiculous. During Partition, there were seven members in his family. On the eve of the referendum, Sylhet experienced increasingly deteriorated communal situation due to narrow politics of inciting religious passions. This in fact, pushed people into utmost difficulties and to suffer severe mental trauma (My conversation with Nirmalendu Purkayasta on 12 June 2006).

Many other Partition victims in Karimganj like Makhan Chakrabarty, Subal Das, Prasanta Das, Narendra Das, Umesh Das, Ananta Deb, Abani Das,
Jogendra Mohan Das, Ranjeet Chakrabarty, Dhirendra Mohan Nath, Jadhu Bhattacharjee, Rabindra Chakrabarty, Gopesh Chandra Malakar, Ashalata Ayan, Sushila Chakrabarty, Smriti Das and others who migrated from Sylhet to Karimganj narrated their experience of meaningfully shared community life in their native village. Thus the interviews reflected the pre-partitioned reality of villages and towns of Sylhet full of serenity, peace and tranquility marked by deep fraternal feelings.

The richness of inter-communal life was intimately felt even at the moment of communal madness that rocked East Pakistan. A large number of families panicked in the deteriorating communal situation and had to flee in haste having no time to organise their flight but consulted their friends or neighbours belonging to the other community who either helped them to cross the border, protecting them from mob or guarded their abandoned home and property. Many of them entreated them not to leave the land. The same was true on Indian side of the border in Karimganj and Cachar when the Hindus helped their Muslim friends and neighbours to cross the border when a communal violence rocked Karimganj in 1950. Some Muslim petty business families who inhabited Mugla Patty area (present Roypatti) of Karimganj migrated with the help of their Hindu friends and neighbours. Some Muslim families of Maizgram village migrated with the help of their Hindu neighbours (My conversation with Dhirendra Mohan Nath on 16 June 2006).

Case 14

Apurba Bhattacharjee (89), a Partition victim migrated from village Chulkhai of Sylhet district and presently located in Kraimganj recollected that the Muslim neighbours of their village requested the Hindus not to migrate and the situation that arose out of momentary madness would be quelled very soon. But the communal violence tarnished all their dreams and expectations and they were bound to migrate from their endeared homeland to Karimganj (narrated by Apurba Bhattacharjee in an inter-face on 25 June 2006).
Case 15

Deboprasad Chakrabarty (82) of Lamabazar Sylhet and presently located in Dohaliya area Karimganj district recalled that the Muslim neighbours in their village assured that the turbulent days were temporary and would settle very soon. But in the situation of rousing communal violence, the Muslims also became ambivalent and helped their Hindu friends and neighbours to cross the border even at personal risk (My conversation with Deboprasad Chakrabarty on 2 June 2006).

Case 16

Radharani Roy (89) of village Rahimchandrapur in Sylhet district who is presently settled in Sonbeal area of Karimganj recalled that many people good at heart were confident that the communal uproar was only temporary and things would turn normal once the frenzy of communal uproar would be over. But they were compelled to migrate in a situation of increasing insecurity and fear. Even after migration they cherished the hope of going back to their ancestral home. But they could not do so because of threat perception associated with their homeland. They virtually became homeless and helpless within their own district with a simple line drawn on the map. ‘This was the greatest irony’ she lamented (Interviewed Radharani Roy on 1 June 2006).

Case 17

Ashalata Ayan (90) of Nalsuka village of Habiganj subdivision in Sylhet district who migrated to Sonakheera area of Karimganj recollected that the dawn of independence after much struggle and sacrifice was a long cherished moment of joy and freedom. But the Partitioned-independence fiercely tarnished all hopes and aspirations. She stated that the British exploited them but the bloody and tragic Partition destroyed them forever. When Partition became imminent there was confusion and fear in people’s mind. But they thought that the violence would quell after sometime. Their Muslim neighbours assured them that the turbulence was temporary and would be over very soon. But to utter dismay, the events turned unexpectedly. They were at a loss with the reports of violence that
poured in from various parts of East Bengal which in fact compelled them to migrate. In that situation, a Muslim neighbour of their village came to their rescue. He arranged a boat for them at the dead of night. They crossed the river Kushiara to reach Karimganj in almost wretched condition. They had to leave behind their home and belongings (My interface with Ashalata Ayan on 5 October 2005).

**Case 18**

Girindra Dhar (89) from village Mammudpur, Bihanibazar thana of Sylhet district and presently located in Badarpur recalled that they were happily settled in their village with the people of other religious community. They owned a paddy field and a small pan shop which provided the necessities for their survival. His wife cultivated vegetables in a small piece of land they owned. He recollected that in large number of water bodies in their village, there was abundance of fishes. With meager means, they were happy until Partition fiercely uprooted them from their native land. He stated that on the eve of the Sylhet referendum, the district population of Sylhet was communally polarised. Since the common people did not understand the implications of the referendum, they were utterly disillusioned. Both Congress and the Muslim League organised processions, meetings etc. Meetings and the processions organised by the Muslim League were more organized, rowdy and communally incited than by the Hindus. As they were not acquainted with communal violence earlier, they were at a loss. He too participated in one of the processions organised by the Hindu leaders to retain Sylhet in Assam. Unable to trace the situation, at the initial years after Partition, he narrated that some families migrated; some others were divided with members dispersed on both sides of the newly drawn border but a large number stayed back expecting the situation to be normal. But the communal violence of 1950 drastically changed the situation. Fearful of the frenzy of communal violence or hit by one or the other kind of violence in their native village, they were compelled to migrate. Some other families of the village accompanied them. With utmost difficulties they crossed the border Sutarkandi on foot. They reached
4.3 Trauma of Partition

The holocaust that followed with the making of two new nations over the populous Indian provinces violently shattered the collective community life and it arbitrarily defined the identity of the people as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs etc. After Partition there was a profound rupture in the civilization of the subcontinent and people were violently uprooted from their emotionally involved social and cultural milieu.

Consequently, Partition invoked intense emotional crisis into the mind of the people of the subcontinent. The monstrous displacement had tremendous psychological implications on individual and collective lives. The idyllic and harmonious past ended up in the poignant experiences of instability, uncertainty, and fractured life. It traumatised the entire generation too. The sudden intrusion of violence and mistrust reinforced in many narratives found the victims disturbing and appalling. The refugees experienced the trauma of being uprooted from familiar surroundings, suffered from the pain of being forced to leave behind essentials like home, paddy fields, jobs etc. A large number of the refugees experienced loss of previous social and economic position after migration. Many had to discontinue their studies in order to rebuild their families. A substantial number of refugees had to bear the pangs of divided families on both sides of the border.

The territorial redistribution disrupted meaningful association between the communities who otherwise led a simple and peaceful life in their ancestral homeland. Given the sudden dislocation with accompanying pain, uncertainty, and sufferings, many of the victims of Partition hardly could assimilate into their new life. A lot of refugees who migrated from Sylhet might have been successful in escaping the violence physically, but were unable to erase the images of the horrendous communal violence that was imprinted on their minds. The division of their "home", quick transformation of their identity marked by religious divide, discrimination and insensitivity by the government in the place of refuge had
invasive psychological impact in them. The experience of homelessness and consequent uncertainty of livelihood shaped their tortured memory.

Sylhet referendum resulted in the transfer of the district of Sylhet to East Pakistan. However, it was later realised that a part of the Sylhet district which was transferred to East Pakistan, was the only land corridor for India to communicate with Lushai and Tripura hills. So after a few days, that part of Sylhet was returned to India. The areas in which first the Pakistani flag was hoisted came to be included into India after three days leaving people deceived and panicked especially in the border areas. In Karimganj, the flag of Pakistan was hoisted in the medicine shop of Hekimi Saheb in station road, Karimganj. On 18 August Hekimi Saheb left for Pakistan (My conversation with Makhan Mohari on 12 December 2006).

Driven by insecurity and fear, the people of Sylhet shifted to the other part of the same district divided by arbitrarily drawn border leaving behind their homes, known ambience and hearty neighbourhood. All of a sudden, they transformed into refugees even if they belonged to the same district only with a line drawn on the map (the refugees who migrated to Karimganj). This evoked disillusionment and widespread resentment among the people. They could not comprehend the sudden changes of their identity as refugees and thus caught up in the severest form of brutality. In Bengali, the most commonly used term for “refugee” is Utbastu and Saranarthi. An Utbastu—the prefix “ut” signifying off or “outside” was someone who has been placed outside of where his foundations were or ....literally to be without a bastu or ancestral home. Saranarthi literally mean someone who seeks refuge or protection. The victims of Partition in Cachar could not reconcile with their identity as Utbastu or Saranarthi. In Cachar in many places refugees were addressed as Utra or appendage (My conversation with Umesh Das in an inter-face on 6 June 2006). In the interior areas of Cachar the term Rifu is still prevalent to identify the refugees (My interface with Sujit Choudhury on 24 May 2005). In Brahmaputra Valley refugees are identified as Bhgania (Das 2007: 6).
The traumatic experiences of the individuals compounded in the place of refuge when they were sent to dense forest areas to rebuild their lives. Most of the rehabilitation sites particularly Dohaliya, Kalinagar, Ramkrishna Nagar, and colonies under Indian Tea Association were extremely inhospitable situated in dense jungle terrain -- the habitable places of wild animals. Moreover, these terrains breded many deadly diseases like malaria, typhoid, and jaundice and dysentery etc. which took heavy toll on their lives. In Dohaliya, the burning of funeral pyre days in and day out represented the cruelty of Partition and the extreme insensibility of the government. Many a time, malaria took the entire family in its grip (interviewed Amalendu Das on 6 October 2005). Thus in the hypothesis we have stated that the trauma of being displaced has been deeply ingrained into the memories of the victims of Partition is true.

The traumatic memory of the victims of Partition in Cachar was represented in some of the narrations collected during interviews and conversations with the refugees who migrated to Karimganj subdivision in Cachar district.

Case 19

Shankar Deb, a Partition victim who migrated from Sylhet to Karimganj narrated that the making of the new nations was at the cost of lives of many innocent people. In fact, they were forced to encounter brutality, insensitivity, and perpetual marginalization, which no civilized society could sanctify for its inhabitants. The pain of leaving behind his home and homeland was inseparable from his self and the attempt of integration to a new place was inflicted with so much of struggle that it defied any human appeal (Interviewed Shankar Deb on 8 June 2006).

Case 20

Anjali Devi, a Partition victim who migrated from Sylhet to Badarpur in Karimganj sub division expressed her anguish and hinted at the political leadership for the pangs and incessant sufferings of the victims. She candidly expressed that due to imagined fear of Assam Congress and a section of the
Assamese middle class the referendum was conducted in Sylhet to squeeze out the Hindu Bengalis for which the innocent people had to pay the price. Many others had to endure intense physical sufferings and mental trauma. There was necessarily no rationale behind the Partition of Sylhet in which people lived a meaningful life with the people of the other religious community. Her father who was an easy going person was at a loss. Before Partition, he provided sustenance to the family by sheer hard work. Even if they did not have plenty, they did not suffer scarcity as well. Life was altogether blissful in their native village. Since her father did not have any expertise skill and hardly went out of the village till Partition, he became disillusioned. Partition forcefully ejected him out of his native land and survival means. The family was quite large. Hence, the decision to migrate in an unknown place was momentum for him. The eventual situation created out of communal violence compelled him to migrate. The uncertainty of providing sustenance to a sufficiently large family panicked his mind and after migration he became despondent in the grinding struggle of poverty and homelessness. She narrated that the traumatic experience of Partition and the subsequent incidents prevented her to remember her home and homeland (Interviewed Anjali Devi on 28 May 2006).

Case 21

Dayal Thakur a vaishnavite saint who migrated from Sylhet district presently residing in Faqua gram, Sonbeal village in Karimganj recollected that just after communal violence in 1950, a group of Muslim goondas came to his akhra and threatened him to leave the place immediately with his disciples. He narrated that throughout his life he was mostly engrossed in ‘Harinam Sankirtan’ which made him virtually ‘oblivious of the externality of the world’. He sustained by pranami offered by his disciples and was at a total loss in such a situation. His disciples too panicked. After two days, those goondas burnt his akhra, compelling him to cross the border. His disciples scattered in different directions to save their lives. Lack of experience to work in outside world, he could not carve out any survival means and turned almost into a pauper after migration to an unknown place. He reiterated that when violence was perpetrated, he was
bewildered because he never experienced such violence in Sylhet earlier. He remorsefully narrated that Partition pushed him to survive with grinding poverty and broken psyche (My conversation with Dayal Thakur on 15 June 2005).

Case 22

Nabin Das of Bazarichera area of Karimganj district who migrated from Mirabazar, Sylhet recalled that the memory of his lost home still haunts him. Quite often he woke up at night and felt hollowness all around. His lost home and homeland was a heart aching moment for life (Interviewed Nabin Das on 30 May 2006).

Case 23

Sushilla Devi who migrated from Sylhet presently residing in Vaterbond in Karimganj district recollected that during communal violence in 1950 her husband sent her to one of their relative’s house at Karimganj. She was then 23 years old with two girl children. Her husband assured her that he would join her very soon. But he never came. She could not stay in a relative’s house for long and they helped her to get a job in a hotel. With two girl children in an alien land she was extremely helpless. Her elder daughter died after sometime due to jaundice. She could not afford her treatment. Even she could not get her younger daughter married because of lack of resources. The memory of her lost daughter and husband haunts her quite often. Her recollection indicated perpetual sufferings amid abject poverty, disgrace and an acute sense of loss. She expressed that the dawn of independence was a terrible moment which destroyed her life altogether (interviewed Sushilla Devi on 9 June 2005).

4.4 Paradise Lost: Abandoned Home and Homeland: Nostalgia, belongingness and a feeling of loss

Partition fiercely uprooted people from their endeared homeland Sonar Bangla. Within a short span of time, in many cases almost overnight, people were forced to transform into homeless wanderers or refugees from a reasonably organised life. The narratives that we have constructed in the course of this study explored that most of the victims were not concerned with the politics of the time
nor experienced any rupture in inter-community life. In fact, the sudden displacement from a reasonably organised social and cultural admixture was a cruel axing from their roots, their livelihood and harmonious canvas of living with others -- a complete rupture from an essentially meaningful life. Many of the refugees considered the loss of home as loss of their self-respect. Norod Kumar Gupta narrated in his book "Bhulibe Ki Pranante"(1974) Matribhumi ongocched prothomei amader buke tibra aghat hanlo (Gupta 1974: 234) [The slicing of our motherland inflicted intense injury to us](translation mine).

Most of the women refugees interviewed in Cachar expressed that they were extremely reluctant to leave their home which they built up with painstaking efforts. Moreover, they were not driven by any moral glamour of going to a promised land. Even at the time of departure some could not feel that they were leaving their homeland for good. Some other refugees narrated that it took several years to believe that they would never return. Some paid a visit to their home and homeland at regular intervals to recover their lost self. In fact, their migration was a forceful ejection from their roots and identity.

In Bengali sense, the concept of ancestral land was inextricably linked to sacredness and purity and their identity was defined within the exclusivity of homeland. They were enchanted by the pastoral green-tinged ambience and the surroundings in their native village. In most cases, it was observed that the refugees preferred to be identified themselves with their Desh in Sylhet or East Pakistan. Belongingness to a place in Sylhet or East Pakistan had its own significance. It had a meaning which was culturally loaded. Marriage, caste, status and indicators of cultural dominance were all bundled in a person's belongingness to his ancestral village. The location of Desher Bari was the most essential credential in the settlement of marriage. Largely, people prefer to get their sons and daughters married to the people of the same district because in East Pakistan each district has its specificities in terms of food, dialect and ways of worship and other cultural practices etc. All cultural indicators were lost after Partition. The ancestral land was considered sacred and auspicious from the blessings of the forefathers and their memory. The attachment to the land and the
rituals associated with it still lingers into the private domain of the individuals. Therefore, the memory of the ancestral land and the sacredness associated with it inculcated in them to set up the root by mixing the soil of their ancestral land with that of the new one.

**Case 24**

This was reflected when Shanti Das, a second generation refugee of Karimganj had to go to her ancestral home in Sylhet in order to fulfill the desire of her father and collected a clod of clay from there which she tied with the soil of their new home (Interviewed Shanti Das on 9 June 2006).

**Case 25**

Sibani Gupta of Karimganj, a second generation Partition victim, also narrated more or less the same emotional orientation. In order to fulfill the desire of her ailing father, she went to their ancestral village in Sylhet and brought a handful of clay and mixed it with the soil in extreme corner of their house (narrated by Sibani Gupta in an inter-face on 12 June 2006).

**Case 26**

Purabi Choudhury a second generation Partition victim located in Karimganj town area recollected that the longing for ancestral village compelled her brother Probodh Ranjan Choudhury, a Partition victim in Karimganj to visit his endeared ancestral home in Srimangal, Sylhet district regularly. Though he was able to rehabilitate himself and his family with hard toil, his lost home continued to haunt him. His conversation at the intimate level was largely the recollection of pre-partitioned life in Sylhet. His friends in Sylhet mostly from the Muslim community had a good rapport with him and his family many years after Partition until he died (recollected by his sister: interview with Purabi Choudhury on 13 June 2006).

**Case 27**

Dibbendu Bhusan Dey a Partition victim in Karimganj narrated that a few years back, when they were able to build up a small house in Karimganj putting
together the labour of family members, he sent his wife to his ancestral home in village Akhaliya in Sylhet district to bring a clod of clay which they had to abandon during communal violence now occupied by a Muslim family. But she was not able to do it. He reiterated that he has been trying for a visa in order to collect a clod of clay from there. He remorsefully recalled that the physical mixture with the new land might be possible but at the psychological level he could not integrate. His lost native land is a constant remembrance for him (Interviewed Dibbendu Bhusan Dey on 23 June 2006).

**Case 28**

Bhabani Charan Chakrabarty of Bamui village in Sylhet district who migrated to Kalinagar area of Karimganj sub division recalled that “*matribhumi manuser nikat bori priya. Tar smriti bori madhur. Ami protiniyotoribhumi ke smaran kori. Purbapurusher ashirbade matribhumi punyabhumi. Jadi Desher bari te ekbar jaite paritam? Desh charar pore shanti paila na. Ekhon moribar boyosh hoiyache. Jodi tothai morite paritam?* (Motherland is endeared to human beings. Its memory is like honey. The memory of my motherland haunts me quite often. The blessings of my forefathers bestow sacredness to it. I wish I could go to my ancestral home once! I did not get peace after leaving my home. Now it is the time to die. I wish I could die there (My conversation with Bhabani Charan Chakrabarty on 3 April 2005).

Thus the narratives built on the oral testimony of victims in Cachar invoked the ever present existence of their endeared home and homeland in their psyche. Many of them were physically away from their home but cherished the memory of their undivided past. Many others survived or have been surviving with perpetual sense of homelessness. “The displacement, thus, forces the subject to remain suspended, hanging between the two worlds; neither being able to fully associate and involve himself with the new setting nor being able to completely detach himself, he remains nostalgic and sentimental on one level, learning the skills of survival at another”(Bose 1997: 82). The borders that were demarcated in terms of political readjustment largely ignored the thoughts and feelings of the people because most people believe that unlike landmass it was
difficult to divide the hearts of the people. Partition divided not only the homeland but also individual homes. Some homes were cruelly disintegrated with the members of the family dispersed on the both sides of the border to sustain them or between Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley in Assam.

The survey which was conducted during the course of this study focused on three generation of refugee families -- the first generation of refugees who were the direct victims of Partition, the second generation with aural experiences of the event and the third generation who have neither direct nor aural experiences of Partition. It is pertinent to mention that the third generation respondents were born in post-partitioned Cachar and carrying no stigma of refugee-hood. They are particularly embarrassed to be identified with such terms like refugees, camp dwellers etc. and are not emotionally related to their forefathers homeland in Sylhet/ East Pakistan.

To the displaced, the rituals associated with the homeland were lost. While writing about displacement Edward Said in one of his essays commented that, “Once you leave your home, wherever you end up, you cannot simply take up life and become just another citizen of the new place. Or if you do, there is a good deal of awkwardness involved in the effort, which scarcely seems worth it. You can spend a lot of time regretting what you lost, envying those around you who have always been at home, near their loved ones, living in the place where they were born and grew up without even having to experience not only the loss of what was once theirs, but above all the torturing memory of a life to which they can not return” (Said 1994: 45-46).

4.5 Summary

To sum up, the narrative that was constructed on the basis of the oral accounts of the Partition victims in Cachar sought to contest the elitist official history writings in India. In our attempt to recover the voices from the freezing silence after years of Partition, we found that people who lived in close proximity to each other were forced to part with their endeared home and homeland, friends and neighbours. The narratives on the Partition mostly represent the syncretism and composite trajectory of community life of serene happiness and peace in their
native land in Sylhet. Most of the victims could not justify the rationale behind the Partition of Sylhet on religious basis and expressed their anguish at the political leadership for brutal change and sufferings in their life. There were many instances wherein the refugees were assisted by the members of the other religious community in times of violence on both sides of the border. Though the victims were compelled to rebuild their lives in inhospitable jungle terrain in Cachar, the process of rebuilding was extremely painful and many had to die untimely in the land which they considered safer. Consequently, the experiences of uprooted-ness and perpetual struggle in the relief camps and rehabilitation colonies made their experience intensely traumatic. The recollection of pre-partition life was invariably full of regret and the cruel axing from their home and feeling of homelessness indicated a sense of loss of ancestral lineage, identity, social status and self-respect. Their identity as *utbastu* led them to survive with apathy, humiliation, embarrassment and shame. Needless to say, Partition cruelly changed the lives of a large number of Bengali Hindu refugees who had to migrate under situation of threat and fear or violence in their ancestral land. The impossibility of finding out home somewhere else was widely represented in such narratives. A large number of victims were found to be emotionally related to their ancestral home and place of their birth which they remember either with pain or nostalgia. Some others are reluctant to remember their traumatic past. The nostalgic yearning for the lost native land which we outlined in the hypothesis was proved to be valid. A vacuum still remains in the mind of the victims.