CONCLUSION

Historiography in the last couple of decades has recognised and come to terms with the fact that Partition was not merely the culmination of a long history of communalism which accompanied anti-colonial struggle. It was rather one of the central events that shaped the history of the post-independence India and Pakistan. It was the primary defining factor of the events that followed the independence and was closely associated with the process of decolonisation in the subcontinent. However, the deep imprint Partition left on the society, polity, economy and culture in the era after independence manifested itself differently in different regions. In Bengal and Punjab its impact and its nature varied widely and were spread over different temporal span. The lingering migration along the East Bengal border, as against the rapid inflow of migrants from West Pakistan, unleashed several unique socio-political trends specific to Bengal and its impact was spread over the years and across generations which to some extent added to the distinctiveness of the Bengal experience. This dissertation looks into the circumstances that forced minorities out of East Bengal. It also studies the impact it had on West Bengal as the minorities in East Bengal transformed to refugees in West Bengal. Studying the case of Hindu Bengali migrants from East Bengal, this thesis tries to break certain myths and address some of the debates that are associated with the impact of Partition in Bengal. It stresses on how the events in Bengal after independence redefined the meanings of Partition and how Partition was reinvented in the minds of the people of Bengal in the context of the socio-political changes that the state saw over all these years after independence.
While independence of India was greeted with euphoria in most parts of the country it was also mourned by many. For Independence, to them, was a reminder of the chaos, death and communal strife that was Partition. Thus in an interview Bengal politician and a close associate of Gandhi, Prafulla Chandra Sen remembered, “During the August 1946 killings, most of the time I was in Arambagh because there was also some trouble and if I had not been there, there would be communal disturbances. But when Gandhiji was in Beliaghata, I came to Calcutta and on 15 August 1947, we did not participate in the Independence Day celebrations because Gandhiji was very unhappy then owing to communal trouble. During the communal trouble, when he went on hunger strike, many people mostly Hindus and some Muslims also, came to Gandhiji and handed over to him their weapons and then Gandhiji broke his fast.”¹ However, troubles for those who were found on the wrong side of the border had just begun in 1947 and the repercussion of the Partition echoed years after it more so in Bengal where the migrations continued for two decades following it. There were indeed many stories of the Partition as every family had their own vivid experience of it. “Among the varied signifiers of refugee experiences,” wrote an eminent scholar on the impact of Partition in Bengal, “are the urban topography of squatter colonies and pavement shanties; West Bengal party politics and the interlocutory activism of organizations such as the United Central Refugee Council; the films of Ritwik Ghatak; enduring folk memories of post-Partition inflation, rationing, black marketing and the nightmare that was Shealdah Station; compelling evocations of Sonar Bangla in the lilt of a dialect and the taste of a fish curry; acts of introduction that involve genealogies extending beyond the Padma River.”² The aftermath and longue durée of the Partition was not only reproduced in the literary genre but was lived

¹ Interview with Shri Prafulla Chandra Sen, Oral History Archive, New Delhi, NMML Acc 571.
experience of the millions who were found on the wrong side of the border. The impact of the Partition was not only seen in the reproduction of the experience in the literature of even the recent times, it was felt in the violence on the minorities, in the experiences of the refugees in the Government homes and camps both within and outside Bengal, in the refugee attempt at self-settlement and also in the refugee protest movements demanding rehabilitation within Bengal or legal rights of the land squatted upon. All this indeed produced the *longue duree* of the Partition for these issues impacted the life of the migrants though several decades after Partition and were even passed down the generations.

In an interview Satish Chandra Das Gupta recollected, “I was born in 1880 in a village, which is now situated in Pakistan. My father was a medical practitioner and that area was predominantly Muslim. Most of my companions were Muslims. I imbibed from my childhood a love for the Muslims and their culture. My mother also endeared my companions. So I was brought up in an atmosphere of Hindu-Muslim fraternity. We never knew what the Hindu-Muslim question was. We could never think that there could be a question of such a nature.”³ Several such recollections of a harmonious coexistence of the two communities created a myth of a peaceful, sacred, pure life of a rural East Bengal. Such recollections create an impression that riots were sporadic incidents, that these were against the norms of the day and was a violation of an ideal world full of harmony that existed in Bengal. But riots were not invented with Partition and Bengal, with the highest concentration of Muslims at the turn of the twentieth century, had the worst records of Hindu-Muslim conflict. However, it was in the 1940s that there was a change in the character of riots and with the Dacca riots of 1941 and the Partition riots in Calcutta and

³ Interview with Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta, Oral History Archive, New Delhi, NMML Acc 255.
Noakhali-Tippera in 1946, one sees organised rioting with clear links with institutional politics. This thesis tries to establish that the most apparent and immediate impact of the Partition in Bengal (and also in Punjab) was large-scale migration and violence that accompanied Partition. The intensity of the phased migration in Bengal that continued in waves through the two decades following 1947 (which was in contrast to the migration of the Punjab) escaped administrative as well as scholarly attention. There was in fact a strong belief in the official circle in the initial years that the migration from East Bengal was a temporary phenomenon and what existed was the fear of violence, rumour of it and press propaganda rather than actual violence that prompted the migration. It is this official claim that has been challenged. The riots after Partition remained pre-planned with one significant difference – it had administrative connivance at least at lower levels.Migration in Bengal did not take place in one sweep as in Punjab. Hence migrations and the violence that accompanied it lingered on. Violence was an integral part of the making of the boundary between East and West Bengal. It marked the experience of minorities in East Bengal. Hindus who stayed on as minorities were faced with alternate periods of riots and riot like conditions and were driven away by violence or ‘the fear of violence’ over the decades. It is important to lay stress on the fact that it was violence with state connivance that led to large-scale migration from East Pakistan. This is not pin down Pakistan guilty of nurturing communal politics, for violence is integral to every instance of communal and ethnic clashes. To deny the violence on minorities in East Bengal would imply that the migrants crossed over by choice and hence should return to East Pakistan. It would also mean that the refugees who crossed over from East Bengal were not justified in their claims at rehabilitation in this side of Bengal. Denial of such violence in migration was convenient for it underplays the seriousness of the situation and relieves the

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Governments in India of its responsibility of accommodating the migrants. In East Bengal one finds a narrative of prolonged structured violence that forced minorities (who attempted to stay on) to cross over. It is this narrative of a structured violence that is being increasingly acknowledged in memoirs and fictional representation of the Partition in the recent times.

The other important myth that has been created is the image of idle East Bengal Hindu migrants who were passive recipients of Government grants. The East Bengal refugees were negatively stereotyped as “victims and trouble makers – indolent, obstructive, unreasonably demanding and unwilling to adapt to new environment”. However, though the state and the central Government came up with relief and rehabilitation programmes, some of it was too meagre that came often too late scarcely reaching out effective benefit to the refugees. For quite some time the establishment in Delhi did not acknowledge the migration from East Bengal as a reality. Violence, migration and the chaos associated with Partition was to them a phenomenon of Western India. Even the state Government did not take much notice of the migration from East Bengal. It was not until 1948 that the issue of the East Bengal refugees was taken up by the officialdom in Calcutta and Delhi. But since then till the closure of Camps in 1960s two broad trends were noticed in the policies noticed in the dealings of the Government. First the Government came up with some very tentative relief measures and ad hoc rehabilitation schemes. But most importantly they listed a series of problems the Government faced in rehabilitating refugees. The Central Government held the state responsible for not taking much notice to the refugee situation till early 1948 when ‘constant influx compelled attention’\(^5\). The state on its part listed its difficulties. For instance Renuka Roy echoed the official discourse

when she stated in one of her speeches, “It must also be remembered that the new comers have come to a state whose economy has suffered even before Partition as a consequence of a major famine in 1943 and the impact of the war and the turmoil that took place on the eve of independence. The new Government that came into existence was thus faced with a much more difficult situation as compared with almost every other state. Before they could adjust themselves they had to face this additional burden of responsibility of a constant influx of refugees.”

The problems thus stressed were innumerable – the constant influx, inadequate financial resources, lack of suitable land for rehabilitation, the delay in approval of schemes by the Central Government which even led to “dropping of schemes,” neighbouring states hesitant to reach out help and also the aversion of the refugees to move out to the Camps outside West Bengal.

Thus instead of refugees being idle and indolent, such lackadaisical and half-hearted response from the Government prompted the migrants to look out for themselves. After the foundation of the Bijoygarh colony in 1948, places in and around Calcutta witnessed a feature that made the refugee experience of Bengal unique and distinctive. Vacant properties particularly in the outskirts of Calcutta were occupied overnight by migrants and what came to be known as Jabor-dakhol colony or squatter’s colony sprang up in and around the city. Initially the colonies came up in the industrial zones of Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Hugli and Howrah, extending along the east bank of the river between Naihati and Sonarpur. But the 1950 colonies also developed along the west bank between Magra and Uluberia. These colonies set up were not merely a temporary accommodation for the refugees but they minutely worked out every detail of their living in the colony. They

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6 Rehabilitation of Displaced persons 1957-67, Renuka Roy Papers, Speeches/ writings by her, File no 34, NMML.
even organized their own defence against the attempt at eviction by the land lords and their private goons and even the police. In short what emerged was a buzzing civil life through the untiring efforts of these non-citizen refugees as they struggled to build anew. The refugees thus struggled to carve out a space for themselves in Bengal polity and society as they turned from refugees to citizens. The squatter movement despite its illegitimate standing did contribute in several significant ways. The squatters took off a major load from the Government by choosing to self-settle. The refugees of the squatters not merely rebuilt their lives to survive but also added value to their living. It was these refugees who expanded the limits of the city, developed civil amenities, constructed roads and expanded educational infrastructure. This impacted literature, cinema and the liberal arts and added substantially to the cultural ambiance of the city. Again the refugees supported the political movements in Bengal such as the movement against the increase of tram fare or the food movement. Hence the squatter colonies not only expanded the physical limits of the city but also constructively added to the post-independence cultural milieu of the city. Most importantly such brisk attempts at self-rehabilitation demolish the myth of the Hindu migrants from East Bengal as an idle inactive lot completely dependent on Government support.

The Partition and migration from East Pakistan also raked up controversies. In the closing years of the 1940s, when the official establishments accepted the migration from East Pakistan as a reality, there were attempts by the Government of India to check migrations. Nehru warned the Press not make statements that could encourage migration\(^8\), accused the RSS of instigating minorities in East Bengal and even entered into dialogue with the Pakistan Government. Thus this period of initial denial was followed by an attempt to

control migrations through a series of negotiations with Pakistan that culminated with the Nehru Liaquat Pact. The Nehru Liaquat Pact initiated a debate within and outside the Parliament primarily between Nehru and Shyama Prosad Mukherjee that defined the dynamics of post-independence ideology in India. But whether it was Nehru’s stress on a secular India or Mukherjee’s insistence on the exchange of population the debate lost its focus from the refugees to larger issues such as secularism, Indian policy towards Pakistan, India’s image internationally etc. While these were important issues for a nation just born, at the sacrificial alter was millions of refugees who were too busy with their mundane day to day chores to be bothered about such lofty ideals.

The other important question that was raised was about the legality of the forced occupation of vacant land by the refugees. After an initial period of fruitless attempt by Police at eviction, the Government intervened with the “Rehabilitation of Displaced persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation of Land Bill 1951”. As soon as the bill was announced it gave rise to severe debates in the Parliament. Khuda Baksh among other members of the minority benches took the issue of the Muslims displaced in riots of West Bengal after Partition and felt that the bill intended to rehabilitate the East Bengal refugees rather than the Muslims dispossessed in the riots. They thus questioned as to why the “displaced persons of another province are getting priority over the displaced persons of its own province?”\(^9\) There were of course criticisms from the Communist members who felt that the bill did not do enough for the refugees.\(^10\) While the Communists accused the Government of siding with the landlords and protecting the

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\(^9\) Speech of Khuda Baksh in Legislative Assembly on April 11, 1951. See West Bengal Legislative Assembly proceedings 1951 VOL 3c No 3, Third session 8th February to 19\(^{th}\) April, 1951.

\(^10\) The Assembly met to debate this bill several times between March 29 and April 19, 1951. It reflected the differing perspectives on the bill. See West Bengal Legislative Assembly proceedings 1951 VOL 3c No 3, Third session 8th February to 19\(^{th}\) April, 1951.
interest of private proprietary, the minority benches accused the Government of betraying the Muslim minorities whose land too were squatted upon in some cases. The debate over the bill was significant in several major ways. First, with the bill being debated in the Assembly, the issue of the squatter’s colonies earned the recognition and sanctity of institutional politics of Bengal. A completely extra-legal occupation of land was thus legitimised through its incorporation into the formal debates in the Legislative Assembly. The debate also exposed the large support the refugees and squatter movement enjoyed among the members of the Assembly. The bill was finally passed with some minor changes but the acceptance of these minor changes signified that the Government had begun to give in to the pressures created in favour of the refugees.

One of the distinctive features of the aftermath of the Partition in Bengal was the political movement that rallied round the refugees which eclipsed with the coming to power of the communists. Ever since the Partition and the migration from East Bengal, the refugees often erupted into active street protests. These protests, initially non-political, were gradually organized into a political movement aimed to legitimize the refugee struggle for citizenship. The refugees were mobilized around the issues of resisting eviction of the squatters colonies, the movement in support of refugees who returned from refugee camps outside Bengal particularly Bettiah and finally protests against the closure of camps in Bengal and dispatch of refugees to the far away Dandakaranya. With the intervention of organized politics the refugees mobilized themselves and it was with the refugee support that the left wing politics saw its eclipse in West Bengal. The electoral rise of the left in Bengal was indeed linked with the aftermath of the Partition. While the rise of left in Bengal politics has been studied by scholars, it is also interesting see how the local refugee leadership together with leaders of various political outfits organized the
somewhat disorderly refugee mob into a political movement that changed the politics of West Bengal in the later years. The political mobilization of refugees or a movement by the refugees themselves was indeed a unique trend among the migrants from East Bengal whereas in Western India there were no such signs of political upheaval.

The migrations from East Pakistan, the Government response to it, the refugee self-settlement, political agitation of the refugees and the ascendancy of the left in the electoral politics of Bengal were some significant aftermath of Partition in Bengal. These did not happen immediately after Partition but transpired over a period of two decades after it. The borders between India and Bangladesh remained porous, the nature of migration changed and Bangladesh infiltration has gained newer dimensions. The Government closed down camps in the 1960s and though it setup review committees to look into some of its policy towards the refugees, by the 70s they considered refugee rehabilitation to be a residuary matter. Even the squatter’s colonies had become permanent and it was clear that eviction of the squatters was impossible. The left too went ahead with issues concerning rural reforms and other popular movements. The refugees were eventually integrated into the mainstream population of West Bengal despite efforts at rehabilitation in Dandakaranya and Andamans. The Ghoti-Bangal (East and West Bengal) differences were thus light hearted humours.

But the Partition did produce its longue duree. From the establishment of the first colony in 1949 till January 29, 1987, when the state Government ordered that freehold title

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would be given to all refugees in unauthorised colonies, it was a long battle of the refugees against the legal regime imposed on them. Though it was clear that eviction of the refugees was not possible, illegal status of the colonies led to the denial of basic infrastructural services to the refugees. It was this struggle of the refugees to earn legitimacy that produced the concrete *longue durée* of the Partition. Most importantly, it was the memories - stories of one’s childhood, ancestry and their homes back in native villages that were handed down the generations - that kept Partition alive. Moreover it was these memories that were reinvented in light of larger events such as the Bangladesh Liberation War in the 70s or with the rise of the right wing forces in the 90s. While the nostalgia for a lost home was the focus of literature in the early years where violence was glossed over as an aberration, with the creation of Bangladesh hopes for a larger Bengal was rekindled. The literature of the nineties was perhaps more realistic representation with no illusions of a paradise lost. Most importantly, it revealed a never to die interest on the issue amongst a generation that was untouched by Partition. Thus the aftermath of Partition in Bengal cannot be restricted in time. It did not merely imply the chaos that was left in its wake in the forms of migration and refugee-hood or the political upheaval it created. Partition is also multiple memories of what it stood for and every family has its own tale of the Partition. In this sense Partition is an unfinished story yet to be unfolded. The aftermath was twofold- the immediate and the long term. It was the memory of the immediate – the memory of violence, migration and refugee-hood, of the trauma and survival – that was kept alive, reinvented and preserved in the *longue durée*. 