INTRODUCTION
WHY STUDY THE LITERATURES OF THE PARTITION (1947)?

'Partition literature of the early period – of which Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s devastating stories are the outstanding examples – was largely confined to the strife-torn areas of Punjab and its environs in the decade or so after Partition. The violence of the times does not appear to have become a central motif in the Bengali literature of the post-Partition period. ...while the famine of 1943 deeply moved Bengali writers 'the Partition of Bengal...never became a dominating theme of Bengali fiction even during the 1950’s or shortly thereafter.’ – Gyanendra Pandey, In Defense of the Fragment

In 2003, while I was translating some short stories from West Bengal and Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal/East Pakistan) dealing with the Partition of 1947, I came across the words that I quote at the beginning. These and many others like them have troubled me because of their validity and authenticity. The Partition in the eastern part of the subcontinent has been a neglected area, particularly its literature, although some recent works have drawn our attention to the region.¹ In the course of my readings, I came across virtually unknown (outside Bengal) and un-canonized (in the Bangla literary canon)

authors. At one point of this study, I was filled with despair if I could ever do justice to the enormously rich and varied literature that Partition has produced amongst the Bangla speaking peoples of West Bengal, the North East and Bangladesh.

The Partition of 1947 has generated extensive literature ranging from scholarly works, historical monographs, reminiscences to novels and bestsellers. The complex political mosaic of a pluralistic society, the growth and acceleration of the nationalist struggle, the changes in Hindu-Muslim relations, popular protests, and British imperial policies have resulted in a proliferation of writings on the various aspects of the Partition. A look at even the currently available material convinces one of the impossibility of grasping all the various issues involved – national, communal, imperial in their social, religious, economic and political connotations. The emerging trends in Partition Studies have also emphasized that the Partition in Bengal have not received adequate attention from scholars and the vivisection of the subcontinent still throws up faulty perspectives and false surmises. Certainly, a more balanced view of the events leading to the Partition is now possible with access to new material available in The Transfer of Power (1942-47) series edited by Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon and the Muslim League documents (1906-47) compiled by Syed Shafiruddin Pirzada while the Towards Freedom volumes are invaluable for archival materials from India. The diaries of British Governor Generals like Wavell and the accounts of British historians, describing the last twenty years of the British rule in

2 The literary canon dealing with the Partition in Bengal is comparatively larger than its historiography. However, many authors who have written on the Partition and its effect have remained unknown outside Bengal, leading to fallacies of perception that no sizeable Partition literature exists in Bangla. Also, some authors remain un-canonized and unread even by a discerning Bangla readership. Shaktipada Rajguru’s novel on Dandakaranya and Dulalendu Chatterjee’s two novels (that I discuss in chapter 4) are examples that come to mind. Porimal Goswami is another author who seems almost forgotten. I have not found a single discussion on them in notable books of Bangla literary history including one that discusses Partition literature exclusively, Ashrukumar Shikdar, Bhanga Bangla O Bangla Sahityo, Calcutta, 2005.


India, are also available. On the Indian side, the multi volume *Collected Works of M.K. Gandhi*, *Selected Works of Nehru*, and correspondences and private papers of public figures like Sardar Patel, S.P. Mookerjee, Meghnad Saha, Renuka Ray, Ashoka Gupta are valuable source materials. The writings by Nirmal Kumar Bose, Saroj Mukhopadhyay, Abani Lahiri, Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, Manikuntala Sen, Soofia Kemal and Renu Chakravartty provide rich details, particularly about Bengal. Institutional papers like the AICC files, government reports and the Assembly proceedings also contribute to our understanding of the Partition not only as a division on the map but a division on the ground and in the minds of the people - the uprooting and the looting, the rape and recovery operations, the riots and their fallouts that marked these moments of uncertainty in the political and social life of the people in the subcontinent. Recent anthropological and sociological studies of Partition’s legacy of violence have also prompted considerable questionings especially of the idea that the Partition’s unfinished agenda of nation building in the subcontinent remains largely flawed and problematic.

The Partition of 1947 meant massive population migration across the borders of the newly independent nation states of India and Pakistan. Fifteen million people

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crossed the newly defined boundaries; in West Bengal alone an estimated 30 lakhs of refugees entered by 1960. For over a million people, it was death in various violent encounters involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For an estimated 80 thousand women, in India and Pakistan, it meant abduction and sexual assault. Although ordinary people suffered these traumas of displacement, murder and mayhem, the dominant hegemonic structures of public memory of the Partition, issued by the state and the majoritarian nationalistic discourses, have paid very little attention to these voices. However, in the last decade, some shifts in Partition Studies can be discerned. In the late nineties, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin commented on the abundance of political histories of the events equalled by a 'paucity of social histories of it'. They also noted an absence of feminist historiography of the Partition. Around the same time, Urvashi Butalia began to retrieve through interviews and oral narratives the stories of the smaller, invisible players of the events: the women and the children and the scheduled castes. Butalia’s contention was that we can not begin to understand what Partition is about ‘unless we look at how people remember it’.

These works, as well as others like Kathinka Kerkoff-Sinha’s study of the Momins in Jharkahand, Sarah Ansari’s study of the Muslim refugees in Sind and Papiya Ghosh’s work on the Biharis in Bangladesh, question the homogeneity of nationalist discourses and have marked a significant break from an exclusive concentration on high politics. These explorations have also seen marginal communities in a constant dialogue with hegemonic state structures even as they internalize hegemonic perspectives. Other studies that look at the ‘unfinished agenda’ of nation building especially the participation of the Dalits and minorities in the formation of the nation state as well as

8 Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 6-9. For an emphasis on social issues like abduction, displacement and communal violence when Menon and Bhasin was writing see D.A. Low and Howard Brasted, eds, Freedom, Trauma, Discontinuities: Northern India and Independence, New Delhi, 1998.
9 Urvashi Butalia, The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India, New Delhi, 1998, p. 18. See also Kuldip Nayar and Asif Noorani, Tales of Two Cities, Delhi, 2008 for personal accounts of the trauma that transformed the subcontinent.
issues of social mobilisation have also opened up the complexities of the Partition. On one hand, these studies have recognised and documented violence to see the importance of personal memory to demonstrate the plurality of how we remember the Partition even within the same community just as they demonstrate that gender, caste and class variegate the memories of a community as the communities in turn are constantly reinvented and reconstituted at particular moments in history.

Mushirul Hasan sees this shift in focus as being animated by the intellectual resources made available to us by creative writers as 'they expose the inadequacy of numerous narratives on independence and partition, compel us to explore fresh themes and adopt new approaches.' Only literature evokes the sufferings of the innocent by exploring the experiences of communities. So, in the last few years, historians have begun to pay serious attention to literary representations of the Partition, despite the claim that fictional representations are few, especially in Bengal. The dimensions of experiences of the common people have been constructed through oral narratives and imaginative readings of their silences as well as from literary renderings of the Partition events. All this has meant that Partition studies have undergone a new and critical sensitivity that take representations more seriously than ever before. This call for new resources for remembering and representing the Partition means that social relations, locality as well as memory, that make up a subjectivity come under the historian’s scrutiny. The ambivalent nature of memory, its healing and transformative role constructing individual and collective identities, also receives critical attention. As a form of representation and construction, memory is vitally implicated with imagination.


14 Pradip Kumar Bose states that given the magnitude of the Partition there is a 'virtual absence of any socio-political analysis or evaluation of a human disaster of such magnitude' and even 'fictional representations of the refugee problems have been few and far between.' See P.K. Bose, 'Refugees in West Bengal: The State and Contested Identities' in Pradeep Bose, ed, *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta, 2000, p., 1.
so an engagement with literature can be an important and significant way to enter the hidden and silenced narratives of the Partition.\textsuperscript{15}

An early interest in Bangla Partition literature had set me thinking about Hindu-Muslim politics, breakdown of their relationship and the extant syncretic traditions (if any) often celebrated in Bengal’s chequered history. Even before the Partition of 1947, the politics of the religious communities in India complicated the nationalist dream of freeing the country. ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ politics had begun muddying the course of Indian political advance from 1905 onward in Bengal (Tagore’s \textit{The Home and the World} reveals to what extent) and although secular nationalists took up in earnest the task of combating communalism, by 1930s its tentacles could be seen in all aspects of the province’s politics. Some earlier studies that explore the communal divide like Joya Chatterji’s \textit{Bengal Divided} and Suranjan Das’s \textit{Communalism in Bengal} cover important ground. The first text looks at the enthusiastic role played by the elite Hindu \textit{bhadralok} (and to a lesser extent the ‘communal mobilization’ of the lower castes in Bengal) in bringing about the Partition and the latter, the convergence and playing out of elite and popular communalisms in cases of violent conflagrations.\textsuperscript{16} I also examine the period before the 1940s to gain an understanding of the agrarian and economic situation of Bengal between the two Wars and the rise of nationalist ideology both among the educated and the peasantry (while the Civil Disobedience and the Revolutionary Terrorist movements played out) to understand the ways in which political parties act and how factional quarrels take their toll on the Hindu-Muslim political unity.\textsuperscript{17} The history of communalism and the history of the reproduction of the ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities’

\textsuperscript{15} I am grateful to Sudeshna Banerjee whose presentation ‘Public Memory, Personal Memory and the Historical Moment: Rethinking Partition Here and Now’ at the seminar-consultation ‘The Partition of India Revisited: Thinking Through and Beyond Violence, Trauma and Memory’, New Delhi, 24-26 August, 2005, has urged me to think through many issues that I grapple with in this work.


remain as enigmatic as ever, so I think that it may be instructive to study questions of Muslim identity formation in the years immediately before the Partition. Muslim experience of the communal divide particularly in Bengal is an important aspect of the period I am studying. I especially want to assess how the motif of abduction has been represented in literary works to see whether the violence of a historical event translate into fiction, particular in the East where abductions have been much less than in Punjab.\(^{18}\) Scholarly works on the violence accompanying the Partition (that the historian Gyan Pandey once lamented are not being written) are finally coming centre-stage with recent studies based on aspects of witnessing and trauma.\(^{19}\) As I look at these issues through the literatures of that time (because reading literary texts is an essential part of my disciplinary practice) I begin to be interested in questions of subjectivity, the dimensions of the experiences of ordinary people, their trauma and their tragedy. I realise I am looking at literary texts as a kind of ‘source’, analogous to other sources that may be found in archives, to ask specific questions relating to the Partition like the postcolonial experience of living as a refugee in a camp or the experience of an eye-witness to a riot. Very soon, I have a project in mind – I want to look at some of these issues but through the optic of literary texts in Bangla.

My plan to research intensively the Bengal Partition through the region’s literature is not an attempt to nullify the importance of the historical archive but a way to foreground a reading practice. It is an endeavour to juxtapose perspectives, not an attempt to replace one history with another. Poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists have demonstrated history’s own constructed narratives about the past and the textuality of all past evidence. This textuality is in many ways similar to the textuality of a cultural product of a novel or a short story, in that they both ‘read’. Postmodernism particularly has also overthrown generic distinctions between literary and other discourses with far-reaching influences for the practitioners of literature and history. Therefore, in the last few decades we have seen a fresh awareness in historiography as historians turn to newer reading practices, and like the literary critic,


have begun to pay great attention to rhetorical strategies of 'texts' although differing
generic texts employ differing strategies.\textsuperscript{20} To look closely at a literary text is to ask,
like a historian, some fundamental questions about the time of composition, the
rhetorical elements used by the narrative, its genealogy, its location, its audience and
its ultimate purpose. When we look at history through a literary text, we are trying to
pose new questions about life and society that sometimes stretch the severe
constraints that historical narratives operate under. Literature and History may be at
odd with each other in their disciplinary approaches, yet both are concerned with the
dichotomy between the notions of \textit{experience} and \textit{representation}. With thematic and
structural cross readings of other narratives (memoirs, diaries, essays, poems) in the
corpus of literature through a period of twenty odd years, I hope to see the patterns
through which people (writers, activists, political workers) remember and negotiate
concrete experiences with the exigencies of the historical events that they are
witnessing. The way I have planned my project also encompasses my real sense of
urgency in bringing together evidences not only from written texts but oral sources as
well. The vast hinterland of Calcutta is home to hundreds of refugee colonies, in
Bijoygarh, Bagha-Jatin, Ranikuthi, Netaji Nagar, Ranaghat, and other areas of the
districts of Nadia and Hoogly. Many of the inhabitants of these colonies are now old
and feeble. There is very little time left to record their memories and experiences and
preserve them before they are lost forever.\textsuperscript{21} I am also greatly influenced by a work I
came across even before I began seriously thinking on this topic. In 2002, Pradip K.
Bose edited a path-breaking book \textit{Refugees in West Bengal} that still remains an
important addition to the subject. In an article the editor states that:

\begin{quote}
\ldotsone important aspect of the refugees in West Bengal that has rarely been
addressed either by the government or by the scholars is the cultural dimension
of the refugee-hood. The experience of the refugee is profoundly cultural and
the disjunction that refugees face between their familiar way-of-being and a
new reality, compels them to resolve the problem of meaning and interpret
their experience continuously.\textsuperscript{22} [Italics mine]
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} Hayden V. White, \textit{The Context of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation},
Baltimore, 1987 began the debate between history and literature with far reaching effect. White
stated that 'we experience the 'fictionalization' of history as an 'explanation' for the same reason that
we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In
both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it
seeks to inhabit comfortably.' (p., 99)

\textsuperscript{21} A wonderful beginning has been made by Jadavpur University to record and preserve the
experiences of East Bengali refugees in Kolkata. See Tridib Chakraborty et al eds, \textit{Dhongsho O

\textsuperscript{22} Pradip K. Bose, ‘Refugees in West Bengal: The State and Contested Identities’, p., 2.
I am deeply interested in studying this cultural aspect of refugee-hood through a cultural product: the short story or the novel that will show how the migrants interpret their experience of the new reality of homelessness and relocation.

I am aware that my project will study a specific region with its own localised customs, habit, cultures and its own historical processes. In the last few years, academic studies foregrounding a particular region have thrown up important issues and debates, particularly in Social Anthropology, Cultural Studies as well as in History, especially because a regional perspective acts as a counterpoint to a large macro-history of the nation state. In the process of aggregation that is the Nation, regional perspectives get erased in many vital ways. This is keenly felt today in Partition Studies. The narratives from the West and East Punjab have in many ways smothered the other histories of the Partition, particularly from the hinterlands of Bengal and the North-east of India. Issues that are peculiar to these regions can be explored effectively through the literature written in the post Partition years both in West Bengal and East Pakistan, later Bangladesh. Diaries, reminiscences, as well as fiction, ‘history’s creative counterpart’ can be valuable sources to look at the Partition through the experiences of the common people, especially of women and children, their trauma, tragedy and rehabilitation and the shades of violence they are subjected to, both during and after the Partition. These writings can fashion a critical sensitivity and create a new optic for remembering the Partition, taking representation much more seriously than ever before. Of course a novel or a short story that directly or indirectly deals with the Partition and hence specifically contextualised in its time has no obligation to faithfully represent that time, yet these questions cannot be avoided altogether in such a study as this. The current critical attention to the language of memory and traumatic forgetting has called forth new resources that can

23 For example, Shail Mayaram, Against History, Against State: Counter-perspectives from the Margins, Delhi, 2003, gives an account of the Meos in Rajasthan as well as Veena Das’s ethnographic work among the Punjabi refugees in Delhi. Also, a text like Shahid Amin’s, Event, Metaphor, Memory, Delhi, 1995 that looks at a historical event of Chauri Chaura as a metaphor aiding remembrance.

be roughly assigned to the domain of subjectivity. The post Partition years in Bangla literature is a period of difficult negotiations and dilemmas fashioned within a set of complex questions regarding livelihood, identity and place of sojourn. In reanimating this history we need the sensibilities of a critical tradition, a self-reflexive tradition that looks significantly to enrich the empirical event of the Partition. I am also aware that the shadow-lines of states and boundaries have constructed national archives and created fault-lines in what we choose to remember. My study will juxtapose literary texts written roughly between the years 1946 and 1969 (I stretch this time frame and look at two texts written in 1980 and 1996 because they are so topical to my discussion), with other archival materials both conventional and non-canonical, and then go on to reflect on the historical issues of violence, the struggle and resettlement of refugees, issues of gender and the growth of political and cultural identities amongst displaced people from East Pakistan. Fiction can be of great help in making us see the hidden histories of the Partition, and in showing the cultural dimensions of that momentous event in the life of our nation. My effort will not be to ‘interpret’ the national and state archives but to weave archival material and literary text into a thick description; this way I hope to map and make visible a jagged continuum of themes and regular/irregular discursive practices. Necessarily interdisciplinary, I employ in this study insights gained from current literary and cultural criticisms and focus on certain modulating influences of specific histories rather than attempt to develop a macro-historical perspective on the Partition. 25 Bangla short stories about the Partition form a wide range of narratives. Short stories from West Bengal and Bangladesh in general explore some important themes of the Partition – the loss of a homeland, the new life of a refugee, the fragility of borders in the construction of identities and the continuities and disruptions of memory and how culture and nature of the East Bengal bind them together. However, if we compare the first stories written immediately after 1947 in West Bengal and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) we find them distinctly different. In East Bengal, called East Pakistan after the Partition, stories published

around 1949 are decisively propagandist in tone and overtly support a nationalist cause that celebrates the birth of a new nation. If we look at some of the stories written in West Bengal during this period we find stories that deal with the refugee problem, the angst and pain of leaving one’s homeland, the horror of riots and the slow erosion of values in the public psyche. So there is a difference not only of themes and motifs but also of structure that is worth investigating.

In dealing with the Bengal Partition I take 1946 as the starting point. With only brief and minor breaks, the 1940s are marked by the rise of communalism as a recurrent theme in social, political and literary life of Bengal. It is also the time of intense peasant and workers’ struggles, notably the Tebhaga Andolan in parts of North and East Bengal. Consequently, I focus on the August riot in Calcutta and the one in Noakhali, then go forward till the post Partition years to explore the consequences of the Partition in diverse spaces like the metropolis of Calcutta, Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi, Barak Valley and then turn back once again to 1946 as I explore a novel from Bangladesh based on the Tebhaga Andolon. I also want to begin with 1946 because that year is definitely a watershed in modern Indian history, the penultimate and worst phase of communal violence in pre-Independent Bengal, and creates, for the first time, a migrant population who flee their places of sojourn due to insecurity and fear. The Calcutta and Noakhali riots are also significantly different from preceding instances of Hindu-Muslim violence for it is the first time that religious and political issues (and not natural calamities or economic oppression) that come to dominate the reasons why people leave their homes.

Even when I am ticking off the themes that I shall look into, I am also particularly sure that in this study I want to go beyond trauma, violence and memory. I am deeply indebted to recent studies on these issues especially with a focus on gender (Jill Didur’s work comes to mind) but Bengal’s case is different. I am interested in finding out in what ways is it different from the experience of the Partition in the west. It is undoubtedly true that public memory of the Partition deploys spatiality as power. Although there is no public memorial of the Partition in the subcontinent, nations have played cartographic politics, claiming this portion of

26 Jill Didur, Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory, Delhi, 2006.
land or that as belonging to it. The power of maps that transforms land into territory is a living reality in South Asia. It is also true that Radcliffe’s Line, drawn in haste and with very little judgement, amputates people’s lives and places of sojourn with very few options. Territoriality has thus meant that space becomes an element of politics and can be used to classify people into ‘citizens’ or ‘aliens.’ The most enduring image in my mind whenever I think of what people suffered in 1947 is the scene in Ritwik Ghatak’s Komalgandhar (1961, the second film in his Partition trilogy) where the protagonists, Bhrigu and Anasuya, travel to the last railhead that separates India and East Pakistan. They stand at the barricade that closes off the railway line, gazing out at the river Padma, to a land where they had once lived and where they would now be treated as aliens. This is a moment of epiphany and has symbolized for me the intense expressive mode of a landscape that brings together subjectivity and spatiality. I realize now that the scene is given its power because Ghatak explores the spatial parameters of the Partition experience: he unearths a history of the Partition through landscapes in his films. Anasuya and Bhrigu’s rootless lives touch the countryside that lies in front of them and render it visible to us: the land becomes a marker of their lives, and through them, the lives of thousands who are just as rootless. All the texts that I read through this study have reaffirmed this idea within me: Partition is not just an event, or a date but a long durée that lives within each of us; we can never get rid of it but can only acknowledge its existence. In the texts that I explore and analyze, this acknowledgement is made through the landscape, the setting through which the characters move. The landscape is given meaning by the suffering subjectivity and the landscape, in turn, is expressive of that suffering. Each works upon the other to construct the meaning and power of the narrative. Michael Shapiro’s contention that ‘it is a propitious time to rethink the ethical and political history of space’ because cartography and identity are closely linked is a point that comes under close scrutiny in this work.

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28 I am grateful to Shri Kumar Sahani for sharing with me his understanding of this particular film.

I do not see the topography of Bengal as a stage upon which actors enact significant historical events: rather the very topography of the land, bound by mighty rivers like the Padma and the Brahmaputra, is significant and alive – throwing up rich spatial representations (memoirs and literatures of Noakhali or Calcutta or Marichjhapi) through which the memories and experiences of partitioned people find new expression. Undivided Bengal is the ‘landscape…of the mind’ and imprinted in the collective memory of its people. Its ‘scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.’

The imprint of the Partition on these landscapes – demographic, social and cultural – are profound and long term. In this study I therefore touch upon how Partition transform places, either through the influx of refugees or through violent confrontations between people. Literature captures these moments, rendering visible that which has lurked hidden beneath the statistics and figures in government reports. For example, the riots in Calcutta in August 1946 results in a number of novels and short stories that look at the city in crisis and the quotidian experience of the days of rioting. The texts ask questions about how we can witness these horrors as well as the impending freedom of the new nation state. Calcutta is also transformed when the thousands of refugees crowd its bus stations and rail yards, die on its pavements or protest on its streets. The urban concentration of refugee colonies in the Calcutta Development Area is a special feature of the effect of Partition. From social and economic surveys we know that apart from the well-marked waves of migration of Hindus from East Pakistan into Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal, for many years after the Partition there has been a steady flow of people going out. This has meant enormous demographic, social and other changes in Calcutta’s urban landscape: ‘refugees are now settled in nearly all Bengali residential wards’ with a specially high concentration in some southernmost and south-eastern wards. It is also significant that ‘many of these wards were formerly inhabited by Muslim labourers and artisans.’

accommodate the newcomers can be mapped in the literature that discusses the advent of the refugees, the cramped life lived in camps or colonies, the changes that occur in the refugee women’s lives (in Sabitri Roy and Sunil Gangopadhyay’s works). However, it is not just the city of Calcutta that changes so do the ‘marginal’ (to the central metropolitan spaces) places like Dandakaranya or Marichjhapi or Barak Valley. What sediments does the Partition leave behind in the physical topography of these places? In what ways are landscapes ‘memorials’ of traumatic events? Is landscape an adequate way in which we can gauge and map out some of the hidden histories of Partition? The literature that I read therefore are just not texts, but a way of unearthing the sediments of history that lie hidden in the topography through which the refugees travel; they are the landforms and the geography through which Partition’s history can be mapped in a new way because different geographies throw up different ways of representation. Although there is a mirroring of themes and motifs, each landscape has a different story to tell and recreates a space that is in direct contradiction to the territoriality of the new nation state. Exile is a kind of recreation that tries to restore the original place of sojourn that is now lost. Thus a novel set in the forests of Dandakaranya tells a different story than the one set in the banks of the Jamuna though both the texts talk of the marginalized farmers and peasants of the lower castes whose stories have never gained prominence in Partition debates. Yet the representations of their struggles by the two writers (Rajguru and Elias) are very different. In this study, however, I do not see the landscape as a sign system that brings to life some meanings of the past but rather the landscape as integral to the message that the author/filmmaker/poet is hoping to convey. His/her understanding of the network of linkages between people and the land on which they choose or not choose to reside forms the central theme of many of the literatures that I study. The ‘sedimenting of history’ and ‘sentiment in the landscape’ therefore form two overarching themes in the Partition narratives that I take up for study. I am also

aware that the experience of the Partition cannot be mapped in trite formulations: it was too vast, too complex and too heartrending to be put into neat theories of identity, habitations or modernity. But I do try to make sense of the cultural representations that have been brought forth by suffering and rootlessness by situating them in their particular spaces and in their times. Thus, I look at Calcutta, Noakhali, Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi, Barak Valley and some areas of Bangladesh as spaces where Partition’s victims play out their life stories. In turn, the literatures that use these places as settings do so deliberately: by questioning the validity of boundaries and by demonstrating the impossibility of separating memory and geography in the way Partition is remembered, especially in Bengal.

As I had stated earlier, the project is an interdisciplinary one, maybe even an overtly ambitious one. I scan geography, history, literature, economics and anthropology to make sense of what happened in 1947 and after. I am aware that such an interdisciplinary work depends on taking certain risks, a risk that comes from what Foucault calls ‘the art of reflective insolence’, a peril that a critic describes ‘of never being erudite enough to satisfy the demands of all disciplines that one is using, addressing, and inhabiting’. I know I have been trained as a literary critic and many of the methodologies known to a history student may be unfamiliar to me. However, I believe that responding to history through literary texts can be a very fruitful exercise, an interdisciplinary exercise that, while ensuring historical detail, may add another layer to our understanding of the politics of culture in a significant period of our history.

There remains of course the question of readership and language through which the literature I study can be reshaped and communicated. The texts that I explore often use dialects of East Bengal that are impossible to translate and to make intelligible in the pages of this study. As Shahid Amin asks, ‘What linguistic and cultural communication must precede the work of the historian? ...In other words, what must readers know beforehand in order to empathize with this shifting tale of an...event with a long afterlife?’ 34 I try to set out the difficulties without trying to

34 Shahid Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, p., 5.
provide answers to all of them. I translate some important passages or lines from the
texts that I study, not to erase the differences between languages but simply to give
my readers a sense of the import of the words used. After all, even the anonymity of
the speakers does not belie the utterances they make: their words draw blood, even
after so many years after the partitioning of their homeland.