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Original Research Article

The Wounds of Partition: Role of Bongaon Church and a few Bengali Text

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Abstract:
Partition is a permanent wound in our lives. East Pakistan and West Bengal are still carrying this wound today. The border regions of both sides were the most affected. Thousands of people from areas like Khulna, Jessore, Rajshahi in East Pakistan and Basirhat, Murshidabad, and Bongaon in West Bengal crossed the border and left their homeland. The Hindus who became homeless after leaving Khulna–Jessore mostly crossed the border in search of new shelter and created new addresses in Bongaon and Basirhat. Apart from these uprooted people, another type of people was also uprooted from East Bengal who were mainly Christians in religion. The Father of the Church of Bongaon gave them shelter at that time. Besides, many lower-class Hindus and Muslims were sheltered by the Church Father and later converted to Christianity. The narrative of this essay is based on how the uprooted people of East Bengal built their lives under the shelter of the Bongaon Church during the period from 1947 to the liberation war of 1971 and how they adapted to the complex political situation. This Article captures that juncture of Partition.

Keywords:
Partition, displacement, communal violence, refugee, religion, migration, borders, identity

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Introduction

A great deal of writing on Partition has been done in Bengali literature to this day. People who lost their homeland have, at different times, recalled memories of the country they

left behind in their memoirs. Many people from the lower strata, uprooted from East Bengal, took shelter in Christian churches located in border areas. For example, some destitute people who had lost everything and came from Jessore–Khulna took refuge in churches and later converted to Christianity. Even after adopting Christianity, they did not abandon Hinduism anywhere, and through a strange spiritual refuge formed by the coexistence of these two religions, they learned to conceal the dangers left behind in their lives.

Bongaon: In History and Literature

Bongaon, the border town[1]. After getting off at Bongaon station and heading towards the border by toto or auto, one would come across places like Shimultala and Chhoigharia. Once, these areas were full of forests and wetlands. From history, we know that wild boars and tigers used to roam here. Now it is densely populated. If you listen carefully, you can hear the whispers of the neighbors. After Partition, gradually refugees began to settle here. It was not just the Hindus and Muslims from either side who were displaced due to Partition, but also the converted Christians who flocked to both sides. I was re-reading Subhash Mukhopadhyay's *Abar Dakbanglar Dake*. To know Bongaon, the Ichamati, Bibhutibhushan's house, and the myths associated with Bibhutibhushan, I have to keep returning to this book. You will see an abundance of love for Bongaon in this prose. It begins like this:

Here, on both sides, there are continuous settlements. Instead of forests, there are fields of crops. Most of this area is now inhabited by people who came from East Bengal. Today, they can no longer be called uprooted. They have planted themselves in new soil. Across the entire area, not just bonds of home but also of blood are spread. On holidays, there's the obligation of meeting relatives and checking on each other. Besides, there are thousands of other ties.[2]

And then comes the border—smugglers of the frontier, foreign contraband, crop fields, the life of the farmer—stories in which we must stay immersed. In a calm and gentle storytelling style, he keeps the readers engaged. The writer's comment about the new people and geography of Bongaon town is as follows:

It's not because of the border. Bongaon's real difficulty lies in its human nature. Seventy percent of its population has come from outside. They are still not properly rooted in the life here. Their mental chords don't quite strike the same note with the locals. Yet these outsiders are in the majority.

Before Partition, twelve annas of Bongaon subdivision's residents were of the Muslim community. Among fifty-two unions, six had Hindu presidents. Now the percentage of local Muslims who stayed back is down to five percent. Before Independence, this was a stronghold of the Muslim League. The scenario in the adjacent Basirhat is totally different. Nationalist Muslims have both tradition and influence there. Its contrast with

Bardhaman and Bankura is even clearer. To understand Bongaon, one must keep in mind these differences in human nature.[3]

While telling stories of Dakbangla, the writer thus delves into history. In this history, the pain of colonies, communal riots, land-hungry owners, the life of tribal people, and alongside that, the refugee's pain is described. Where the traditional narrative speaks of Hindu-Muslim displacement, Subhash Mukhopadhyay's *Dakbanglar Dake* becomes enriched by the story of Christians losing their homes. After Partition, many Muslims who converted to Christianity in East Bengal migrated to this side, and similarly, Hindus of East Bengal who had converted to Christianity came to this side. Several churches on both sides of Bengal gave them shelter and embraced them. Subhash Mukhopadhyay presents this almost unknown history in the guise of a story:

After Pakistan was formed, not just Hindus but Christians too came in groups out of insecurity. In Bongaon town, two separate Christian neighbourhoods came up. In one lived the Catholics, in the other, the Protestants. Even among them, there is the matter of caste and division. Just a little probing and it becomes evident. Those who herd pigs or sell turtle meat are said to come from lower castes. They have a separate church. Otherwise, all local Christians here are poor! They pull rickshaws, work for others. Around their necks, many wear a cross pendant. In the evening, they chant Jesus's name in Bengali with drums and cymbals: "There is none but Jesus in this world, who else will free us from this great sin?"

I had met a young priest from one of the churches. He wasn't a refugee. A high-caste Hindu boy from Bongaon. After completing a BA, he took up a government job. Reading Christian scriptures changed his mind. He took initiation into Christianity.

Later, one of his classmates told me— "You know what? He had fallen in love with a Christian girl, that's why he converted. Besides, he enjoys a lot of perks in this job. Changing religion has actually benefited him."

That may be. But still, the young man seemed very courteous and decent to me.[4]

The Image of Partition in Bengali Literature: When pain seeks liberation in Spirituality

Is it only in Subhash Mukhopadhyay's writing that the stories of displaced Christians appear? Not really. One must also speak of Amiya Bhushan Majumdar's *Nirbas* and *Aranya Rodan*. Especially the novel *Aranya Rodan*. In it appears a girl named Aratishikha. Aratishikha's father was a scholar at a village *Tol* in Chittagong. Aratishikha found shelter in a refugee camp. "She was one among countless refugee women. Looking at her, I must say I didn't feel any upward, luminous transcendence of Aratishikha. Rather, she reminded me of some destitute yet desire-driven urban woman. She must have been twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old." In her persecuted life came Father Graham like a 'Narayan-shila'. In Aratishikha's words— "It felt like Lord Jesus had

sent just a drop of His mercy." Aratishikha started spending her days with Indian Christian women at Father Graham's bungalow. In the church's prayer meetings, she would sit silently staring at the altar. Arati thinks— 'Jesus Bhagwan, Jesus Bhagwan. You have endured suffering with this mortal body. That is why you seem so close to the pain-stricken human being.' If you notice carefully, you will see that Arati addresses Jesus as 'Bhagwan'. Amiya Bhushan Majumdar has tried to touch the mind of the exile through Arati's eyes in this way—

Across the small river lies India. An ancient land of many days. The people of that land have written the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Perhaps the air there does not feel so suffocating. In front stands a night at the kutibari. So be it. One must pay the price of death to attain a touch. Those who cannot bear to be hidden from sight—when even their desperate plea, "Speak," is heard through broken sobs, still people do not speak again. Perhaps similarly, every cell of Arati's body will weep as it tries to pay the price of liberation. Crossing the small river—Bharatbhumi. Shortly before dusk, Arati has touched this Bharatbhumi by crossing that small river. A half-formed desire arose in her to lift this soil and smear it on her body. She felt as if she was getting an unnatural, sweet fragrance. As if a moist, earthy smell was rising from the soil after the rain. She looked back once—to see if anyone was following her. The kutibari came into sight. Perhaps the priest has now sat down there to pray. Will he tell the truth in his prayer today? Or, for political reasons, can even Bhagwan Jesus be cautiously protected and informed with concealment?

So be it. In front stood a palace. When this palace in the corner of the village suddenly came into view, Arati had the irrational thought that perhaps she would also find shelter there. Advancing along the nearly dark path toward the gateway, it occurred to her that whoever lived in this unfamiliar palace—they were, whatever else, people of Bharatbhumi. Even if they were not easily willing to give shelter, she would weep, touch their feet and plead—after all, they are human, people of Bharatbhumi. Rajsingha was his name, wasn't it? Did Bankimchandra ever write a lie? To give shelter to a woman, Rajsingha endangered both his kingdom and his life. Even after seeing Emperor Aurangzeb's ferocious army, he was not shaken. And before that, Mughal Emperor Humayun—he too had risked everything for his rakhi-tied sister. And look, even in recent times, Vidyasagar of this Bharatbhumi was moved by the suffering of women and fought alone against the whole country.[5]

I could not resist the temptation of a long quotation. From the geographical description of the journey crossing from one country to another, we can easily assume the kutibari on the bank of the Ichamati, where Arati found shelter. The mention of such a church has also appeared in Subhash Mukhopadhyay's writings. He mentioned such churches in his *Dakbangla* diary. In Bongaon's Chhoigharia and Shimultala, such churches exist. After Partition, vulnerable people from lower castes found shelter in churches on both sides of Bengal, just like Arati. To them, Jesus has sometimes remained as 'Allah Jesus', sometimes as 'Bhagwan Jesus'. These churches were filled with people from lower-caste Hindu and Muslim societies who had once converted to Christianity. Not just Bongaon, in

Chapra of Nadia there is also a beautiful settlement of Protestant Christians. They accepted Christianity after converting from the lower castes of Hindu and Muslim societies. Mostly, they converted due to economic reasons. Here, a genre of song called *Christian kirtan* is prevalent. In these songs, all the emotional elements of the kirtan of Nabadwip are blended with Christian themes. Sudhir Chakraborty (Sudhir Chakraborty devoted his entire life to the study of the vanishing rural folk culture of Bengal. He regularly conducted research-based work on Bauls and Fakirs. He also received the Ananda Purashkar for his research-oriented book on Bauls and Fakirs) has explained this matter wonderfully—

In our town of Krishnanagar, there are Catholic Christians, who are idol-worshippers. Only in Krishnanagar, Nabadwip, and Shantipur is there such a Vaishnavite atmosphere due to which a domestic festival called 'Jhulan' is held. In homes, Artificial landscapes are created with clay dolls and grass for Jhulan. There are hills, atop which sits Shiva. Roads, rivers, canals—all are made artificially. Jhulan is quite an enjoyable and visually appealing event. Until recently, it was exclusively within Hindu society. The Catholic community of Krishnanagar felt—why can't they also celebrate such Jhulan? So, during Christmas, using the myth of Jesus's birth, they build a cowshed. There, it is seen that Jesus is born in the cowshed—a new star is visible in the sky, Jesus's mother Mary, father Joseph, the devotees, a few sheep, and a foreign ambiance are also included because these scenes were created based on foreign images. The cowsheds they build with small dolls resemble the Jhulan of the Hindus.[6]

—This adoption of concepts and exchange of emotions is the soul of Indian culture. This is what we want to call cultural synthesis.

Various churches in the border regions of West Bengal became shelters for refugees and displaced people during Partition. Whenever country, time, and society have been in crisis, these churches have assumed the role of protectors. Like the churches of Machlandapur, Hasnabad, and Basirhat in North 24 Parganas, the church of Bongaon also played the same role. Even during the refugee influx of 1971, the role of these churches in providing shelter was commendable. One day, step by step, we reached Shantipara, Chhoigharia of Bongaon. The objective was to talk with the church fathers and Christian residents of the area. We gradually met many people. For example, Shyamal Barui, age 81. A small part of the conversation with him is shared below—

Q: When did you come from Bangladesh?

A: In 1958. Father, mother, and four brothers—we all came together.

Q: Where did you live in Bangladesh?

A: In Kishorekandi village of Barisal district.

Q: Why did you come to India?

A: My father's brother's sons lived in India. We heard from them that the situation here was better. Goods were more expensive in Bangladesh. Though my father

received benefits from the church in Bangladesh, he received nothing from the government. There was a good connection between the church in Bangladesh and the church in Bongaon.

Q: What do you remember when you think of Bangladesh?

A: We remember only the ponds, betel nut groves, mango orchards. We remember the church there.

Q: What was the reason for coming to India?

A: From our church there, we heard that the condition in India was better, with good healthcare and education. That's why we came.

Q: How did you come to India?

A: Only clothes were with us. First, we came by boat. Then by steamer, we reached Jessore.

Q: Are you married?

A: I married an orphan girl from Bongaon church. Since I married an orphan, five kathas of land were registered in my wife's name.

After that, our conversation continued with people like Usharani Sardar, Bhola Sardar. In these conversations, there were no narratives of revenge. Instead, a wonderful picture of harmony enchanted us. "Many unfulfilled desires linger in the heart, Oh Khuda, do not ask for the account of my sins"— Usharani Sardar's day ends with such a prayer. When a strange evening descends in prayer to Allah Jesus or Bhagwan Jesus, we begin a conversation with the church father. We met the father of Barasat church. He has been researching migration for a long time. He asked me about my religion. I said, Islam is my religion. He said— "Oh, Mr. Haque, both of our religious leaders were migrants!" Then he narrated the story of Jesus's migration—

In the province of Galilee in Palestine, in a small town called Nazareth, a child was born into a very poor family. He is our Jesus. His father's name was Joseph, mother's name Mary (in Hebrew, Miriam). When Jesus was born, Palestine was not under Roman rule. The king there was Herod. A story is associated with Herod regarding Jesus. Later, Matthew included it in the Gospel. Matthew says that after Jesus's birth, some wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking where the king of the Jews had been born. Herod, fearing the loss of his throne, wanted to kill that Jewish child. Herod always feared someone would conspire to assassinate him and seize his throne. On the other hand, Joseph had a dream that night instructing them to flee to Egypt with the newborn; otherwise, their baby's life could not be saved. Immediately, Joseph left with Jesus and his mother into the darkness of the night for Egypt. Until news of Herod's death arrived, they could not return to their homeland. Thus, to save his life, Jesus had to go into exile.[7]

Then we began telling the story of Muhammad. The establishment of worship of the one and only formless God, rescuing the sin-drenched Arab society, and unifying the

fragmented Arab nation—these were the purposes of Muhammad's life. To fulfil these objectives, not just the power of religion, but also political strength was necessary. However, as Muhammad's religion gradually took hold in the region of Mecca, the local leader Abu Jahl gave this instruction—

Gather a group of brave youths from each family of the Quraish clan in Mecca. With free swords, they will strike Muhammad's chest simultaneously and kill him. Muhammad's relatives will not dare to take revenge against all the Quraish clans. Eventually, they will be content with compensation instead of blood.[8]

Muhammad got wind of this conspiracy beforehand. That's why he fled from Mecca to Medina. Many believe that the day Muhammad left Mecca marks the beginning of the Hijri calendar. The word 'Hijrat' means migration. The story of Prophet Muhammad's migration is also mentioned in Mahmudul Haque's novel *Kalo Borof* (*Black Snow*). It contains a heartbreaking account of how a Muslim family from this side of Bengal, fearing Partition, moves to East Pakistan. "Suddenly one day, the area became Pakistan," and their neighbors told them that they could no longer stay here because this country was "only for Hindus." Familiar people, even school friends, started whispering when they saw them. No one would speak openly anymore. They gradually understood that they could no longer stay in this land. Someone had stolen their peace and happiness. They began thinking about migrating to East Pakistan. While narrating this family's exile, Mahmudul Haque mentions Prophet Muhammad's exile—

There was constant whispering. Mother would sit all night on the bed, watching over us by hurricane lamp—we understood nothing. No one approved of Abba going to Pakistan. Abba would say that holding one's head high is what matters. Wherever I can walk with my head held high—that is my country. Mother would reply, but does that mean leaving everything behind and living in an unknown land? What sort of idea is that? I won't go anywhere. If I have to die, I'll die right here. Whatever is written in my fate will happen." This would enrage Abba. He would say, "What is a country? Unless one leaves a country, one cannot gain another. Everyone must go through a hijrat in life. Have you forgotten the Prophet? He chose Medina Sharif." Khenaram Kaka would try to console Mother, saying— "We are all here, why leave the country? Lifelong relationships! I don't even remember how we managed.[9]

Conclusion

This article discusses the role of the Bongaon Church in the history of Partition studies. It examines how the Bongaon Church became a shelter for helpless people during 1947, and how ordinary people, in order to escape their endangered condition, sought liberation through spirituality there. Thus, in the narratives of the exiled, Jesus and Muhammad become one. In the undercurrents of the Partition story, diverse cultures cling together. The dispossessed people, like Amiya Bhushan's *Aratishikha,* have sought salvation at the feet of Bhagwan Jesus or Allah Jesus. This astonishing cultural narrative, whether in

India on this side or in Bangladesh on that side, may now seem too incompatible to the state religions!

References

1. Bongaon was originally called Bonogram. This Bonogram subdivision was once associated with the Nadia district. Later, in 1882, it was incorporated into Jessore. Again, in 1947, at the time of Independence, half of it was included in the 24 Parganas district. Bonogram had established communication not only with India but, it is said, also beyond India since ancient times. Bongaon is situated on the banks of the Ichamati River. Besides the Ichamati River, the Bongaon subdivision also has many baors (oxbow lakes) and bils (wetlands). These contain water throughout the year. The area of Bonogram where settlements have now expanded—particularly on the banks of the Ichamati—still has a village named Chapaberia. The name of Kali Poddar of Jessore will always be remembered, for he was the one who first prepared a long road through Bonogram. The name of this road is the Bonogram-Chakdaha Road. Many important offices and courts of the British government were located here. Now the size of Bongaon has increased significantly. Settlements have developed on both sides of the railway line. In addition, many freedom fighters and liberation war activists had strongholds in this town of Bongaon. Bongaon has given birth to many eminent personalities such as Dinabandhu Mitra, Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. Even the home of Gobinda Halder, the lyricist of the song written during the Liberation War— *"Mora Ekti Phulke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori"*—is in Bongaon.After the Indigo Revolt of Bengal, toward the end of 1862, the Magistrate of Nadia district, Mr. Horsell, and the Magistrate of Barasat district, Mr. Eden, came to Bongaon (then Bonogram). Promising good governance to the distressed indigo farmers, they declared the formation of Bongaon subdivision centered around the Bongaon town.
    a. Bongaon is the 28th most populous city in West Bengal. After the 2011 census, the population of the city increased, and as of July 2011, the population stood at 1,08,864. Among them, 51% were male. The primary language of this city is Bengali. About 96% are Hindus, 3% Muslims, and the remaining are Christians and Sikhs.

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