

## There Are No More Places to Migrate To

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**ABSTRACT** This essay, written as narrative nonfiction, is the portion of an oral history interview with Kalyani Ray Chowdhury, who was born in 1929 in Chittagong (present-day Bangladesh), on what she recalls of her homeland in East Bengal. A few months prior to India's 1947 Partition into India and Pakistan by the British, Ray Chowdhury's family had been vacationing in the city of Patna. They were unable to travel back home to Mymensingh due to rising communal and political turmoil. When the Partition line was finally declared, they found themselves living life as refugees in Calcutta in West Bengal, while their home remained abandoned across the newly formed border in East Bengal. During the course of the interview, Ray Chowdhury also makes note of the nuanced distinctions in the culture and language of people from both sides of the Bengal border, and how conscious efforts had to be made on the part of her family to feel any sense of integration to their newly adopted home. **KEYWORDS** Oral history; Partition; Migration; Displacement; Memory

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For the last many years, I have spent my days as an oral historian, interviewing individuals—Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Englishmen and Englishwomen—who experienced the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Raised in New Delhi, India, and hailing from a family where all four of my grandparents migrated from the other side (what became Pakistan), the mental topography of undivided India remains an area of vast interest. In my ongoing field research, my goal is to record the many *versions* of Partition, for the Partition is an event that has several versions, depending upon who tells the story. And though the event has now receded from public memory, it continues to quietly and painfully linger in private discourse.

This collection of testimonies is not always easy or accessible, for remembering can be quite difficult, especially if the story has remained unspoken for a long time. The conversations hardly ever begin with Partition; on the contrary, they could start with cups of tea or coffee, talking about the weather, family, my day, their day, why this work, how this work, what is the relevance of this work that I am doing. And then, eventually and gradually, we arrive at the word

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Partition, *batwara* or *taqsim*. Within this dialogue, a formation of trust must somehow be established, for the divulgence of great vulnerability from the interviewee demands a similar responsibility from the interviewer. The ethics in this kind of documentation require time, effort, empathy, respect for those who refuse to speak or choose to remain silent, and in some cases (as in mine) the bridging of a rather large generational gap, whereby I cross not just the physical borders of geography, but one of age as well. Thus, a story emerges only when it wants to.

Owing to this rather intricate realm of oral history and belonging, anything uncomplicated about “home” that I had inherited and accepted as a part of my upbringing has since been rendered insufficient. Through this experience, I have come to understand that the term “belonging” comprises a complex and multidimensional terrain. It comprises not only physical belonging—a sense of ownership over land and tangible space—but also cognitive belonging, a psychological landscape of solace and familiarity. In the interviews I have been conducting over the years, it is clear that the Partition rendered both a physical and a cognitive sense of belonging that is incomprehensible for many people, no matter on which side of the border they found themselves. The focus of my ongoing work in this domain has taken many routes simultaneously, ranging from material artifacts, which were carried across to both sides of the border, to the descriptions of intangible symbols of remembrance, to the different ways in which refugees both *return* home and *retain* the idea of home.

In this essay, I engage with the oral history of Kalyani Ray Chowdhury. I interviewed her in her home in Kolkata, India, in January 2018. Driven by her memories, I focused upon the invisible and intangible elements of migration. In the summer of 1947, her family had been vacationing in Patna, a city in the Indian state of Bihar, and owing to communal and political tensions, were unable to travel back to their hometown in Mymensingh. They became stranded in the Indian state of West Bengal as refugees, never to return. This is her story.

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“Well, where you want to travel is a place of the past, and I don’t know if I can return so easily. I am old now, nearly ninety, and too much time has passed,” she said slowly and cautiously. “You see, at times I don’t remember anymore, other times, I don’t have the words to express myself and then . . . sometimes the past seems almost like an imaginary landscape.”

Kalyani Ray Chowdhury smiled a toothless smile and rounded all the vowels in my name in typical Bengali fashion that made it sound something like *Ochol*,

and yet through the course of the afternoon, she never once failed to enchant me. *Titta* was what her grandchildren called her, and so I did so, as well.

“All I know,” she continued, “is that before we came to Calcutta, we had no connection on *this* side. No connection.”

“But what do you remember about *that* side?” I prompted.

“East Bengal?” she asked. I nodded.

For a while the room was quiet. Evening was settling on Kolkata. We were seated around the living room waiting for a life from across a border to unfold.

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“I was born in Chittagong in 1929,” she began. “My father was a doctor of anatomy and we lived in a small house near the river. In 1942, we heard a rumor that in the midst of World War II, the Japanese were going to bomb the area! And so we moved northward to a *zila* called Mymensingh to be safer. I might have been thirteen years old then.”

“Did the war affect you in any other way?”

“Oh, I was too young to understand these things, war and conflict,” she dismissed my question, and then suddenly, as if a thought had struck her, she said, “Well, to be honest, we hardly saw any political turmoil in my childhood, but I do remember the 1930 Chittagong Armory Raid led by Surya Sen, who attempted to loot the weapons from the armory of the British. My cousin brothers were in the police service and they used to discuss it at home. I remember hearing that they arrested many Indian boys and tortured them, as a result of this case. The men used to talk, and from discreet corners of the house, the rest of us used to listen. I was too young to understand it, but of course, I thought it was interesting. Apart from that, there was no political conversation in my family.”

“Well, what about Partition?” I began.

“Partition. Yes . . .” her voice lingered. “It was a few years after we arrived in Mymensingh. It is the reason we are on *this* side today. Ochol,” she addressed me, looking directly into my eyes, “things were very difficult in those days, both personally and politically. It is strange to think of yourself as someone who doesn’t belong in the only place you have known to be home. The Partition severed us from East Bengal, from our home . . .”

From a clear plastic bag, she extracted a stack of old photos and placed them on the footstool before us. I climbed off the sofa and sat on the ground next to the stool, going through the photographs. In them, I could see a young woman with sharp features and long black hair.

“*Titta*, is this you?” I asked, smiling.

“Yes, I was still a teenager in 1947, maybe seventeen or eighteen when our family went on holiday to Patna city for a few months. That was the time that discussions for Partition took place. In the paper, every day, they would publish headlines like—*Are you in favor or against the Partition?*”

“What did you think when you read these types of articles? Were you in favor?”

“I used to read, but did not think seriously about these things. Even for a moment,” she stressed, “even for a single moment, we did not think that Partition would happen in India. How could it? But then, we also heard of rumors that Mymensingh and other parts of East Bengal were no longer safe for Hindus. Things were changing. We were on our way back from Patna, but couldn’t get home. The air was thick with rumors of terrible incidents. People were burning houses in the villages, they were being forced to convert to Islam, girls were being snatched. I don’t think my father agreed with the idea of Partition, but he was also concerned about taking two young daughters back to a place that might not be safe anymore. And so straight from Patna, we came to Calcutta. If I begin to think of the course of our migration, it seems like a bizarre turn of events. One day, we are on holiday, and the next day, we are homeless. Overnight, we became refugees, *udbastu*, without home, without *bastu*, only with two pieces of baggage,” she held up two fingers. “Our whole life in two bags. We had nothing else.”

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Then even before I could ask her, *Titta* brought out, from the depths of her memory, the idea of home. “We had left everything as it was in the house in Mymensingh. Now, imagine,” she gestured to where we sat, “imagine leaving *all* of this, your whole life, going on holiday and then realizing that you can never return to your motherland. It was a strange reality to grapple with. I left all my toys, my Japanese dolls, my storybooks. My sister used to play the sitar, and I still remember exactly where it sat when we left. All our beautiful furniture made in Burma teak, so shiny and glossy, we left behind. Beds and tables and chairs made of original Indian rosewood, *sheesham*, we left behind. My father could not go back to his job in the hospital, we could not go back to school . . .

“I remember all of this now, but nothing could have been done then. Things just had to begin again; life had to begin again, as if from scratch. In Calcutta, we stayed in a friend’s house for a few weeks before moving to a cousin’s apartment in Bhagalpur in Bihar and then finally, a few weeks after that, we came back to Calcutta to stay with another relative who had also moved here. But even there, the furniture we bought was cheap and of poor quality. Not good,” she shook her head disapprovingly.

“Was that because you couldn’t afford it?” I asked, naively.

With a smirk, she asked, “Where would we put the furniture? The land was not ours, house did not belong to us. We were living on borrowed space, trying not to be a burden. Do you know what that feels like, Ochol?”

Her words stabbed at my heart. I had wondered why she repeatedly spoke about the furniture—tables, beds, chairs—and then slowly, I realized that it was not a sense of materiality but, rather, normalcy that she had been trying to convey. The fact that a house with “stuff” was a house that was lived-in and inhabited. In Calcutta, *Titta’s* family had no physical space to call their own at all, and so the desire for ownership continued to linger.

“When Partition occurred,” she broke my reverie, “we were already in Calcutta. The idea of independence invited many expectations into our lives. The dream of seeing peace, of experiencing better days where everyone was happy, there was no misery, no political turmoil. But that dream was very difficult to achieve.”

“Why?”

“Well, one thing is certain that time constantly changes. It cannot be the same. In East Bengal, when we were young, the days were very peaceful. Our lives were simpler. In West Bengal, after the Partition, it was very difficult to live because the days became more and more complex. There were adjustments to be made, a lifestyle to be altered, a way of speaking to be adopted, a new identity that had been given to us . . .” she paused as I hung on her every word. “Migration is not merely physical, you see; it is so much in the mind. A two-fold displacement. We, who could trace our origins to East Bengal, were called ‘Bangals,’ and those who were from West Bengal were called ‘Ghotis.’ Our language is the same, but our dialects are significantly different, and though now it is gradually disappearing, at the time, we had to make a conscious effort to speak in the ways in which we were unaccustomed.”

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“So, then what is home for you, *Titta*?”

“When I think of home, all I remember is green,” her voice became dreamy and faraway, serene in its tone, as if taking on the colors of the landscape she so vividly described. “My home is East Bengal, and it was lush and green. There was abundant vegetation, flowers, trees; it was so beautiful. The Kadam tree, the Champa, Juhi, Madhavi flowers and their heady perfume, I remember all this. Those of us who have been born on the other side are very attached to nature. There are so many vast bodies of water there—Meghna, Padma, Brahmaputra—and they make the land rich and fertile. I remember that we crossed the Padma

to come to this side. It was so vast that if you stood on one side of the beach and looked ahead, you would dissolve into the horizon. White, frothy white, was the color of the water. If I think about it now, I can say that it divided life; the river divided our life into two . . .”

Suddenly she looked at me, and moving her palm in the air before us like an undulating wave, she smiled, “How strange it is to think that a river can be the dividing landscape in life, as there is no way to determine a border over water. When all forms of concrete, tangible delineation are swallowed by the force of tides and waves, how is a border marked and how do we know when we have crossed it? When a landscape of endless sky and water exists on this side and that, when the same rising sun illuminates both sides identically, how can we tell where the hull of the boat floats? The borders on the East of India remain far more porous than those on the West; they are literally fluid.”

I sighed, still watching her moving hands. “Have you never wished to go back?”

“I wanted to for a long time, and my in-laws even had a home there in Barisal. But I never went. Things are no longer the same, the pace of life has altered the landscape and I might not recognize it anymore. But in my memory, East Bengal has remained the way I left it. Untouched.”

“You don’t think you will ever visit?”

“Only mentally,” she says wistfully and tears line her aged eyes. “As you grow older, your existence becomes contingent on the world around you. See? I am dependent on other people, as I cannot walk on my own anymore. My whole life has been shaped by movement and now, look at me, I am bound, motionless, immobile. I cannot move. Is this the will of the world? To know for certain that there are no more places to migrate to . . .”

“But still, every day I can close my eyes, cross the border, meander through hill tracts, riverbeds, flower orchards, and find my way back home. Sometimes, I like to think of what a pleasure it would be to walk again with my sister by the side of the Brahmaputra River in the early morning. A red and dark blue sky, like fire and water, fused into each other. On one side, there was water, and on the other, the rising sun. And the sun rose higher and higher. It was so beautiful . . .” With her hand, she lifted the sun from out of the horizon, out of her memory and to its place in the sky.

I smiled and she beckoned me closer, as if remembering an old secret. Then she looked ahead, hands in the air again, as if painting an invisible scene for me.

“One night in Mymensingh, I was standing downstairs in the veranda of our house. The sky was luminous in the light of the full moon, which was reflected

like a perfect silver sphere in the pond beside our home. I stood for a long time, transfixed. The beauty . . . I can't begin to describe it."

"How did you suddenly remember this, *Titta*?"

"I cannot explain it," she said softly, "but it was just sitting in my mind. Every inch of the pond was lit with moonlight and around it fell the shadows of trees. I couldn't leave, I simply stood there, enjoying the scene, wishing to be absorbed into it."

"Do you miss it?" I asked, reaching out to hold her hand.

"Oh yes, Ochol, I miss it the most. Ever since I moved to Calcutta, I have made nature the most important part of my life. This is my attachment to my home; my umbilical cord, as it were. No form of migration can sever it. I remember what it felt like to touch grass, to walk on sand, to look at water."

She gestured to her balcony, an oasis within the concrete jungle of city living.

"When I moved into my own home in Tollygunge, after my marriage, I tried to sow the same plants that I remembered from home. Maybe if I grew them in Calcutta, then it would feel like my own private East Bengal—away from the rest of the world, an escape. But nothing grew here, for even trees bear allegiance to their soil, you see. Just like people, it is difficult to uproot them and place them where they don't belong. Sometimes, life is full of sorrow."

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I have chosen to showcase Kalyani Ray Chowdhury's oral history because I was enchanted by her understanding of memory and migration. Deviating from the frequently mentioned details of travel and physical migration, she focuses solely on the seemingly disjointed pieces of the puzzle of home, which she has been trying to re-create in her mind over the last seven decades. Though she is unable to divulge any facts about the political turmoil that prevented them from returning to Mymensingh—mostly due to the lack of knowledge and having been a teenager at the time—she is generous in her remembered observations about how East Bengal functioned in her daily life. Her equation of mundane plants that grow across a land now rendered inaccessible by a national border, to a sense of mourning for a place of comfort, continues to linger in my mind as a moving testimony of a strange kind of helplessness, a forced un-learning and re-learning of identity. I am grateful to have been able to record these subtleties of her memory, for they enrich my understanding of personal and collective histories of migration.

In her story, we also see that oral history is not merely a form of reportage or journalism, but rather, becomes the very penetration of human memory. Through informed questions, we are mapping memory in relation to historical and geographic events. Memory, which ironically, many would argue, becomes inherently

unreliable and malleable as time passes, somehow remains the sole informant in re-creating minute personal history—an accumulation of which, in the case of Partition, can help formulate collective history. And collective memory is the most available means to understand the existing past. Kalyani Ray Chowdhury's oral history shows us that her sense of belonging is rooted in a natural landscape, the natural landscape she craved from her hometown in East Bengal, a landscape she tried—without much luck—to re-create in West Bengal. Like her story, there are many others that remain to be told, which shows us that there were many ways an event as profound and catastrophic as Partition continues to be experienced. Oral testimonies of Partition are often dismissed as mere “stories,” and even though they come with their fair share of limitations, they enhance and augment historical and academic accounts. More importantly, they free us from the intellectual imprisonment of popular, state, and, more recently, jingoistic narratives of Partition that have been cultivated on both sides of the border. In Kalyani Ray Chowdhury's story, my hope has been to illustrate how both she and I were seamlessly transported across the eastern border into what is now Bangladesh. Upon our narrative return from her old home, we both discovered that it was the flora, fauna, and the moonlight that were central characters in her oral history. ■

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