In August 1947, two international borders were drawn through British India. The first separated West Pakistan (now Pakistan) from India and the other, some 1500 kilometers to the east, separated East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from India. None could deny that partition was an act of political expediency, yet at the time there were few who had any real inkling of the very worst in human behaviour that the uprooting of millions of people on apparently sectarian grounds would give rise to. Whether there was a political stance behind it or whether a greater catastrophe could have been prevented by it – these issues concern politicians and intellectuals. But for the huge amount of people in both Bengal and Punjab, this was not a theory to be discussed. It was a ground reality, a direct physical experience – the pain and wound very difficult to heal. Comparisons have often been made between Bengal and Punjab and how the latter has coped much better and the people rehabilitated fully. But the fact remains that in Punjab it was a one-time exchange of population whereas in Bengal, this was not the case. Also, this massive influx of refugees and uprootedness was not reflected in Bengali literature to that extent as the Punjabi experience was in Hindi and Urdu literature.

Recent studies of the Partition of India have begun to focus on people’s experiences and perceptions of this event, and, in particular, the massive violence that surrounded it. It shows how in its process of reconsidering Partition, some historians have begun to criticize the existing history writings based on the nationalist discourse, which analyzed only political developments among parties and politicians. The subaltern studies group of historians focus on the ‘fragments’, ‘oppressed voice’, and ‘silence’ in history writings trying to explore how memory of events was constructed and reconstructed by different groups of people. Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin in their book *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (1998) filled in part of the gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession around the thematic clusters of violence, abduction and recovery, widowhood, women’s rehabilitation, rebuilding and belonging. Also, it is to be seen what is foregrounded and what mostly forgotten. Mushirul Hasan, a well-known subaltern historian of Partition believes that history cannot capture the complexity of such an experience; one has to look for creative writing:

> Literature has emerged as an alternate archive of the times. In the study of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, in particular, literature has articulated the ‘little’ narratives against the grand; the unofficial histories against the official (Hasan 2006 xiii)

Ramchandra Guha also expresses a similar point of view when he states that the memories of the partition were “too painful to set down in memoir or history, so they were camouflaged and perhaps made more evocative through the medium of fiction” (Guha 1997). If that is the case then question may be raised why there are more literary documents helping us to understand the Punjab of 1947 and so few elaborating on the suffering of the Bengalis on the
either side of the border. There is no answer to the question why the so-called sociallyconscious writers of Bengal, who had composed stories, plays, poems and songs on theBengal famine, kept either silent or were apathetic towards the issue of the partition. Most ofthe creative artists were part of the leftist movement in Bengal yet it is strange that in order tounderstand the trauma of partition we have to primary rely on personal reminiscences than onfiction per se.

If there is such a dearth of creative writing, then we can assume the situation incinematic representation of the event. Films, by virtue of its aural and visual techniques incombination with the temporal act of viewing, appear to fuse time and space in ways theother media do not. In this sense it should be the best medium to document the reality of theevent. But when the film director has to depend on others, and when these other peoplebelieve in the commercial viability of their investments, the trauma and anguish of thepartition is the last choice for the subject matter. Considered to be primarily a source ofentertainment and not a socially committed art form, it is quite natural for a film to avoidthe issues on the silver screen. Besides, before Pather Panchali, Bengali cinema has primarilyremained busy with the depiction of personal happiness or tragedy of middle class people,unwilling to be bothered with collective or social crises in a big way. There was anotherdisadvantage for the film director. After the Partition, the stream of refugees pouring into thecountry probably did not let them remain tranquil—the tranquility of mind required to depictsuch a crude reality on the screen. Also, having got used to avoiding harsh reality for a longtime and depicting make-believe reality in their production, they though best to avoid it.

This paper deals with films on the Partition-in-the-East (to borrow the phrase fromRahaman and Schendel), produced both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh, made bydirectors who did not believe in the run-of-the-mill commercial productions of the time.Unlike the more big-budget commercial productions with Bollywood stars cast in leadingroles that several films portray about the partition of Punjab, most of these films areportrayed in the neo-realist style and remain silent about the direct representation of politicalissues. Instead they talk about the trauma and resettlement angst that torment the lives ofordinary people and avoid conflict as a theme to be explored. Thus most Bengali films shiftthe field of Partition studies from the actual political division or communal violence to thetransformation of society post-Partition. Considering the fact that there are different termsdefining the people affected by the Partition—immigrants, refugees, evacuees, displacedpersons, bastuhara, shoronarthi, bastutyagi (all of them not mutually exclusive categories),they can be called migration studies at their complex best, capturing both the loss and theopportunity in the world of the migrant; the one lamented, the other seized with both hands toforge a new life. Juxtaposed between the sentiment of nostalgia for their desh and a sense oftrauma, they stress the aspect of renewal, of new beginnings.

For reasons mentioned earlier, considering the huge number of films churned out bythe Indian film industry each year, one notices a general apathy on the part of filmmakersversing films on the Partition of India and its aftermath. Cameraman-director NemaiGhosh’s Chinnamul (‘The Uprooted’) made in 1951 can be called an exception in thiscontext. Depicting the physical pain and crisis, Chinnamul is about the Partition of Bengaland the flow of refugees from East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) into India. Based on astory by Swarnakamal Bhattacharya, it begins in a peaceful village in East Bengal whereHindus and Muslims, farmers and artisans, live in a spirit of amity. Gobinda and Sumati are
about to have a child, but the Partition forces the Hindus to leave their ancestral village and head for Calcutta. Devoid of any location or shelter in this side of the divided country, they eke out their daily lives in temporary shelters in and around Sealdah railway station. Along with millions of refugees, this family has to face untold misery in the big city, the injustice of social and political realities. But, the struggle for existence never stops. Giving it a documentary feel, two particular scenes of this film are often quoted by viewers and critics alike. The first one is a non-actor elderly woman who refuses to let go of her home’s door post and shouts out in the local Bangal dialect, “Jamu na, ami sosurer bhita chaira jamu na” (I will not go, leaving my in-law’s house behind). Many years later, when M. S. Sathyu depicts the plight and reaction of a similar elderly woman in his film *Garam Hawa*, it seems Ghosh’s endeavour has been underestimated. The second memorable scene that sought realism by enacting it through no professional actor is that of the crowded train journey to Calcutta. Though it does not have the blood and gore that signifies Khuswant’s Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, the film highlighted for the first time the seriousness of the refugee problem that came along as an appendage with the new independent nation.

*Chinnamul* captured the tragedy of a dismembered state. Employing innovative idioms juxtaposed intelligently with documentary footage, the film managed to convey the gruesome, gory terror that was unleashed, without even a single shot actually showing any violence! Though the Russian filmmaker and theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin had praised the film and tried his level best to publicize it, the film didn’t do well and the filmmaker was compelled to seek his fortune elsewhere; he never made another film. Ghosh himself had very definite ideas of what exactly he wanted to do:

I wanted to project the miseries of the refugees after the partition and also to expose the selfish motives of the politicians who were behind the partition. The Indian People’s Theatre Association movement helped me to understand the actual reality. Had I not been associated with this movement, I would not have been aware of the human beings around me. This awareness prompted me to make the film *Chinnamul*, which is regarded by some as a political film. I did not deliberately include politics, but it could not be separated from life either. I took the camera out of the studios into the open, to bring out the truth which shaped this film. I also used artists from I.P.T.A., some of them without previous acting experience, because I thought it could lend an air of authenticity to the film.

A critic, Dipendu Chakrabarti laments that the historical evaluation of *Chinnamul* vis-à-vis the Partition of Bengal is still incomplete. He succinctly points out that though people tend to believe that neo-realist in Bangla films only began with Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali*, the first attempt to experiment with neo-realist in Indian cinema actually began with *Chinnamul*. He argues that though the Ray masterpiece possessed all the basic characteristics that Zavatini defines for an ideal neo-realist film, it lacked one fundamental aspect, and that is contemporaneity or the ‘Today, to day, to-day’ formula. Also, Ray never gave importance to the theme of Partition in any of his films. It was left to Ritwik Ghatak later to explore it. Ritwik, who started his illustrious career by making an on-screen appearance in *Chinnamul*, as well as working behind the camera as an assistant to Nemai Ghosh, was to demand with characteristic candour, “Nimai Ghosh’s *Chinnamul* has started a new era. Have we been able to proceed further in our consciousness?” (*Cinema and I*)
While the films *Refugee* (1959) directed by Shantipriya Mukherjee or Rajen Tarafdar’s *Palanka* (1976) have now faded into oblivion, Ritwik Ghatak is the only director whose films and worldview have become synonymous with the Partition. Dispossessed himself, his anger, angst, frustration, discontent and probably even his indomitable creativity— all took source from it. As an important actor in and commentator upon Bengali culture, his films represent an influential and decidedly unique viewpoint of post-Independence Bengal. Unique, because in his films he pointedly explored the fallout of the Partition of India on Bengali society, and influential, because his films set a standard for newly-emerging ‘alternative’ or ‘parallel’ cinema directors. As Erin O’Donnell rightly points out, the majority of Ghatak’s films are narratives that focus on the post-Independence Bengali family and community, with a sustained critique of the emerging petite-bourgeoisie in Bengal, specifically in the urban environment of Calcutta. In this context, he utilizes a melodramatic style and mood novel to Indian cinema. He was outspoken concerning India’s independence and partition, and in response to an interviewer’s question regarding what personal truth had inspired his films, stories and plays, Ghatak replied:

> Being a Bengali from East Bengal, I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of independence – which is a fake and a sham. I have reacted violently towards this and have tried to portray different aspects of this [in my films] (*Rows and Rows* 92).

With three significant films produced in three successive years, namely *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1962), Ritwik Ghatak entered the scene with poignant pictures of human distress – not just the pangs of separation that caused so much hardship but also the long-term effects of the mind. Beginning with the issue of partition, the problems and pain of migration and rootlessness, he depicted utopian and dystopian visions of ‘homeland’ in an independent Bengal in film after film. Whereas Nemai Ghosh wanted to capture the physical aspects of the problems of partition and hence began his film in East Bengal, Ghatak’s films may be considered to be the continuation of that process of rootlessness. In them the physical aspects of the Partition are already over and hence we get neither the depiction of streams of refugees nor do we see the moments of actual desertion of the ‘home,’ the torture and insult meted out to them. At least this is the impression we get from him. In other words, stated a bit crudely, if *Chinnamul* is considered to be a contemporary testament of the partition of Bengal, Ritwik’s films can be termed as a continuous picture of mental tension. Continuous because the wound never heals – even if the physical wound heals up, the mental wound does not. Thus there is no physical presence of the partition in his films. Instead his characters continuously bear about the trauma and pain of losing their *desh*, their homeland—this is their mission; they roam around in search of new homes, of stability. In Ritwik’s trilogy therefore, the issue of partition, the pain and anguish of turning refugees work at various levels. Though the central theme of these films differ, Ghatak himself loved to string the three of them together. In an interview he discussed the common thread of union in these three films and stated:

> Against my intention the films *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar*, and *Subarnarekha* formed my trilogy. When I started *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, I never spoke of political unification. Even now I don’t think of it because history will not alter and I won’t venture to do this impossible task. The cultural segregation caused by politics and economics was a thing to which I never reconciled myself as I always thought in
terms of cultural integration. This very theme of cultural integration forms the theme in all three films (Bhattacharya & Dasgupta 67)

If we are asked to choose a single film which captures the trauma and tragedy of the Bengal partition with unmatched power and sensitivity, we choose, without question, Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star/ The Star Veiled by Clouds). Hailed as an unqualified masterpiece, it is a seminal depiction of the existential dilemma of the Indian lower middle class, where the sacrifice of one good, meek, dutiful daughter ensures the survival of the rest of the family. Not explicitly mentioning the Partition, the events of this classic film take place in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Calcutta and concern an impoverished genteel Hindu bhadralok family and the problems they face because of the Partition. Reversing the roles of traditional patriarchy where the elder brother Shankar should have taken on the responsibilities of the family, Ghatak depicts how Neeta, the eldest daughter of this uprooted family, in a stifling, desperate environment, turns into the breadwinner and ultimately sacrifices her life. The central concern of the woman is not only negotiating the relationship between the home and the world. Like other refugee women, she fights for food and shelter, for peace, for all issues that concern them as citizens, not only as women. In fact, Neeta has become the deathless symbol of Partition itself and the uprooted woman’s struggle against it. After fulfilling her mission, when she at last succumbs to tuberculosis, her piercing cry ‘I want to live’ sums up the essence of all displacements, exodus and partitions.

Apart from the Bangal/Ghoti divide, another significant aspect of Meghe Dhaka Tara was the establishment of the image of the new woman, the woman who worked shoulder to shoulder with the males in order to earn their daily bread. The film had opened with Neeta halting to pull at her torn slipper on her way to work. The closing shot completes the circle. This time, it is not Neeta, but an anonymous girl who takes Neeta’s place to bear the burden and feed her refugee family. She falters because her slipper is torn. But the message is clear – thousands of such Neetas changed the socio-cultural pattern of middle-class Bengali life from the 1950s onwards. This sociological change in Bengal was so immense that Satyajit Ray, the director accused of not being affected by the Partition at all, made his film Mahanagar (The Great City, 1963) three years later on the same predicament. One also sees the city of Calcutta as a kind of leitmotif in the tragedy of these refugees. To Ghatak, Calcutta symbolized corruption, degradation and decay. It was a city that inflicted violence on those who had come to live here as Ghatak had, by force of historical circumstance – the Partition. His films therefore reflect a Calcutta he loved to hate and hated to love. Beginning with his film Nagarik (Citizen, 1952) onto Meghe Dhaka Tara and later, Subarnarekha, Calcutta is portrayed as a victimizer of people. He also showed the city as the helpless victim – of refugees pouring in by the thousands, of skyrocketing poverty, and of squalor which turned the city into a huge drain flowing with blood, waste, and desperation.

In Komal Gandhar (E Flat, 1961), a film that Ghatak made immediately after Meghe Dhaka Tara, all the middle-class protagonists suffer from the anguish of separation from their home on the other side of the border. The film is about a committed theatre group that reached out to the people in the countryside, bringing them genuine works of art. Though they suffer drawbacks in collecting funds for their theatrical productions, there is no financial crisis in the personal or family lives of Brigu or Anasua or the other members of their group. They do not suffer the physical crises of the partition, but carry in their minds a deep sense of rootlessness, a longing for the ‘homeland’ on the other side of the border. The film
showcases Ghatak’s experimentation with the medium while he seems to have tried to do away with the method of storytelling. It carries the nostalgia of the IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) days, the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI) – of comradeship, of hopes, of faith and trust on which the movement had developed but failed. It also bears that determination to fight for that faith even in a hostile environment.

Emphasizing the syncretic culture of undivided Bengal is the chorus literally crying out “Dohai Ali” (Mercy Ali) in gradually increased speed as the camera simulates the movement of a train hurtling forward towards the end of the railway tracks that are closed to acknowledge the presence of the new country – Pakistan. In this memorable sequence Ghatak, using as wide-angle lens, has focused on the lovers standing and staring at the buffers at the terminal railway tracks beyond which flows the river dividing Bengal.

The members of the theatrical troupe in Komal Gandhar form a new kind of ‘alternate’ or ‘surrogate’ family, not of the typically Bengali extended family kind. Here rootlessness is not depicted in reality but in a metaphorical sense. Also, as Partha Chatterjee states, the film, for all its adolescent preoccupation with the idea of mother and motherland, and at the same time, the authentic poetic connection between the two, is also a loving tribute to the nation-building energies that went into the activities of the IPTA which was, before it was sabotaged from within by the CPI, an organization of idealists who had a purity of purpose and dreamt of building a contended egalitarian India. Yet, in spite of all that, Komal Gandhar cannot be termed to be a partition film in the true sense of the term.

In Subarnarekha (1962), Ghatak restated the theme of traditional roots savaged by an imposed political decision. With the Partition serving as a backdrop, the film is, “about rational elements like history, war and its aftermath, mass displacement and loss of an old habitat and hence roots on the one hand, and irrational entities like destiny and fate that are not supposed to, but do affect human beings and their conduct to alter their lives irreversibly on the other” (Chatterjee 2003). One of Ghatak’s most complex films, it moves beyond the immediate problems thrown up by the Partition namely, unemployment, urban distribution, collapsing family ties. The storyline is as follows. Ishwar Chakravarti comes after Partition as a refugee from East Bengal to live with his fellow sufferers in Navajeevan Colony, a settlement for the displaced on the outskirts of Calcutta. With him is his little sister Sita, and an orphan, Abhiram, whom he has accepted as his little foster brother. Ishwar gets a job managing an iron foundry by the river Subarnarekha in Bihar. Haraprasad, the schoolmaster who has nurtured the new home of his fellow unfortunates, accuses Ishwar of being a coward and for thinking only of his own welfare and not that of the others around him. We are therefore plunged into the heart of a moral tale that can only end in tragedy. The post-independence optimism gives way to harsh realities. Sita spends her life caring for her unmarried brother until she grows into a young woman and falls in love with Abhiram. Ishwar is determined to find a proper high-caste Hindu husband for Sita and demands that she never see Abhiram again. He proceeds to arrange her marriage, yet Sita, resolved to marry Abhiram, escapes with him to Calcutta on her wedding night.

Once again living in a slum, the newly married couple has a child, Binu, and Abhiram finds work as a bus driver. One day, he accidentally runs over a child and an angry mob kills him. Sita is forced to earn money for her and Binu. She begins to sing for paid customers, and thus unwittingly becomes a prostitute. One night, Ishwar, on a business trip to Calcutta, visits Sita in a drunken stupor to avail of her services, not realizing that this prostitute is his
sister. The film ends on a tragic note with Sita cutting her own throat to escape the shame, and Binu is placed in the care of Ishwar, who although devastated, attempts to move on for the sake of his nephew. In the film there are sequences of superb visualization of the tragedy of the uprooted and the displaced, the daring handling of melodramatic situations, and the passionate invocation of ‘slokas’ from the sacred Hindu texts. The final scene, heart-breaking and of surpassing beauty with Ishwar and Binu walking towards a craggy landscape with the horizon far in the background, accompanied by choral chanting of the ‘charai beti’ mantra on the soundtrack, in search of a new life, “sums up the forced political and hence historical displacement of millions, in our own times and earlier, people whose only crime was that they had sought a little peace, dignity and happiness in their lives”(Chatterjee).

Some critics accuse Ghatak for being oversentimental about desh or ‘homeland.’ With him, they feel, the experience of partition remained imprisoned in nostalgia, never a noble emotion, however painful its portrayal may be. According to Iraban Basu Roy:

Partition was Ritwik’s own passion but that passion did not get any creative inspiration or language in his films. Not that he was not aware of rootlessness; but whenever it came to representation of collective tragedy that surpassed personal pain, it seemed that Ritwik withdrew his passion. ... So Partition remained loosely attached to his films, never turning into the central motif. That the Partition was not of a particular moment, but had long drawn effects on the personal and collective consciousness is understood in a film like Shyam Benegal’s Mammo; this extended influence is missing in Ritwik’s films. Except for a few stray moments, there is no permanent depiction of the pain, harassment and nightmare of the Partition in his films. Like Bengali fiction, Ritwik’s films too just make stray references to it. On the other hand, like many other ‘myths’ about Ritwik, a baseless myth about the Partition also got created (184, translation mine).

Madhabi Mukherjee, the actress who played the role of Sita in Subarnarekha, once told her interviewers that when the film was being made she was too young to ascertain fully the intensity and depth of Ghatak’s personal feelings about the Partition. But she mentions that at times Ghatak used to say, “Lambu (‘tall one’, meaning Satyajit Ray) never experienced Partition.” She also emphasizes the fact that even in a traumatic film like Subarnarekha, Ghatak ends on a note of redemptive hope. She told Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Aparajita Dhar in an interview published in The Statesman (14 July 2002) commemorating forty years of the making of the film:

No matter how deep the tragedy is, how intense the suffering, this filmmaker refused to end on a totally negative note. Remember the last phase of Subarnarekha where the child is pulling his uncle to take him to the land of butterflies and beauty? Or the unforgettable lines of Tagore: “Joi hok manusher, oi nabajatak, oi chirajibiter” (Glory be to man, to the newborn, to the eternal) with which the film ends?

Partition was indeed the singe-most traumatic experience for him, but Ritwikda did not stop there. He did not conform to any particular discipline. However, he was steadfast in one aspect – he refused to accept the defeat and degeneration of human beings as final. He hoped against hope.

In a Special Article in the Economic and Political Weekly, Anasua Basu Raychaudhury states that the films of Nemai Ghosh and Ritwick Ghatak indicate that “the partition has left a permanent scar on the psyche of the uprooted. To them, the loss of home seems to be a loss
of self and the acquirement of a new identity. The uprooted people have lost their established identities based on certain shared ideas about ‘personhood’, ‘collectivity’ and ‘social struggle’, and were forced to accept identities imposed on them by others and by an imposing reality. In the process of acquiring a new identity, the memories of the displaced persons compel them to mourn their ‘irreplaceable’ loss. And these collective memories prevail through generations.” The scholar also makes a significant point in arguing that desh and nation are two different categories and that though the nation is largely an imagined category, desh is frequently revisited in memories. Unlike the nation, desh is “a concrete but distant reality for the uprooted people as it remains encapsulated in their past.” Existing in a distinct space, the role of nostalgia remains very strong in this category and can explain its excessive use in Ritwick Ghatak’s films.

In the Afterword section of an anthology of Bengal partition stories, Debjani Sengupta states that a major difference between the narratives of the East and the West lie in their treatment of time. Many of the stories from Bengal treat Partition not as historical time, ‘the past’, but also as real time, ‘the present’. For the people of the two Bengals, Partition did not end at 1947 and the terrible cost of the partition is to be seen now. So, some of the stories do not talk of Partition at all, except in very indirect ways. They are allusive and instead of exploding, unfold bit by bit. The movement of refugees that still continues today is another significant aspect of Bengal’s partition that has shaped its narratives. This gives rise to a sub-genre of Bengali fiction and cinema that according to Sengupta, “may be called ‘colony fiction’ for want of a better name. Films, short stories, novels, plays belonging to this genre explore the life of people living in refugee colonies that grew like mushrooms in and around the urban centers in West Bengal”(190). Reiterating the idea upheld by Anasua Basu Raychaudhury she mentions that in these colony narratives, both of the film and the fiction, displacement and dispossession are the dominant themes:

These stories are set after 1947 but partition features indirectly in these narratives through the lives and experiences of the refugees. Their daily fight for existence, their pain and loss are in a large way a comment on the Partition. These representations, springing as they do from the life of the colony, also show how marginal people can help to create alternative ‘notions of legitimacy and citizenship’ that challenge ‘new orthodoxies’. The marginalization of the colony inhabitants from the mainstream, their fight for social and economic equality, the food movement of 1965 that brought a large number of refugees into active politics have given new strength to left-wing politics in Bengal (191).

In Bengali literature as well as in films therefore, Partition is often seen in metaphysical terms – the hurt is not in the body but in the mind, the soul. Madness is not a trope in these stories, rather, it is nostalgia and a constant dazed search to know how and why and wherefore. In a seminar address regarding his own cinema, Buddhadeb Dasgupta once stated:

For me, making a film is not just another job to be done. It is a mode of expression. It enables the continuous search of the inner self through the extension of reality. The focus is more on the socio-political context where there are more questions than answers. There is a continuous striving – not so much pursuit as search (Dasgupta 1995:20).
Dasgupta’s *Tahader Katha* (‘Their Story’) made in 1992, is founded on the realities of the last eight years of colonialism and the first three years of independence in a partitioned India, or, more precisely, a partitioned Bengal, for the former East Bengal had become East Pakistan. Sibnath Mukherjee, the protagonist, had been typical of so many Bengalis of his generation – high caste, an intellectual and a terrorist. He had a master’s degree and had dedicated himself to the freedom movement which, in Bengal, particularly, was considerably more violent (or at least less Gandhian) than in most other parts of India. For the killing of a policeman – the nightmare reality of which continues to haunt his consciousness throughout his remaining years – he was sent to the infamous Andaman Islands penal colony. After eight years of his sentence, however, India becomes independent, and while many political prisoners were set free, Shibnath was transferred to a mental asylum for three years. The film opens after his release from that institution as he travels, after eleven years of alienation from history, back to his home and family. Unfortunately, Shibnath fails to adapt to life on the outside, becomes alienated from his wife and former friends and associates, kills a traveling conjurer and is returned to custody.

Based on a short story by Kamal Kumar Majumdar, the apparent simplicity of the narrative actually points out to the characters’ radical misunderstanding of their roles in history. Shibnath, albeit apprehensive and suffering quite consciously the emotional and intellectual wounds – and to a lesser extent, the physical ones – inflicted upon him during his eleven years of incarceration, hopes that things are much the same as they had been when he was taken away. On the other hand, his wife and friends hope that he will simply fit into the changed lives that they have come to take for granted. The kernel of the tragedy, as John Hood rightly says, lies in the fact that neither side anticipates the effect of an eleven-year absence, especially one as cruel as that endured by Shibnath, on an attempt at rehabilitation. One of the film’s main aims is to examine the gulf between husband and wife.

*Tahader Katha* should not be viewed as a film that seeks to define true madness, for it is in no way a psychological polemic. Whether Shibnath is clinically sane or otherwise is not the film’s point. The point is that Shibnath is an intense idealist, a dreamer and a stickler for truth and sincerity, who does not fit into a society which has started to establish itself before his coming to it. He wonders whether he is better off being ‘free.’ He is able to perceive that the significant question is not what is wrong with himself, but what is wrong with the world. Without delving too much into the questions of nationalism, what is prominent is the pain and the torment of people cut off, inexplicably, from one another – the woman who cannot know her husband, the children who want to love their father and continually find obstacles in the way of their affection, and the man who can find no rational perspective in his life nor a meaningful direction to the hearts of his wife and children. The film thus remains the story of Shibnath’s tragedy of alienation, an alienation made all the more stark by its apparent continuity with his brutal incarceration, and made all the more heart-rendering by its consequent tearing at the natural bonds that tie a man to his family. The nationalist element of the film is really incidental to this human tragedy, drawing it beyond the bounds of its 1950s setting (Hood 114-115).
In East Bengal (called East Pakistan after the division), 1947 and its consequences were far-reaching. In the years following the Partition the rise of the Bhasha Andolan among the students and the intelligentsia was an important way in which a national identity was forged. This demand to make Bangla an official language resulted in the rise of a ‘new linguistic nationalism.’ The claim that Bengali gave the people of East Pakistan a separate cultural identity (different from that of West Pakistan where Urdu was the national language) culminated in the War of Independence in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh. Many critics consider these two events as crucial to the development of Bangladesh’s literature and a great deal of Bangladesh’s literary narratives are coloured with an awareness of these political issues. But interestingly, though the traumatic events of the Partition have produced literary works that are unforgettable, Bangladeshi contributions towards the genre of Partition films is insignificant. The fledgling film industry in that country might be one of the reasons. Or maybe like their fellow sufferers on this side of the border, they wanted to remain silent.

Surya Dighal Bari (House by the Sun/The Ominous House 1979), debut venture by codirectors Masiuddin Shaker and Sheikh Niamat Ali, was probably the first Bangladeshi film to depict any incident related to the Partition. Based on a novel by Abu Ishaque, it is set in such a time of East Bengal where the famine of the 1940s as well as communal riots and separation had deeper impression on everybody. The main story of the novel dates around the years of World War II and the independence from the British but takes on a local and personal color when it focuses upon the plight of a widow and her children who live at the end of a village. The village landlord has a covetous eye on the property and also a lustful one on the widow and tries to evict the family from the house on the grounds that it is haunted. The rest of the story shows how Jaigoon, the widow and her children fight the village for the right to live in their house. So where does the partition feature in such a story, one might ask. If we look into the socio-political context of the novel, we get the contemporary picture of the historic famine of 1943, the black days of the riots of 1946 and the Partition of 1947, but these serve to make it more realistic and lively.

The only other memorable entry from Bangladesh is Chitra Nadir Pare (‘Quiet Flows the River Chitra,’ 1999) scripted and directed by Tanvir Mokammel. Portraying the ongoing nature of migration and its problems, the brief storyline of the film is as follows. After the partition of India in 1947, Sashikanta’s family, like millions of other Hindu families of East Pakistan, faced the dilemma whether to migrate from the land in which they have been living for centuries. But Sashikanta Sengupta, an eccentric lawyer, refuses stubbornly to leave his motherland. The widower Sashikanta has two children, Minoti and Bidyut and Anuprova Devi is an affectionate old aunt who lives with the family. The family lives in a house on the banks of the river Chitra in Narail. Some Muslim neighbours eye on Sashikanta’s house, but the family refuses to migrate. The film begins with a sequence in an afternoon of 1947 when Sashikanta’s children Minoti and Bidyut and the neighbouring Muslim children are shown playing besides the river Chitra. Minoti and Bidyut are particularly close to Badal, Salma and Nazma, the children of a next-door Muslim family. Minoti and Badal gradually become more than friends. The children grow up. Badal goes to Dhaka University. Those were the days in the 1960s when the atmosphere of the universities was charged with political radicalism. Badal gets involved in anti-military student movement and while participating in a demonstration for democracy, gets killed by police firing. Sashikanta’s brother Nidhukanta is an idealist doctor who lives in their ancestral village on the other side of the Chitra river. During the 1964 riot between the Hindus and the Muslims, his daughter Basanti, a widow, gets raped. Basanti commits suicide by drowning herself in the Chitra River. Nidhukanta’s
family migrates to India. In the meantime, all these untoward incidents happening around him affect Sahsikanta’s failing health. He suffers a heart stroke and passes away. Minoti and Anuprova finally leave for the border en route to Kolkata.

*Chitra Nadir Pare* essentially portrays the ongoing nature of uprootedness and migration along with all its manifest problems. The politics and advantages taken during the exchange of property on both sides of the border; the breaking of camaraderie between the Hindu and Muslim families; the way Bidyut lives in cramped surroundings in Kolkata; how people take advantage of reservation policies; Mokammal also emphasizes how mere border crossing does not solve the problem once and for all. Migration from Bangladesh continues unabated till date and the enormity of this problem is amply authenticated by various surveys and media reports. For example, according to the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR) – a US-based international watchdog on refugee problems, at least 5,000 Bangladeshi Hindus and other minorities fled to India between October and December 2001 to escape violence that followed the national election in Bangladesh. The figure could even be as high as 20,000. Most Hindu asylum seeker went to West Bengal and Tripura while others went to Assam and Meghalaya, the report observed.

III

Nearly half a century after Nemai Ghosh’s *Chinnamul*, the new century witnessed another excellent rendition of the Bengal Partition through Supriyo Sen’s documentary, *Way Back Home* (2002). The two-hour documentary, which the director calls a “non-fiction” is divided into two parts – *Way Back Home* and *Imaginary Homeland*, and is dedicated to the minorities and refugees of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It traces not only a physical journey from Kolkata to Barisal, but the emotional journey to a life that refuses to die. Born into a family of East Bengal refugees in Kolkata, Sen listened to stories about his mother’s village in Barisal, the people she had left behind and the painful memories of being exiled after the partition. The stories bred in him a deep urge to undertake a personal journey to the land of his dreams. Without any written script, it was a mere journey to one’s roots with the camera in tow. He narrates to the reporter of Statesman News Service:

> On the eve of independence violent communal riots broke out in the country. Millions died and those who were lucky enough to survive started identifying themselves by their religious beliefs. The atmosphere of hatred reached its peak when in 1950 the biggest massacre in East Pakistan took place in Barisal. Around 6,50,000 people were trying to flee the country and on the way they were looted, killed and abducted. My parents left everything and reached Kolkata as refugees. They were dumped on a platform of the Sealdah station…it was a bitter struggle for existence in a heartless city (Statesman 11 February, 2003).

Thus the story does not follow any logical pattern, instead it grows out of bits and pieces of the recollections. The protagonists of this film are the elderly couple (the parents of the filmmaker himself) as they board first a bus and then a launch to rediscover their lost world. They meet people at every point, recall near and dear ones left behind. Particularly striking is the wife’s recollection of a sister who has refused to leave her roots fifty years ago and had been virtually abandoned by her relatives because she married a Muslim. But the emotional bonds survive fifty years later. The woman who returns to her ancestral home at Barisal in 2003 makes anxious enquiries about her and discovers she is dead but has left behind a
family that is equally attached to the memories of the past. Swapan Mullick, the noted film and theatre critic, was all praises for this film:

That Supriyo Sen, a young man who belongs to the following generation, can capture the emotional state with such conviction, depth and credibility is something of a miracle. It makes Way Back Home one of the best things to have appeared on the Bengali film scene for a long time (2003: 7).

Mullick of course points out that he thought the parallel that Sen drew between fundamentalisim that divided people then along religious lines and the communal carnage in Gujarat was unnecessary and perhaps overdrawn. Another critic, Ranabir Lahiri believes that nostalgia emerges as an ambivalent motif in partition narratives and Sen’s documentary is “truly an extended exercise in nostalgia, an attempt to recapture the oneness, both real and constructed.” The desire to recreate “a mythology of origins,” framed within a larger narrative of loss, originates in a subjectivity that is firmly enmeshed in a privileged Hindu middle-class position which determines the choice of narrative strategies. The Bengali name of Sen’s documentary is taken from Jibanananda Das’s only too familiar line ‘Abar ashibo phirey dhansirir tirey’ (I will come back again on the banks of the Dhanisri River), not merely for lyrical effect. The words are emotionally wired into the Bengali psyche. They awaken a stubborn wish to relive that social, political and cultural space which has once been the poet’s own. The promise of a journey back home suggests, at one level, a desire for connectedness to one’s roots and at another, an obscure death wish. Sen’s documentary reactivates the same collective wish by mixing it up with history, nostalgia and contemporary reality. Lahiri also describes Way Back Home as a visual act of rescue, an exercise in retrieving the whole landscape. In this it participates in the dominant discourse in Bengal on Partition which is deeply entrenched in a Hindu middle-class location. It elaborately recreates the place of its origin in sensuous terms – its seasons, rivers, paddy fields, Durga Puja and the countless minor festivals. This rootedness is of course achieved by forcing the larger community of the Muslim masses to the margin. Only occasionally do they come into the picture. Their real presence and historical role are to be felt more through narrative gaps and ruptures. Sen himself also emphasizes the human interest of this documentary and shows how the personal story becomes part and parcel of social history:

The partition was not just about the Nehrus and the Jinnahs. It was about people like my parents who had to forget their own identity and remain dissolved in the claustrophobic atmosphere of this city. They needed a passport to go back home and nothing could be more painful than this.

IV

In this article I have tried to focus on the significance of the development of post-partition Bengali cultural identity as expressed though Bengali films and documentaries made during the past fifty years. In this process I have had to take recourse to offering synopses of most of the films because their diversity cannot be generalized under a single statement. Also, a significant trait of the Bengali films under consideration is that almost none of them have focused the attention of the viewers on the politics of the Hindu-Muslim leadership or on the policies of British imperialism. Yet the manner in which they have depicted the harsh realities as the outcome of such political moves is significant. Though we do not have the
direct depiction of violence as in Khuswant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*; Deepa Mehta’s *Earth* (1998) which contains brutal scenes of communal carnage; the sensationalism and nationalism as depicted in Anil Sharma’s *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), or the love-hate relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims as shown in *Pinjar* (2003), for the uninitiated viewer, Bengal Partition films might initially seem a damp squib. This is because they do not conform to the stereotypical images of violence, bloodshed, carnage, mayhem, rootlessness, migration that are always associated with any division of a country. But the scar is deeper and is reflected in the state of the mind. As the political psychologist Ashis Nandy succinctly states in an editorial in *The Times of India*:

Partition has stayed with us, along with the psychopathological forces it unleashed sixty years ago. South Asia has paid heavily for not coming to grips with the violence of partition and its long-term consequences. Not merely the pervasive culture of immunity today but the paranoiac and psychopathic features of the national security states we have built in the region have their roots in that cultivated forgetfulness.

The noted historian Papiya Ghosh believes that “accessing a nuanced documentation of the partition experience in the subcontinent and diaspora can add several new dimensions for the re-theorization of nations, diaspora and the region” (2007: xv). Though Ghosh’s observation focuses primarily on the historical event, stressing on the ramifications of such a cataclysmic event, we can surely state that with the passage of time we will also get films on cross-border migration that is taking place even now. Though not directly related to the Partition, it still remains one of its roots. Take the example of Bappaditya Bandopadhyay’s *Kantataar* (The Barbed Wire) made in 2005. The film deals with the current state of affairs alongside the borders without directly referring to any particular side. Apparently this film tells the story of helpless human beings who could be living anywhere and who suffer from an acute identity crisis, but like many films on the partition, this too addresses communal issues and socio-economic problems that were born after that cataclysmic event of the past. Such extensions and diversification from the main theme of the partition will continue in the near future.

Films on the Partition of Bengal

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