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 behavior that the uprooting of millions of people on apparently sectarian grounds would give rise to. The effect and consequences of Partition were cataclysmic. The communal holocaust set off one of the largest mass migrations in history, the death and devastation of millions of people, the rape and abduction of thousands of women by men of other communities, and innumerable other losses of property, ways of life, and community. 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. Over the last fifty years, many feature films have been made on the Partition of India. While films on the Partition-in-the-East (produced both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh) made by directors who did not believe in the run-of-the-mill commercial productions of the time, talk about the trauma and resettlement angst that torment the lives of ordinary people and avoid conflict as a theme to be explored, those of the Partition of Punjab speak of more violence, mayhem, bloodshed and are often more big-budget commercial productions, sometimes with Bollywood stars cast in leading roles. Again, most of the Bengali films
are portrayed in the neo-realist style and remain silent about the direct representation of political issues. Instead they talk about the trauma and resettlement and the construction of the post-Partition identity.

A brief survey of the films made on the theme of the Partition of India in each decade reveals several interesting facts. Considering the huge number of films churned out by the Indian film industry each year, we notice a general apathy on the part of filmmakers towards making films on the Partition and its aftermath. Made in 1951, cameraman-director Nemai Ghosh’s *Chinnamul* (The Uprooted), the first film of this genre, and the only significant film made in an entire decade, can be called an exception in this context. Capturing the tragedy of a dismembered state and 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! Depicting the physical pain and crisis encountered during the flow of refugees from East Pakistan into India, it begins in a peaceful village in East Bengal where Hindus 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. *Refugee* (Shantipriya Mukherjee, 1959), the only other film of the fifties decade has faded into oblivion.

During the 1960s, all the films on the Partition were again made in Bengal. The man who single-handedly spearheaded this genre was none other than Ritwik Ghatak -- 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. Utilizing 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] ¹.

With three significant films produced in three successive years, namely Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960), Komal Gandhar (E-Flat, 1961), and Subarnarekha (1962), 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. Considering the fact that there are different terms defining the people affected by the Partition – immigrants, refugees, evacuees, displaced persons, bastuhara, shoronarthis, bastutyagi (all of them not mutually exclusive categories), they can be called migration studies at their complex best, capturing both the loss and the opportunity in the world of the migrant; the one lamented, the other seized with both hands to forge a new life. Juxtaposed between the sentiment of nostalgia for their desh (homeland) and a sense of trauma, they stress the aspect of renewal, of new beginnings.

The decade also saw another film Bipasha (Agradoot, 1962) but lack of availability has pushed it into a sort of oblivion.

The Bengal film industry dominated the seventies decade as well. With films like Nabarag (Bimal Basu, 1971), Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (Ritwik Ghatak, 1973), Palanka (Rajen Tarafdar,1976), and the first Bangaldeshi production Surya Dighal Bari

(Masiuddin Shaker & Sheikh Niamat Ali, 1979) it would seem that Hindi films had deliberately shunned the genre had not *Garam Hawa* directed by M.S. Sathyu made its appearance in 1973. Set in Agra after the first major exodus of Muslims to the new Islamic nation of Pakistan, the film is narrated from the perspective of Mirza Salim in a joint family household and rests upon Salim’s ultimate refusal to leave for Pakistan, even as the departure of his loved ones wrecks devastation on the emotional ties within the family, and results in the loss of his familial home and shoe-making business. Unlike his brother Halim, he never gives in to separatist sentiments but gradually Mirza is forced to reconsider his conviction that the ties of the region and commerce transcend those of religion in the face of many trials and tribulations he has to face as a Muslim in post-Partition India. As mentioned by several subaltern historians, in order to understand the impact of the Partition better, one has to rely on micro-histories, on narration of events across the border. This is not the great geographical border but the one which cuts through ordinary middle-class households like Mirza Salim’s, captured in the film. In an online interview\(^2\), the director, M.S. Sathyu, said the aim of the film was to expose “the games these politicians play” and the “suffering it has caused.” But while the film does show the unraveling world of a Muslim household, and their suffering is eloquently portrayed, it does not really help us to understand the political ‘games’ that shaped this long Partition. How did politicians, many with high ideals and vision, who had fought for freedom and nation, make decisions that caused such dispossession and suffering? Was it inevitable in the logic of Partition itself? Or does history bear the task of putting the very process of making modern nation-states to trial and scrutiny? According to Priya Kumar, the film affirms in its conclusion “a tentative and fragile hope in the possibility of a better future, one that will allow for the emergence of new political coalitions and alignments across religious communities. Clearly, the film is an early (albeit belated) secular-nationalist account of Partition…”\(^3\)

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The 1980s is an interesting decade in the history of Partition films because none of the two major productions during this phase were mainstream commercial productions. The five-hour long television serial *Tamas* (Darkness) based on Bhisham Sahani’s novel and directed by Govind Nihalani in 1986 proved a potent force for dispelling the darkness of communal prejudice. Famous for its realistic depiction of the Partition, the series pretended to keep memories and truths about the partition alive, at a time when many Indians and Pakistanis seemed to be forgetting this historical tragedy. The miniseries became a landmark 297 minute, 35mm film and was as controversial as the novel hovering almost on the verge of provoking another riot. The series struck an instant chord in the popular understanding, with the majoritarian communal campaign growing in intensity and public displays of sectarian religiosity gaining a fresh vogue. *Tamas* not only attacked the sectarian version of the tragedy of Partition, but also forcefully contested the growing communalisation of popular common sense, that too in public space.

The only other production of this phase, titled *Partition*, was a Channel Four BBC production directed by Ken McMullen and premiered in August 1987. Difficult and pessimistic, the film challenges its audience at almost every turn. The narrative is barely accessible on a first viewing, as actors show up multiple times in the visage of different characters. Long takes with minimal dialogue and frequent cuts between colour and black and white do little to ease the viewer's confusion, yet it explores the depths of the longstanding rift between England and India. Based on a short story “Toba Tek Singh” by Saadat Hasan Manto where the idea of the border itself remains undeciphered in the mind of the protagonist, the film *Partition* condemns the British and Indian powers that be in the 1947 division of the Indian subcontinent. The film itself is a fascinating, challenging dissection of the days leading up to and following the partition, from the points of view of the leaders in charge and their counterparts at an asylum near the newly created India-Pakistan border. The same actors contribute to each setting and McMullen and screenwriter Tariq Ali make sure to position the so-called "lunatics" as the ones in possession of a much more humane, common sense approach to the partition. Otherwise,

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4 Now, twenty years since the film was made, McMullen's *Partition* made its debut on DVD in August 2007 in an extras-laden edition from the Second Run label.
McMullen’s television film is much closer to a theatrical play than a cinematic undertaking. With much of the film showing the actors talking or looking, either while standing still or seated, there’s relatively little action or movement. McMullen and Ali mention in their commentary the desire to give the audience space to reflect on what they’ve seen. Even if Partition feels like a filmed play unseen on the stage, it still makes its point loud and clear, inspiring viewers to further educate themselves about the 1947 partition.

Unlike the Partition films from Bengal, the emergence of films about the Punjab border came much later and historical causes were responsible for it. One was primarily the already established cinema industry in Bengal. In the case of Punjab, it had to depend on the main Hindi film industry of Bombay, which like all industries geared to profit-making ventures than making films on stark, unpleasant social situations. Thus the list of films on the Partition of Punjab is significantly few compared to literature. Also, the gulf between the two art forms widened since a lot of Partition literature was written in Urdu.

“Historical and literary writings on the trauma of the Partition gradually emerged, but popular cinema by and large, stood aloof,” wrote Lalit Mohan Joshi, the editor of a special edition of South Asian Cinema. As reported by Mehboob Khan, for “nearly two decades after the bloody and traumatic partition of India in 1947, the event failed to find mention in the works of the subcontinent’s filmmakers.”5 The film director Shyam Benegal believed that it took time for people in India and Pakistan to rationally analyze the horrors of Partition. According to him, “people in India and Pakistan began to look back objectively on partition, and the wounds between the two countries began healing only after the third war between the two neighbours in 1971. Similarly all the work in the cinema actually begins at that time.”

The 1990s decade saw several significant productions and more variety. Tahader Katha (Buddhadeb Dasgupta, 1992), Earth 1947 (Deepa Mehta, 1998), Chitra Nadir Pare

5 A UK based film magazine South Asian Cinema in a special issue devoted its attention to the films and television serials dealing with the issue of partition and the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in the two neighboring countries. The articles in this magazine try to explain this fact in details. Also see Mehboob Khan. “Cinema’s taboo on partition.” BBC Hindi Online. http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/378333. Accessed on 12.02.2008
(Tanvir Mokammel, 1999), and *Train to Pakistan* (Pamela Rooks, 1999) show interest on the Partition spread out to from directors residing in Bengal to those residing in Canada, Bangladesh and United Kingdom. By the time we reach the end of the 20th century, we find the mainstream Bollywood film industry also stepping into the arena. This is for the first time we also notice a major tectonic shift in the handling of the issue of Partition. Instead of division of the country per se, the border or the line of control becomes a significant marker around which stories start getting constructed. The political issue for most occasions is relegated to the margin and instead pious nationalism vs. interfaith love stories start gaining more visibility. Thus apart from a few exceptions like Supriyo Sen’s *Way Back Home* (2002), a documentary that retraces the journey of migration of his parents after a period of more than fifty years; or *Pinjar* (Chandraprakash Dwivedi, 2003) based on Amrita Pritam’s novel dealing with the story of a woman in the post-partition atmosphere who brings a change in the man who rapes her and is a gripping tale of human spirit to overcome hate with compassion and love; or Sabiha Sumar’s *Khaamosh Pani* (2005) that has a middle-aged Muslim woman Ayesha relive her abduction in 1947 through heart-rendering memories of a young Punjabi girl who ran away while being instructed to jump into the community well in order to save the family’s ‘honour’ – a history that would have remained as silent as the silent waters of the well in which the women were made to drown; we get films like Anil Sharma’s *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) which is a sensationalistic and nationalistic movie about the Partition, notable for shocking scenes of riot and massacre and also films like *Veer Zaara* (Yash Chopra, 2004) that focuses on Hindu-Muslim /Indian-Pakistani romances.

We also see the emergence of a parallel set of films based on the India-Pakistan border all having the contentious Radcliff Line drawn by the British way back in 1947 as its prime focus and with different kinds of human interactions across that liminal space. J. P. Dutta’s blockbuster Bollywood productions often referred to as his ‘war trilogy’ -- *Border* (1997), based on the Indo-Pak war of 1971; *Refugee* (2000), where the border

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6 *Border*, a blockbuster Bollywood war film is an adaptation from real life events that happened at the Battle of Longewala fought in Rajasthan (Western Theatre) during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and Bangladesh Liberation War. The film was critical and commercial hit in India and unusually tied reality to Bollywood and brought through a message that could and should be understood by most people.
becomes the peg on which the typical Bollywood romantic tale can survive; and *LOC Kargil* (2003)\(^8\) are the most representative examples of the sub-genre. So we see that the wars change but the border remains a prime issue. Again, as mentioned earlier, with the passage of time we notice a major change from the earlier partition films where the brutal depiction of communal carnage and the love-hate relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims is replaced by stories that focus primarily on cross-border romance. That the Partition and interfaith love and romance can still be the fodder of feature films is witnessed in the recent film *Partition* (2007) by Indo-Canadian director Vic Sarin who depicts a love story between a Sikh ex-soldier and a Muslim girl whom he saves during the 1947 exodus of refugees in Punjab. Beginning with the realistic depiction of historical events, the film soon shifts its focus to a more formulaic commercial storyline where the hero even changes his religion to unite with his beloved who is forcefully held by her family members across the border and gets beaten up and killed by his villainous brothers in law.\(^9\)

The historian Papiya Ghosh believes that “accessing a nuanced documentation of the partition experience in the subcontinent and diaspora can add several new dimensions for

\(^7\) *Refugee* (2000) follows the actions of a man who has no name or identity but it simply known as Refugee. He helps Muslim refugees cross the border illegally but this is soon put under watch by the authorities who find out that illegal activity takes place in the area. He comes across a family that is trying to cross the border. He falls in love with the daughter Naaz, she also falls in love with him. The Pakistani Border Officer Mohammad Ashraf also loves her. The fact that Naaz loves an Indian refugee heightens the conflict between the refugee and the authorities. Thus the border becomes the peg on which the typical Bollywood romantic tale can survive.

\(^8\) The Kargil war began in April 1999 after Pakistani infiltrators captured some Indian territory in Jammu and Kashmir. The Indian army fought for four months to drive out the infiltrators who had taken up position on the hills. J.P.Dutt said, “I was deeply moved when the Kargil war happened. After our victory, I felt this was the right subject for a film. I must do it. I have attempted to make Indians remember the greatness of the armymen who risk their lives so that we can live a peaceful life in our cities and villages.” See [http://www.rediff.com/movies/2003/nov/12loc.htm](http://www.rediff.com/movies/2003/nov/12loc.htm). *LOC Kargil* is the story of Indian soldiers fighting in Kargil and being remembered by their family.

\(^9\) The taglines of the film read as follows: “India, 1947. The British Raj is in its last days and a way of life is coming to an end. Intertwining cultures are forced to separate. As partition divides a nation, two lives are brought together in a profound and sweeping story that reveals the tenderness of the human heart in the most violent of times. He is a disillusioned soldier determined to live out his life in solitude, she is a young girl torn from her family and thrown into an unfamiliar world full of rage. If he saves her he will be forced to fight again. To care again. To live again.”
the re-theorization of nations, diaspora and the region.”

Stressing on the ramifications of such a horrible event, my contention is that with the passage of time we are now getting films on cross-border migration that is taking place even now, but somehow there has been a tectonic shift in the way the issue is handled. Though not directly related to the Partition, it still remains one of its roots. Without focusing on any historical moment per se, these films are gearing towards contemporary issues that apply to activities around any international border – namely illegal trafficking of human beings, livestock and commodities, the socio-political ramifications that lead to such situations and especially the role and plight of women under such circumstances. We are also burdened with the question of the kind of ethical and political claims that can be articulated for the women who inhabit a marginalized and dispossessed subject position. To substantiate my argument I will focus on a particular award-winning Bengali feature film called *Kantataar* (The Barbed Wire) which was successful in several international film festivals but received lukewarm response in commercial release back home.

Made in 2005 and directed by Baapaditya Bandopadhyay, *Kantataar* deals with the current state of affairs alongside the borders without directly referring to any particular side. A brief summary of the storyline is necessary to analyze my point. It revolves around the journey of Sudha, an illegal immigrant from across the border who for the sake of survival and in a search threat of cross border terrorism entirely changes the socio-political situation of a remote village close to the line of control. The army comes in and takes its toll on interpersonal relationships that gets marred by suspicion, competition and fear. Sudha takes refuge in a temporary weather camp just outside the village. She develops a physical relationship with Binod, the weather balloonist, whose job is to take note of the frequent change of the direction of the wind. Soon Sudha’s identity comes into question and she is seen as a suspect. Her dream of a secured shelter is once again threatened. The film becomes an introspective journey into the many lives

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11 This film is different from another film called *Kantatar* (1964) directed by Bireswar Mukherjee under the banner of G.S.C. Productions with actors Ashim Kumar, Manjula Sarkar, Kali Banerjee, Chabi Biswas and others.
of Sudha – from Pirani to Rehana to Sudha to Feroza – Hindu and Muslim names taken up and discarded as and when required. Her transition from one religion to another (from Hindu to Muslim once and Hindu to Muslim once again) in the course of her struggle for existence, not only ridicules the communal politics in our country but once again underlines the fact that when it comes to survival, poverty has no name and religion becomes irrelevant. While she confides her life story to Binod just before her imminent arrest she tells him how she undergoes three lives everyday – one in the morning, one in the daytime and one at night – and all of them are true. The film begins and ends with almost similar shots of a burkha-clad woman walking towards the barbed wire fencing of a border with the nostalgic strains of a folk song that speaks of a daughter leaving her parent’s home after marriage playing in the background. (video clips)

To conclude we might say that though not a great film per se, Kantataar 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. It also endorses how we have moved far away from the post-Partition secular nationalism of the Nehruvian kind that typically relied on liberal idioms of ‘tolerance’ and ‘protection of minorities’. Thus extending and diversifying from the main theme of the Partition, Indian films on border crossings and migration will continue appearing in newer avatars in the near future.