

# The Volatile Seventies: A Memoir of the Naxalbari Uprising in Calcutta and the Bangladesh War

by *Manas Ray*

*My steps falter, my head swims, walls on walls, cornices on cornices,  
Pavements change at midnight,  
On my way home, houses within houses, feet within feet, heart within heart  
Nothing more – (so much more?) – but well before that  
My steps falter, my head swims, walls on walls, cornices on cornices,  
Pavements change at midnight  
On my way home, houses within houses, feet within feet, heart within heart  
Nothing more.  
“Hands up” – put up your hands – till someone picks you up  
Black cars within black cars, and another black car inside.  
Rows of windows, doors. Graveyards – skeletons topsy-turvy  
White worms within bones, life within worms, death within life – hence  
Death within death  
Nothing more.  
“Hands up” – put up your hands – till someone picks you up and  
Flings you out of the car, but inside a different car,  
Where someone always waits – like a banyan sapling clings to the plaster  
Someone or the other, someone you do not know  
Lies in wait, like a firm bud lurks behind leaves  
With traps of golden cobwebs, ready to garland you–  
You’ll be wedded at midnight, when pavements change –  
Steps falter, head swims  
Walls in walls, cornices in cornices.  
Imagine, the train still, stations rushing by, stars shining beside dimming  
light domes  
Imagine, shoes walking, feet still – this, that, any poppycock  
Imagine children carrying corpse-bearing palanquins to Nimtola –  
And beyond,  
The old lined up for a wedding dance –  
No time for cheers, not a happy time this.  
Just then,  
My steps falter, my head swims, walls on walls, cornices on cornices,*

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*Pavements change at midnight*

*On my way home, houses within houses, feet within feet, heart within heart  
Nothing more.*

Shakti Chattopadhyay, translated by Nandini Gupta<sup>1</sup>

As I jot down my thoughts, a particular moment from the past comes to mind. It was not exactly an event, just a few utterings, and happened back in 2005. I had gone to the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, for the first time. A friend had lent me his car to visit the locality where my parents once lived. I had heard so much about it from childhood. As the driver and I were meandering through the narrow lanes of Gandaria in old Dhaka, I told him, soliloquy-like: ‘Do you know, had the country not been partitioned, I would have grown up here?’ Out came his sharp response: ‘What?’ I said: ‘Partition’. ‘What is that?’ Baffled, I explained impatiently. He said: ‘Now that you tell me, it reminds me that my mother had said something similar. She used to say, at one time, these places would be teeming with Hindus. So, why did you all leave?’ Exasperated, I asked him whether he had heard of the war, the 1971 war. For the rest of the journey, his endless narration of the stories of the war he was brought up with accompanied our ride. He was a man in his mid-thirties. I realized that for the man on the street at least, the Bangladesh War had erased the Partition, or perhaps the Partition resides within the war.

## I

Nations have their own ways of dealing with memories of trauma. For the newly independent India, an endeavour of silence seemed necessary for the project of the nation-state. After the initial disoriented years, the Partition of 1947 which accompanied independence was assigned to near oblivion in the public arena. From my childhood memories of the early sixties, it seems to me that the Independence Day celebration referred more to the new nation than the severed nation. Of course, it would be wrong to say that the Partition died out from popular memory. Communal flare-ups were above all sore reminders of an unresolved past – till, of course, they became the organized, calculated pogroms of contemporary India.

In recent decades, the more the national narrative of stability, growth, and statist secularism has proved untenable, the more has been the interest in the Partition, taking it as, if not the *originary* point, then at least the dividing line of our national life, as if it holds the secret of much of our present misery. This is not to say that Partition became part of academic discourse only from the 1990s. Big fat tomes were regularly being churned out, probing into who was responsible, how it could have been avoided, the big actors, the big story, the big picture of the big nation. The scholarship that emerged in the 1990s started asking new kinds of questions, questions that came with new epistemological assignments in history writing, literary studies, and cultural anthropology: How did people undergo the experience of Partition – as groups, as families, as individuals? How did Partition become part of ourselves? What does it mean to suffer? What is it to witness? What does it mean to be violated and raped and

then to have to live with those poisonous memories that cannot be shared even with very intimate relations? In short, the afterlife of pain and trauma. This scholarship paralleled, tied up with and at times drew intellectual sustenance from the emergence of a self-conscious emphasis on memory in history writing, developing out of a convergence of Holocaust discourse, the emergence of cultural studies, and new trends in philosophy loosely clubbed under the rubric of post-structuralism. Over the past three decades, this new scholarship on the Partition has grown in bulk as well as prestige, attracting some of the best writing in history, cultural studies, and cultural anthropology as well as other branches of social and human studies.<sup>2</sup>

If history as a disciplinary project is an attempt to reduce a plurality of experience to sameness, the counter-posture of memory is to keep this plurality alive, to bring to life the small voices of history. Memory thus is framed as a counter to the unifying mode of history. Hence also the interest in oral histories, vernacular memories, counter-memories, all of which capture the fragmented, interiorized experience that the traditionally practised protocols of history writing miss out.

While the Partition in Punjab in the west produced literary and academic accounts concentrating on violence, trauma and living with agony, the Partition literature of Bengal in the east began mostly as upper caste Hindu Bengali nostalgia about a lost land depicted as a pastoral idyll – the lush green meadows of rural East Bengal, a bucolic plenitude of food, rivers and other waterways, the vibrant blue sky of autumn, quotidian religiosity with each household having its family deity placed in a *thakur dalan*, the numerous religious rituals, *bratakatha*, the village fairs, *doljatra*, *rashpurnima* and such other joyous Hindu festivities.<sup>3</sup> Hindu Bengali sentimentality obscured the fact that upper caste Hindus behaved towards Bengali Muslim peasants and also Dalits in a manner no better than apartheid.

A collective, popular recollection can unobtrusively become a national recollection. The numerous memoirs – written or oral – in recent times by Hindu refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan seem to have already adopted standard generic protocols: the villages of plenty where Hindus and Muslims lived harmoniously; the sudden eruption of the Partition due to the connivance of the British rulers along with some misguided and opportunist leaders; the enormous hardship and bravery in the initial decades of resettlement, aiding, paradoxically, the formation of a new solidarity among the refugees; and, finally, the gradual upward journey on the economic and social curve.<sup>4</sup>

Palpably biased, this version narrates only a part of the story of Bengal's Partition. For Bengali Muslims, the Partition of 1947 was half the victory. The other half would be enacted in East Pakistan and result in the liberation of Bangladesh from the clutches of West Pakistan in 1971. The struggle for self-esteem of the Bengali Muslims could not stop merely with ceasing to be part of united India, but continued till the Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis were ousted from the land. 1947 and 1971 are part of the same conjoined processes of the historical search for self-esteem.

The early 1970s was also a time when West Bengal witnessed an unprecedented political and social upheaval. Starting in 1967 as a peasant rebellion in Naxalbari in the foothills of the Himalayas, the unrest spread like wildfire to other parts of Bengal. In Calcutta, it took the shape of a full-fledged urban uprising. The activists of the movement were popularly known as Naxals, and were linked to a new political party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) – CPI(ML) – established in 1969.<sup>5</sup> The state's response was merciless, a severe crackdown which by 1972 had largely eliminated Naxalism from urban areas, though its ripples continued to be felt until Indira Gandhi's declaration of a nationwide Emergency in 1975. During the uprising, traditions were questioned, the bourgeoisie-landlord rule challenged, the continuation of the colonial legacy attacked, and prevailing cultural, ethical, and sexual mores put under intense scrutiny. This article, written from the author's own experience in Calcutta as a young man in his late teens and early twenties, tries to show how the streams of events in Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal had remarkable convergences. They were not merely concurrent processes but shared larger historical truths.

## II

7<sup>th</sup> May 1971. That was the day my school-leaving exam would have started had it not been indefinitely postponed because of the prevailing unrest in the city. Towards the evening the postman delivered a postcard, slipping it under the door of my father's room. Father asked me to get it for him. Reading the short note, he called out for my mother. As he swung his legs down from the cot and looked for his slippers while tying the knot of his *lungi* (a type of sarong), Ma came in. He handed the card to her. 'Who is it from?' mother asked. He kept quiet for a few seconds, then replied: 'Satish of Chattogram. He has come with his family and is staying at a refugee camp in Ranaghat.' It was not unexpected, though not expected either. The raging war across the border had already pushed millions of evacuees into Bengal and Assam.

'When did they come?'

'Apparently, more than a month now, he with his wife and two children. He earlier wrote to his two relatives; they did not reply.'

'Do you propose to go yourself to fetch them? Where will you find them in that mad crowd? Better to send a letter.'

'Letter? To what address? It just says Camp 7. Plus, he doesn't have a coin left.'

'Remember, during the 1964 riot, when they came over, you told Satish so many times to stay back in Calcutta and not to return. But he was too tied to their house there and his *sahib* (British) company job!'

The next morning my father left early, returning in the late afternoon. Accompanying him was his boyhood friend Satish, Satish's wife Lata, and their two children, Tamal and Latika. My mother had seen Tamal and Latika, but that

was a good seven years back, and Latika was then only a small girl. In the fading sun of late winter, my mother held Latika's face up and remarked, 'Who has she taken after? She looks like Satish-babu.' To which Lata-kakima was prompt to reply: 'You think so? People over there think she looks like me!' Kakima looked quite at ease; there was hardly any trace of the travails they must have gone through in the preceding two months. Tamal was playful, but Latika carried a streak of sadness that was unusual for a girl of sixteen or seventeen. Satish-kaka was distinctly sad and disoriented.<sup>6</sup>

The following day, Satish-kaka went out to see his relatives and returned with one of them. Abani-babu was a jovial elderly man and promised to take Satish-kaka to a few places that might have some job openings. I came to know later that Satish-kaka had started his career as a steno-typist in a British firm dealing with tea export in Chottogram. He had risen from an ordinary clerk to the post of floor manager and was quite content with his life there.

The search for a new job began in earnest the next morning. But it was of little use. Finally, on the fourth day, he managed to get a stenotypist's position in a Marwari concern in Park Street.<sup>7</sup> They would pay him on a daily basis, thirty rupees for each of the five days of the week; Saturday and Sunday being holidays, he would receive no pay. The next Monday morning, Kaka set off in a clean pair of trousers, the only decent pair he had, and a blue terylene shirt with a pen tucked in the pocket. He looked like a regular office-goer. Very quickly, I thought, he had managed to put his recent turbulent past behind. But luck was not on his side. He came back in the evening with a long face. Apparently, his Marwari boss told him that he would receive thirty rupees at the end of each day all right, but Rs 1.50 would be deducted for every error. Since he was long out of touch with stenotyping, what he received at the end of the day was barely ten rupees and fifty paise. I was quick to calculate the number of errors: 13! Dad expressed a strong sense of disgust; mother said, 'Marwarira konodin karo bhalo korshe naki!' (When did the Marwaris do anyone any good!)

On father's advice, Kaka didn't go back to that office again; instead he went to see some people in the city's office quarters, Dalhousie Square. That didn't work out, but Kaka was fascinated by the enormous range of activities he saw there, so many thousands of people in so many different organizations and occupations. The very bigness of it tempted him to comprehend the ongoing manifold activities as one huge abstraction, behind which he sensed an excitement both inviting and mysterious. He started going there every morning and checking with private firms to find out whether a vacancy existed. In the evenings, he came back, sad as ever. In his absence, my parents had worried exchanges regarding his job prospects. But Kakima looked the same contented lady. Tamal spent the days climbing trees and flying kites with the local boys, an activity I thought was a bit childish for his age. After all, he was three years older than me and must by then have been twenty. Latika spent most of her time sitting in our wide red verandah, either looking at the sky or at her fingernails.

A couple of days later, Abani-babu came for a visit again. He offered Kaka some money. In course of the conversation, he suddenly hit upon an idea: 'Satish, wasn't K. M. Dutta your friend?'

'K. M. Dutta, who?'

'The one who did law at Calcutta University when you were doing your B.A. and who stayed in the same boarding house?'

'Oh, you mean, Kamini? Kamini Mohan? What about him?'

'*Aare!* He is now a famous lawyer and runs a law firm in Dalhousie! Why don't you meet him? Meet him tomorrow itself!'

My father also remembered Kamini. After all, they all were in the same boarding house in Calcutta.

Satish-kaka's luck at long last smiled on him. K M Dutt and Sons was indeed a large firm, right in the heart of Dalhousie Square. Kamini apparently had remained the same good-hearted man and had indeed a place for Satish-kaka, and a good one. The office administrator had died a month back and Mr. Dutta was looking for a good replacement. Satish-kaka fitted the bill perfectly. Dutta was very relieved to find a person he knew with the right kind of experience. Satish-kaka, needless to say, was relieved too.

K M Dutt and Sons offered Kaka a resettlement allowance. A two-bedroom, ground floor flat on the other side of the main road was rented, not too far from our place. The necessary furniture was procured, including a dressing table with a long mirror at the behest of Kakima. Unbelievably, all this happened within a month of the family's arrival at our place.

When Kaka came to see us after a month with sweets, he seemed to be a different person altogether. Gone was that unsure look; here was a seasoned, alert man, settled in life. My parents were warm in their hospitality. They talked like age-old friends, looking back on their life together in the village and their memories of my maternal grandfather, who was the political mentor of both my father and Kaka. We began to visit them at times. Father usually went on Sunday mornings; my mother and I on the weekdays in the late afternoons. One day, Kakima asked me to get five *rosogollas*, a common Bengali sweet, from a nearby shop. It took no time for me to come back with the consignment. Kakima went to make tea. From the kitchen, she called to me and asked softly, 'Did you have one of the sweets on the way?' Taken by complete surprise, I shook my head with some effort and softly said, 'Na.' A few minutes earlier, I had noticed Tamal enter the house in a hurry, only to leave straight away. My mother could make out that some words were exchanged in the kitchen. When she inquired about it on our way back in the rickshaw, I merely said: 'I am not going back there again. From now on, you go alone.'

Satish-kaka's days of happiness were short-lived. It was soon clear that Tamal had become friendly with the local rough elements, some of them with Naxal links. After all, their rented house was not very far away from Chanditala, a notorious Naxal hideout. Satish-kaka was looking for a place in another locality, closer to the

city. But before they could move out, one day Latika, his daughter, went missing. On sustained enquiry, it was discovered that a Bangladeshi acquaintance of hers had been seen near their home a few days earlier. After a month or so, news reached us that Latika and her friend, Rana Mohammad Shahidullah, had crossed the border into East Pakistan and got married. Not only did Latika marry a Muslim, but a liberation fighter too. It took some effort for Satish-kaka to share the news with my parents. He looked distraught. My father heaved a deep sigh and could only say: ‘What else can you do other than accept it?’

A deep silence fell on Satish-kaka. He remained quiet for a long time. Father only said, ‘Cheleta-to bhalo-o hoite pare!’ (For all you know, the boy might be good!) ‘Aage to baicha thak dui jane – bhalo ar manda! Ei Lata’r askarate kandata ghate parlo!’ (Let both be alive – what’s there to talk about, good or bad! It is due to Lata’s indulgence that this could happen at all!). It was clear that the family had



Figure 1: Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule graffiti. Photographer Salim Pau.



**Figure 2: The IMF loan burden. The image depicts the then chief minister, S.S. Ray. Photographer Amit Dhar.**

known Rana quite well. Ma told my father: ‘Had Satish listened to you and stayed back last time they came, nothing like this would have happened!’ Kaka and his family moved out to a relatively peaceful place far from our house. The visits became more occasional. Tamal went to a polytechnic for a diploma course. Satish-kaka became the right-hand man of Kamini Dutta. Lata-kakima was busy with matinee shows, reading film magazines, and knitting.

About three years later, one afternoon, they all came to visit – Satish-kaka, Lata-kakima, Tamal, Latika, and Rana. Latika carried their little daughter, Shukla, in her arms. Rana was a tall, quiet, impressive-looking man. The two touched my parents’ feet and did *pranam*. The tip of my mother’s forefingers, I think I saw, crawled back for a moment and straightened again. To touch or not to touch, when the context is a tradition of transmitting ritualistic practices from one generation to another, becomes more of a reflex than a conscious act. My father started chatting with Rana and was happy to find that he had read his Tagore well. Rana, on his part, was pleasantly surprised to find an elderly man taking so much interest in *Shesher Kabita*, Tagore’s romantic meditations on the mysteries of love.

Shukla in no time became the centre of attraction through her cries, babble, and endless tantrums. She was a beautiful little girl of about two. They all left after lunch, save Satish-kaka. He stayed for quite a while that day. My father praised Rana and assured his friend that everything would be all right with time. After all, in God’s universe there were no religions, only humanity mattered. I think I noticed a hint of happiness on Satish-kaka’s face. He started talking of their days together at the college boarding hostel on Raja Dinendra Street, and sharing with my mother memories of their village home in Dhaka and of her parents. He was not reminiscing, he was clinging to a common blissful past to cope with the present.



## III

I remember the day the CPI(ML) was formed. It was in April 1969. I was then in Class X, around fifteen years old. One of the local chaps, my senior, went to attend the event. The next morning when we met, he whispered into my ear: 'Biplab Shuru Hoye Geche!' (Revolution has begun!) He seemed confident about the arrival of revolution and therefore damn excited – but also keenly on the alert for eavesdropping counter-revolutionaries. I could not make out the reason for such caution, since we were standing alone in a field. I told myself: the revolution is much too serious an affair to be talked about in a normal voice. I was thrilled, a whole new continent of history seemed to be opening up before me; I was also scared, much too scared. That afternoon, caught between a powerfully seductive sense of liberation and a stubborn paranoia, something strange happened. A string of flowing sensations, a secret bodily conclave as it were, a tumescence, all resulting in a slow imprint of a geography that would take its own shape on my pants and need to be washed out. The experience was unknown to me until then. I juttied my hand inside to fathom what seemed uncanny. The smell was of raw betel nut, the fragile green of the tree's pulp that had once reminded me of my junior school classmate Madhusree's cheeks. The same experience was to recur a few months later when I was taking the maths exam. I was stuck with one problem for some time, and when the invigilator announced that only fifteen more minutes were left, I had three more to go. I panicked. The bodily response was the same – as was the result. But this time I enjoyed and welcomed the alchemy, though I left the paper incomplete. Soon things would fall into their proper template, I would unveil the mystery, and it was then business as usual.

In 1970, the final year of school – when I was not busy giving private lessons to students, some as old as me – I started attending the secret classes of Swadhin-da, the local contact for the CPI(ML) party. His dark, damp room added to the ambience of what we were taught and asked to perform. I earned a great deal of notoriety for taking part, along with fellow comrades, in an evening raid of our school premises when the nose of Gandhi's statue was broken to pieces with a sledgehammer. It took a lot of persuasion on my parents' part for the local leaders of the mainstream Communist Party, the CPI(M), to allow me to return to the locality.

That year it seemed the Higher Secondary Exam (the school-leaving exam) would never happen. The exams were always imminent and always postponed. At one point, I lost patience and started reading other things, storybooks mainly. The night brought sounds of stealthy footfalls, brisk running, and sudden distant cries and screams for help that faded slowly in the dark. If a coconut fell at odd hours, we knew someone was hiding at the top of the tree. Heavy sounds of boots meant we closed the windows and allowed the armed policemen to go past. Finally, three days before the exams were due to start, the secretary of West Bengal Board of Secondary Examination gave a press statement asserting that there would be no more postponements. I got out my books and exercise books, put them back on my desk and tried to regain my lost concentration. It was difficult.

Our exam centre was a school in another refugee colony, Bapuji Nagar, near Sulekha Glass Factory. On the morning of the first exam, my mother performed

the usual ritual of touching sandalwood-smearred holy flower petals on my forehead and putting the stuff inside my shirt pocket. I touched her feet as well as my father's and set off for the exam centre in a bus, escorted by my sister. Halfway through, I noticed a large crowd assembled at a playground. As the bus slowed down, I tucked my head out of the window and saw four men lying with their throats slit. One seemed to be still alive. My entry into adulthood was hastened. I reached the centre completely disoriented.

In the late afternoon, as I came out of the hall into the school courtyard, I found my sister waiting with a bag. She looked disturbed. I was told that a few hours earlier, the Central Reserve Police had cordoned off our locality and shot down five escaping men, all of whom I knew. All but one of the men died on the spot. I was not to return home but should stay at my maternal uncle's place in New



**Figure 3:** Typical domestic scene of middle class Calcutta in the 1970s. Photographer Santosh Monda.



**Figure 4: A narrow lane in the congested parts of the city. In the 1970s, such lanes were the site of many a police chase resulting in what in state parlance are known as ‘encounter deaths’.**  
**Photographer unnamed.**

Alipore. The bag contained some books she thought would be useful for the rest of the exams.

My *mama* (maternal uncle) was a senior manager of a well-regarded pharmaceutical company. Their airy three-bedroom flat was delightfully done up. Mama called me and asked how I proposed to go to the exam centre the next morning. I had no idea. He told me not to worry, he would drop me at Gariahat junction, even if that meant making a long detour. From there I could catch a southbound bus. I nodded – though it did not make matters any less confusing.

My sister had not brought any of my exercise books in which I had all my notes, including some answers written out. It did not bother me as I had already developed a nonchalant attitude. At dinner, my uncle asked me if I still

hobnobbed with my Naxal friends and added, jokingly: 'I hope they will not follow you here!' My auntie tried to smile to hide her anxiety. My cousin, then five or six, asked curiously who were the Naxals. Aunt replied: 'Jano na toh Naxal ki! Sab kheyee nao, na holey kintu Naxal dhore niye jabe'. (You don't know what Naxals are! Eat up everything: otherwise, the Naxals will take you away!). The little girl looked strangely at me and, for the rest of my stay, kept a safe distance.

The morning after the first exam, the vernacular daily paper carried a list of ten exam centres in Calcutta where what was happening was not an exam but a pure farce. Our centre came third in that list. The news consoled me for not having the relevant books and other study materials.

Exams over, I rang my father at the school where he was a headmaster and asked him to take me back home the next morning. Father came, and in no time, I packed my little bag and was ready to leave. Aunt made tea for him, Mama by then had gone off to work, and soon we were off too. The next evening Mama turned up at our place to take me back again, since Netaji Nagar was no longer safe for a young lad like me. The gesture brought us closer. Gradually I started feeling part of his family; *maima* (maternal aunt) at times called me to taste her curry while it was still on the oven and check for salt and spices. On his way to office, Mama dropped me near the British Council, where I spent the whole day browsing in the library. I was provided with lunch – the same that was given to my Mama.

I didn't know which book to look for, or how to look for a title in the racks, for I had no title in mind. I used to pick up one, mostly arbitrarily, from the pile of returned books, read a few pages and put it back from where I had got it. In the course of my meandering search, one day I chanced on a book called *Industry and Empire*. The author's name, I found, was Eric Hobsbawm. Halfway through the book, as I read about the formation of the industrial working class in nineteenth-century Britain, I started dreaming of a land of distant church bells, rows of oak trees, stately buildings from a different era, a long tapestry of sonorous hums coming from somewhere I didn't know, of ponds and ducks and beautiful white children, young girls with small, golden braids, a picture I suppose I drew in my mind from the few poems of Keats I had read at school. The discussion on class struggle would draw my attention later, but never without a calming pageant of peace and harmony in a far-off land.

I didn't expect to do well in my school-leaving exam, and I didn't either. My marks were just about enough to secure my admission at a college run by Hindu missionaries, and to be eligible for the entrance test at Presidency College, Calcutta. My tenure at the missionary college was over in a week. By then I had received two warnings from the Maharaj, the head priest. On the first occasion, my room-mate, Soumitra, and I were caught smuggling cigarettes tucked inside a small packet of puffed rice. A second warning about our behaviour soon followed. In a desperate need for transgression, Soumitra and I one early morning landed up in the prayer hall wrapped in bare, red quilts. We were asked

to wait outside the hall. The principal's call came soon after. Knowing that the final warning could not be far off, Soumitra waited anxiously for the admission test results of Jadavpur Engineering College, while I waited to see if I had a place at Presidency.

Early one morning, still not completely awake, I thought I saw my father and *didi* (elder sister) enter the college gate and approach the hostel. I knew I must have made it to Presidency. For the first time in my stay with the saffron missionaries, I felt excited and happy. It didn't matter that I didn't actually see father and *didi*, that it was only an apparition. I needed a thread to hang my hopes on. Around nine in the morning, they did land up. They were carrying the news of my admission to Presidency College, which they announced to me with barely concealed excitement. All three of us proceeded towards the principal's room; by then I had already packed my bags and put on my best clothes. The principal muttered in a moaning voice: 'Ekhane antata charitragathan-ta hoto!' (Staying here would have at least helped in character formation!).

#### IV

Leaving behind whatever project of character formation the missionary college might have had on offer, I tried hard to be part of the Presidency crowd. The very first class was taken by Kajal Sengupta, everyone's favourite Kajal-di. She was lucid, loud and clear, and had a stunning appearance. Not very tall, she was comely; her saree, white with a large red border, sat tight on her, her eyes sapphire bright, actually burning, a grey patch weaving through her hair. I felt sad, for I knew it would take no time to fall for her. One day I confided this to a senior. He told me not to be worried: 'This is a ritual young men perform on entry to the college. You will be all right.' Very early in life, I experienced the erotic spell that an attractive woman of poise can create. The project of character formation had by then retreated into the far distance.

Presidency's English Honours class those days was a bastion of the elite. Not only did I not have English, I also lacked the habit of speaking in the standard Calcutta dialect of Bangla. Born in a refugee colony, I could only speak in a mixed East Bengal dialect with the Dhaka variety foremost. Soon the girls of my department took me to be an introvert, and I was happy to be left alone.

Presidency was my early adolescent dream. In retrospect, a magazine brought out by the radical students of the college during the fiery days of the mid-1960s decided my fate. The cover contained a huge nib scribbling, bold and scruffy: 'Ei nongra, pochā, gola bourgeois sanskriti nipat jaak' (Down with this dirty, rotten, festering bourgeois culture). Inside were articles arguing how the bourgeoisie weaves a web of deception through its cultural artefacts. Each piece was a veritable cannonball. To date, I am yet to come across an ideological criticism so fierce, so targeted, and so committed. One such pointed target was the Bengali film, 'Balika Bodhu', a genial story of adolescent romance. Nonetheless, I took the analysis to represent a higher realm of revolutionary truth, a sacred realm, at whose altar I must sacrifice my boyish infatuations.

I continued giving private lessons – or ‘tuition’ as it was commonly called – to local lads and girls, but hiked my rate by five rupees. Some left, others continued; and some new students came from the adjacent Ranikuthi Government Housing who paid me more than I expected. I gave my earnings to my mother, who in return gave me one rupee fifty paise every morning. By the time I returned home at about ten o’clock at night, I was half-dead with exhaustion, having spent the whole day living on cups of tea at the college canteen and an occasional cup of coffee at the Coffee House, courtesy of Ranajay Gupta, one of my dearest college friends. Added to my intake was the standard refreshment offered at ‘tuition places’: a cup of tea with two Marie biscuits that, by the time they were served, had lost their edges to the spilled tea on the saucer. After dinner, I lay down for a while. When I started my day’s study, it was past 11:30 at night. I worked till the early hours of the morning. Next morning at eight, when I was dragged out of bed by one of my sisters, I proceeded straight to the shower, head soaked in sleep that my body rightfully demanded.

I took the 9:15 bus to Esplanade from the bus stop adjacent to Netaji Nagar where I lived. It was packed with locals and gave the feeling that the red double-decker was a moving Trojan Horse with refugee commandos who would soon invade the city centre. Kamal-da, sitting in the front row on the upper deck, used to sing a Bhojpuri number: ‘Ram Chale Aage Aage, Laxmanbhai Piche...’ (Ram walks ahead, brother Laxman following behind) while others joined in the tune. It was real fun.

One day, we were stopped at Azadgarh by the Congress Party goons, among whom were two brothers, Kajal and Sajal, who had already acquired a great deal of notoriety. Their father, Santosh-babu, was from Dhaka, where he had lived near our village. He was a tall man who carried a huge pile of brassware on his head, and inevitably while passing by our house he stopped and had a chat with my *thakuma* (paternal grandmother), mourning, in the course of their exchange of nostalgic tales, those lost days of peace and plenty. Thakuma served him a glass of water and a *batasha*, a homemade sweet, and offered him a *paan* which he chewed with great relish.

Kajal and Sajal, wearing dark glasses that day, their collars turned up, commanded everyone to come down from the bus. They were looking for their enemies at Netaji Nagar: ‘Don’t be scared. We know who we are looking for.’ They meant CPI(M) activists. I don’t know why, but they took me to be among the chosen ones. A hard palm held me by the collar and dragged me off. I don’t know who else they chose to keep me company. Soon I was blindfolded and made to walk quite a distance. At one place, I was stopped and asked to turn around. I could make out that I was not the only catch of the day, since similar orders were given to at least one other person. Without much fuss, a gun was fired; then there was a fall and a withering cry. It all happened like the trailer of a crime movie. Then someone came to me and asked, ‘Ki korish?’ (What do you do?). ‘Presidency-tepori.’ (Study at Presidency). ‘Banchod’ (Sister-fucker). A motionless stillness. I imagined a white wall running behind me. I had read in the

newspapers how young men in the nearby district of Baranagar were lined up by the Indian army alongside a white wall and then shot dead.

Whispers were eddying around me. Then I heard a voice say: ‘Shon, marish na, CPM karena. Or baba amago Head-Sir, o Anilbabur chele, ami Anilbabur coaching e porshi, ore ami chini, party karena’ (Listen, don’t kill him, he is not a CPM fellow. His father is our head-sir, he is Anil-babu’s son, I have been to Anil-babu’s coaching, I know him. He is not into party-politics.) There was some more discussion in whispers, and then a man’s footsteps approached, the blindfold was roughly taken off, and I was set free. Someone said, ‘Bhag Bokachoda!’ (Get lost, you fucking fool!). I walked down the lane to the bus stop, my eyes and temple aching from the tight bind. Caught between fearlessness and paranoia, I thought I could not see, almost as if it was not necessary to see to keep walking. Years later, I read Raghav Bandyopadhyay’s Naxal memoir, *Journal 70*.<sup>8</sup> There the writer-protagonist was similarly let off at the last moment by a group of policemen working on ‘shoot at sight’ orders when they realized that he was the only son of a widow and a Brahmin, and that too a Bandyopadhyay (Banerjee). Killing him on Nabami evening of Durga Puja would cause great *paap*, a sin.<sup>9</sup> Such merciful acts happen once in a blue moon, but when they do happen, they are magically real.

That day, after the third class, as I was approaching the college canteen, a waiter told me: ‘Your father is looking for you.’ I had not shared the morning episode with any of my college mates; it was too fresh, too close to me still. My father did not ask me anything. He took a taxi, and following a different route, we reached home around four o’clock; he was silent and pensive throughout the journey. My mother too said nothing. At night, I was told that I would be taken to the college hostel next morning, where I would stay, and not to come back home even for a casual visit unless specifically instructed.

## V

A five minutes’ walk from Calcutta’s College Street, in an old, long, red building with an imposing green iron gate that closed to a suspiciously tight arch, we ate mutton for dinner every night of our lives. I discovered a new world at the hostel. Like me, the other boarders too were not from Calcutta. Many of them were from outlying districts. Like me, they also could not speak faultless English, had no idea of fashionable New Market, did not know about Nizam’s kebabs or Flury’s cake and had never tasted the Italian flavours of Firpo’s restaurant. Some of them were wealthy farmers’ children and brought back, on every journey back from their family home, a large bag full of puffed rice and molasses with a delicate sweet smell of coconut and date-palm. They were fiercely disciplined about their studies. Between them and their goal (mainly restricted to qualifying for the state civil service cadetship) were two obstacles: women and Naxals. They joined the college fully briefed and tolerated no distraction. But one or two did slip out of such vows, with mostly miserable results.

One late afternoon as I returned to the hostel, I found a small crowd in the corridor leading to my room. They seemed to be enjoying the scene inside a



**Figure 5: College Street Coffee House. Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022.**



**Figure 6: Presidency College (now Presidency University). Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022.**





Figure 7: College Portico. Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022.



Figure 8: The Long Steps, Witness to History. Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022.

particular room. I took a peep and realized that one of our mates had lost his sanity. Lying on the bed, he kept murmuring in a sing-song, wavering voice ‘Chorui Pakhi, Kutur Kutur’. It didn’t mean anything, apart from suggesting that twittering sparrows were having fun. Apparently, he had been doing that for the previous few hours in a room that was dark and damp and with the window closed. The secret travelled from one lip to another, and in no time, the entire hostel was a party to that sight. We were told that the chap – a short, thin, quiet fellow from an interior village – had fallen in love with a college girl who wore sleeveless blouses and *bileti scent* (foreign perfume). No one questioned the inevitability of the fall. He came back to his senses the next morning after being administered a healthy dose of sedative. He looked forlorn, his face shrunk and dry. He was sent back home that afternoon, escorted by a fellow student. After a couple of months, the news reached us that his father had arranged a bride and he was going to get married and look after their land. This was the best his parents could do to rid their son of city vices.

Of course, not everyone in the hostel was like this. There was another crowd, mostly from district schools or from the two sides of the Hoogly river, the rotting industrial heartland of Bengal. They ranked very high in the school-leaving exams. Apart from a few who studied economics, they were science students – mostly in Physics and Chemistry. The Indian Institutes of Technology were yet to demand their due share of those who topped the exams. These boys were a cheerful lot and well read. I was introduced to Hemingway and to photography by one such boarder who, as an aberration, chose to do physiology. Animesh and I

went for long walks together after dinner, a path that took us at times to Esplanade in the city centre, where the movie theatres mostly ran English films. Stepping inside those theatres was itself an experience. The dimly lit halls with ladies and gentlemen seated neatly and talking in soft voices; the chairs that could be made to recline; the thick spongy soft carpet, usually red; the curtain that went to the two sides in tidy folds with the ringing of the bell; the huge spotless screen; the dim lights half tucked at the bottom of the walls and on the steps. It's a vivid memory, something most amazing for a rustic boy. It all seemed so magical and I was willing to believe everything I saw on the screen.

On one such occasion, we watched 'Summer of 42', set in Cape Cod on the eastern seaboard of the United States. The heroine's long shapely legs, and her climb up the ladder to the attic as her young lover watched with an erotic shiver, left a deep impression on me. It inaugurated a chemistry I was not sure I understood. Like an addict, I watched the film perhaps half-a-dozen times without letting anyone know. It reinforced my vision of the unknown, pristine West, with bells and church spires, that I first began to weave in the idle afternoons at the British Council while reading Hobsbawm. I told myself that I too belonged, though I wasn't sure where or to what.

Certain evenings we went out for the night show in a group, giving a shout from the gate to the guy who served our meals: 'Jiban, this many late meals!' By the time we came back, it would be past midnight. The meals would be covered with thick brass *thalis* (plates), but cats had usually managed to finish off two or three of them. We settled for the ones that appeared untouched – chapattis like dried hide and mutton as cold and taut as it could get. Occasionally we could hear a gargle-like sound coming from the open tank of drinking water. We knew what we would see – a beautiful frog of green and gold with protruding eyes, looking wistfully at the world outside and seeking our mercy.

One day, three of us had gone to watch a James Bond film. It was the summer of 1972. Halfway through the film, as Bond was about to push a villain from a high-rise building, a bomb exploded at the gate of the theatre. Then there was another explosion in the passage leading to the exit. A huge commotion erupted as men and women tried to leave the auditorium all at once. We were on the third floor, the area reserved for those with the cheapest tickets. We could do little better than stand where we were and breathe in the sulphurous odour. It was quite some time before we could leave. By then, the police had come and were busy collecting the leaflets that our assailants had left for us. One of my friends managed to collect a couple of them. They were roughly printed sheets of yellowing paper. The write-up reminded us about the glorious revolution being conducted by Bengali peasants in the interior parts of Midnapore (now Jhargram); the day was not far away when the revolutionary peasants would surround the city of Calcutta and make the middle class pay for bending the knee to the bourgeois-landlord state.

Suddenly we spotted three policemen running after a thin, tall figure. They caught hold of him near the main road, started kicking straightaway, and then threw him bodily inside the waiting van. We kept walking; hiding would invite

danger. We knew what awaited that chap. The van in all likelihood would zoom deep into the Maidan, dark and soulless, the door would open and the man would be told to flee. As he got out and ran, he would be shot from behind, ending one more episode of the urban uprising.<sup>10</sup>

After ten at night, the mutton and chapatti dinner over, the whistling began from young men in hostel wards one and two, those adjacent to the road. We told ourselves that these students were from other colleges and not, in any event, from Presidency. They were calling for Sonali, a tallish young beggar woman who apparently squatted outside the hostel gate at night, her newborn child on her lap. She was not more than seventeen or eighteen, her voice husky, her complexion dusky, her unclad breasts shapely, enough to set aflame the arid lives of the undergraduates in their late teens or early twenties. As the gate closed and Shukheswar-ji, the hostel *darwan* (caretaker), started making his bed, the whistling would become intense: young men calling out from their rooms to someone they never saw, yet everyone was sure was there. They wanted her to be let in, as the halogen lights on the adjacent street went dim and finally off. Their whistles and fervent calls echoed down the dark, hollow street. From the second floor, I tried to follow the calls and the whistles. The cries were make-believe, yet despairingly human and so real.

Years later, I went back to the hostel and enquired with the boarders about Sonali, the common source of inspiration in our times. It didn't surprise me that she was still being called out for as she sat every night next to the hostel gate holding her newborn on her lap, dusky skinned, husky voiced. Looking back, the



Figure 9: Hindu Hostel. It is from the first floor that nocturnal cries for Sonali used to emerge. Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022.



**Figure 10: Calcutta University front yard where we displayed the sarees. Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022.**

whistles and catcalls of those high-spirited years at the Hindu Hostel seem a long dirge to death and decay in the midst of our youth, those ever-repeated, horribly male sex-jokes like the unresponsive flesh of a paralytic limb. Sonali remains a bridge over the decades, the timekeeper of our adolescent Eros.

## VI

As days passed, the city Naxals became more and more an alienated bunch, more and more cornered by the lethal state apparatus. The class factor, however, remained important. The vice-chancellor of Jadavpur University was hacked to death by a group of students in the name of the revolution to come. They had influential fathers who quickly managed to pack off their sons abroad. But Naxals



**Figure 11: Calcutta Tram, a permanent fixture of College Street. Photographer Bijoy Chowdhury, 29 March 2022**

from ordinary middle-class, mostly refugee families were tortured, maimed and killed in droves.

One day while crossing the newly built Dhakuria Flyover in South Calcutta, probably in late 1972, I noticed a few words scribbled in rough, hurried strokes of tar on a hoarding advertising a cigarette brand: ‘Janagan shuworer baccha, amra chollam’ (People are a pack of swine, we bid adieu.) To my mind, this remains the most truthful testimony of the state of mind of the departing Naxals, exhausted in body and soul and utterly loathful of the betrayal of the middle class. Years later the same hoarding was used to announce the arrival of a new right-wing newspaper, *Bartaman*, with the declaration: ‘Bhagwan chara kauke bhoi koreyna’ (*Bartaman* fears nobody, save God).

Not all was over, however. More than a year later, in the small hours of the morning, a van of armed policemen arrived at the gate of our hostel. They had a job to do and knew exactly where to go. In a room which had been locked for ages, they discovered a whole armoury stacked in cupboards. It mostly consisted of choppers, knives of different shapes, and even swords. The whole collection was whisked off in another van. The work was done briskly, methodically, without fuss. We could make out they were acting on the information that some Naxal prisoner must have provided under torture.

## VII

At some time in the later part of 1973, I noticed a middle-aged man, Robin-da, frequenting ward number five of our hostel where I stayed. Most boarders of this ward were, like me, from Presidency College. Robin-da was a tall man with a swaying potbelly in khadi (hand-spun fabric), a striped *kurta* and white pajamas. He carried a *jhola* (shoulder bag) that at times bulged out. His hair was crew-cut and allowed each strand to stand on its own, independent of others. His spectacles were small and round, in a metal frame that touched the tip of his nose as he bent down to read. He had a disarming, carefree smile, a bit Micawber-like.

His repertoire was enormous – from reading horoscopes, to scientific methods of circumcision, to the latest soccer strategy devised in Germany (which he called ‘hit and run’, borrowing a term, I suspect, from Che Guevara). He was mighty helpful though his resources were nil. It took no time for me to become his *chela* (disciple), willing to follow just as the children of Hamelin danced to the tune of the pied piper. And I was not alone. He was particularly keen to make friends with Prasun, the true Naxal among us though only in spirit. The rest of us were merely post-Naxals, a less glamorous breed, confused and ineffectual as revolutionaries. What saved us was our non-committal attitude. But Prasun was different. He was thoughtful and looked at the world intently over the top of his spectacles, curling a strand of hair all the while, a *mudradosh* (mannerism) he liked to maintain. He was a strict moralist and loved his girlfriend, Chapa, more morally than, I suspect, erotically, because of which he lost her to one of his dear friends, Shuvendu, a fellow Naxal. I soon noticed Prasun and Robin-da talking quietly at times, Robin-da looking this way and that as he talked. They changed topic if we were anywhere nearby. It did not bother me; I admired everything that Prasun did and Robin-da was so immensely lovable.

Robin-da was a man full of ideas, quite often business ideas. Once he asked me: how about getting into the saree business and making a quick buck as the Puja holidays approach? The idea was to get sarees from weavers in interior Bengal and sell them at a moderate price. As an incentive, payment in three monthly instalments was to be offered. But where to sell them, I asked? ‘Hah, hah!’ he laughed. ‘At the gate of the women’s colleges.’ It didn’t strike me that it could be risky to sell sarees by instalment payments to a floating crowd.

The operation started the next week as planned, initially with success. Robin-da told me that we should try selling to postgraduate women students who had more say in the family. So we tried out our luck at Calcutta University Arts Building, just next door to our hostel. Emboldened, we started displaying our wares in the large, cemented courtyard of the campus. Women flocked in droves as we explained the distinction of each saree. When the excitement was at its peak, there appeared a stern old professor, thin and gaunt-faced. His voice was suitably dry and devoid of any positive emotion. He chastised us: ‘Some limits ought to be maintained. You guys have crossed them all!’ The assembled crowd quickly thinned. But by then we had disposed of a good number of sarees on the promise of payment in three instalments. The Puja vacation followed soon. When we went back to the courtyard, and then to the lecture theatres, few buyers could be traced;

many were said to have got married in the break or simply decided not to continue their studies anymore. Our dream of making a quick buck only left us in debt.

Robin-da disappeared one fine day, never to return. I used to enquire after him with Prasun, who would put on a blank face. More than a year later, I came to know that the man we knew as Robin-da was actually Altaf Latif. He was a Bangladeshi, influenced by the ideas of Charu Majumdar and associated with Naxal groups in the northern districts of Bangladesh. When the newly formed Bangladesh government took a harder stance towards the splinter groups of Naxals, Altaf fled to West Bengal and lived 'underground'. He went back in early 1974 with the aim of forging unity among the disjointed revolutionary groups. True to his style, he was biting off more than he could chew and was soon arrested. In a skirmish that followed, he was apparently shot dead. I did not know how much of this story was to be believed. In any event, it did not solve the puzzle called Robin-da. Was his half-baked idea of making some quick money genuine or an act? Whichever, we lost money from the scheme, and not a meagre amount given our diehard poverty.

### VIII

Decades have rolled past. I am in contact with my physiologist friend, Animesh, who switched to Life Sciences after his BSc. He now lives in California where he heads a reputed computer lab engaged in understanding the fundamental biological basis of life. I'm also in touch with Prasun. He retired recently from a bank, a job he tried to run away from several times, every time to be lassoed back by his benevolent bosses. I remember spending the summer of 1983 at his place at Narayana in Delhi. My university was closed because of student unrest and I had to complete my MPhil dissertation, and home was not the place to go back, not at least for an MPhil student who was merely elongating (as per family wisdom) his unemployment. On his return from the office, Prasun spent an hour or so in the kitchen preparing the evening meal. He occasionally called me out and wanted me to watch through binoculars the third floor of an adjacent house where, I was told, his dear friend and his ex-girlfriend, Shuvendu and Chapa, were keeping tabs on him. Prasun was soon diagnosed as a schizophrenic. The unfulfilled dream of revolution had left a permanent scar on him. He still curls a patch of hair, and still views the world over the top of his glasses. He goes to the Ram Krishna Mission Library in the heart of south Kolkata (as Calcutta is now known) every morning and stays there till late in the day, reading Vivekananda and Aurobindo, the Gita, and the Upanishads.

### IX

Let me go back to where I began: sightseeing in Dhaka in my friend's car. I had heard of Shankhari Bazar in old Dhaka from my mother. Actually it was a common refrain in her Partition reminiscences: 'Amra Hindu-ra jantam, Shankhari Bazaar jotokhan achey, amra thik achi. Je din Shankhari Bazaar porbo, bujhum, eibaar jaite hoibo'. (As long as Shankhari Bazar existed, we Hindus knew we were fine. The day Shankhari Bazar fell, we would know the time for our departure had



come). I was eager to see Shankhari Bazar and its labyrinthine lanes. I stood at the entrance of one of those lanes and looked, perhaps with eyes that had consumed too many stories from ancestors. Suddenly I noticed an old man staring at me. He was wrapped in a white *than* (or dhoti), with a long, neat marking of white sandalwood on his forehead. He said nothing, but, step-by-step, came closer. When he was about twenty feet away, he said in a hushed voice of disapproval: ‘Amagore dekhoner kichunai. Bipadey porshen buijha nijer ma-re chaira palaiya gyachen. Jadi dekhoner hoi, nijego dekhon’. (There’s nothing to see in us. Knowing that we were in peril, you left your own mother and ran away. If there is anyone to look at, look at yourself).

He maintained that mortifying gaze. I left the place.

## X

Does the memory of a past land, a mode of living that once was real, ever die? Doesn’t it get embedded in the body tissues? On the way to the home of my school friend, Chitra – a girl I had a thing about – there used to be a narrow bamboo bridge over a small rivulet. The bridge dipped every time anyone passed over it; it dipped so far, it touched the water. As a result, it was permanently wet. I enjoyed crossing it. The cool sensation on my feet seemed the right finale for all the throbbing and squeezing of my heart I felt as I went past her house. The bamboo structure has long been replaced by a proper concrete bridge. After ages, the other day I took that lane again and crossed the bridge. Strangely, I could feel the wet sensation in my feet once again. Blood dries – yet leaves a wet feeling behind.

Charu Majumdar, who issued the Naxals’ clarion call for armed class struggle, was not simply an icon but gave his name to a generation of turbulent, restless youth of the late 1960s and early 70s. His advocacy of the annihilation of class enemies and the functionaries of the state ultimately took the form of the killing of ill-paid traffic police and perhaps a score or so of large farmers and *jotedars* (wealthy peasants). But the rampant violence it unleashed was exploited to the hilt by the very state apparatus it was targetting and its sponsored goons, the so-called ‘young turks’ of the Youth Congress, making Calcutta’s streets and Bengal’s politics bloody. That trend still continues. No one can question the integrity of Comrade Majumdar, but in retrospect it seems his longing for revolution turned the state more venomous, made politics more violent, and took away the lives of many gullible young dreamers. What took root instead in and around the city in coming decades was an aestheticized revolutionary persona, a *nokshu-nokshu* image, to use the rather mocking term used of city-bred, middle-class Naxalites. The real thing disappeared, but the affectation remained and was perfect for consuming gallons of tea in the college or university canteens; it was an advantage too, needless to say, in the arena of romance.

But for those of us who spent their late teens and early twenties in the early 1970s, that wasted, crumpled, scrawny part of life now looks like our fortune coin. Looking back, I wonder whether the 1970s youth uprising had something more to it, a kind of geological explosion. Otherwise, why did it find expression in every

part of the globe, albeit in different forms? In Australia, it was time to cast asunder the long-held colonial cloak and turn to indigenous histories, to local flora and fauna; in Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Berkeley and New York, it took the form of celebrating sexuality in all its splendour and also fighting for change in gender roles; while in Africa and large parts of the colonized world, people engaged full-swing in decolonizing movements. For Bangladesh, it was time to announce independence from its Pakistani rulers and the sovereignty of the Bengali Muslim self, a process that started with the Partition of Bengal in 1947. In the western part of Bengal, we dreamt of armed peasant insurgency drawing on the borrowed philosophy of Chinese Maoism. We all were fighting our past, right, left and centre. Action first, philosophy to follow.

In retrospect, I wonder whether one common underlying theme to these various forms of protest could be the liberation of our erotic lives from the shackles of tradition, reminding ourselves never to forget that the middle of the road was a very dead end. Sunil Gangopadhyay in a prose poem imagines caressing the naked breasts of the goddess Saraswati, hugging her, kissing her, a trope that would recur at several places in his work. The goddess of learning, music and poesy is also endowed with a marvellously shaped body. All these attributes together have worked magic for the Bengali, nay Indian, male imagination. Today such gestures will no doubt invite the fatwa of the Hindutva brigade, but in our times such poems were the staple of our youth, characterizing, one may like to say, a certain kind of *bhadralok* Hinduism gone valiant.<sup>11</sup> Back in 2002, in my autobiographical essay 'Growing Up Refugee', I observed: 'So often in our high school days, we had gushed out in a team ignoring the scornful looks of older teachers, shouting in unison slogans of gigantic simplicity: '*Amar naam, tomar naam, Vietnam, Vietnam*' (My name, your name, Vietnam, Vietnam). I didn't exactly know where Vietnam was on the map. It didn't matter, for Vietnam was everywhere, a libidinal expanse, a name-place where blood flowed to announce the death of a world order.'<sup>12</sup> Looking back, it seems that it is this 'libidinal expanse' which brought the different uprisings of that period together, made us look for new ways of relating to the self, strive for new cartographies, sing songs, march in processions demanding new modes of belonging, a new communion with fellow humans and with nature. I dream of witnessing a procession of young men and women passing by, singing Joan Baez's immortal, metonymic song: 'How long since I've spent a whole night in a twin bed with a stranger/ His warm arms all around me?'<sup>13</sup> Let the 1970s come back again! Let us be talking of adequate procurement prices for peasants and equal citizenship rights for LGBTQ members of society in the same breath. Let revolutionaries be convinced that repression is the soul of reaction. This is particularly true in our era of neo-liberal rights.

I am a rag-picker of the past, a collagist in a world of waste...

*This essay is dedicated to my college friend, Ranajay Gupta, who fell to COVID-19 in the summer of 2020, unsung and virtually unnursed.*

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 'No time for cheer, not a happy time this' (Se baRo shukher samay noi, se baRo anander samay noi), a poem by Shakti Chattopadhyay translated by Nandini Gupta. The translation first appeared in *Parabas* webzine ([https://www.parabaas.com/shakti/articles/shakti\\_notimeforcheer.shtml](https://www.parabaas.com/shakti/articles/shakti_notimeforcheer.shtml)), accessed 25 March 2021). The original Bangla poem was included in *Sonar maachhi khun korechhi* published in 1967.

2 To cite a few: Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Delhi, 1998; Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Oakland, CA, 2006; Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge and Delhi, 2001; Nonica Dutta, *Violence, Martyrdom and Partition in India*, Delhi, 2012; Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, New York 2007; Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India*, Cambridge and Delhi, 2007.

3 *Thakur dalan* is a public courtyard where traditionally the idols are placed on a platform. *Bratakatha* are the stories of the lives of various Hindu gods and goddesses, read out by the women of the house. *Doljatra*, also known as Holi, is a major festival of eastern India. *Rashpurimima* is a festive, and somewhat erotically charged, game enjoyed by devotees of Krishna on a full moon autumn night.

4 The experience of East Bengal / Pakistan refugees in the Indian state of West Bengal is reflected in what is in essence a companion piece of this article, Manas Ray, 'Growing Up Refugee', *History Workshop Journal* 53, 2002, pp.149–179.

5 The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) later split into several feuding Naxalite groups. It was separate from and contemptuous of India's two constitutional Communist parties, the Communist Party of India or CPI and the larger Communist Party of India (Marxist) also known as the CPI(M) or CPM. This latter party was the dominant political force in West Bengal from 1977 to 2011, heading the Left Front state government.

6 Kaka is the family name for an uncle and kakima for auntie.

7 Marwaris are a trading community with their roots in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

8 Raghav Bandyopadhyay, *Journal* 70, Kolkata, 2000, pp. 50–51.

9 This is the ninth day of Durga Puja, Hindu Bengali's main religio-cultural festivity. Mythology has it that on the ninth night, goddess Durga slays the demon-king, Asura. In reality, Asura is a tribe of eastern India. On Nabami, the Asura people observe complete blackout as a sign of mourning for their heroic king.

10 Here is Jawhar Sircar recounting those days of violence in the autumn of 1971: 'We had no idea that S.S. Ray's government [in West Bengal] had decided to use some army regiments to assist civil police in "exterminating the Naxalite menace". As General J. F. R. Jacob of the Eastern Command confessed later on, sections of the army joined hands with the local police to hunt down Naxalites – in what was branded Operation Steeple Chase. In Kolkata, the extremists were cornered and holed up in their last "red bastions" like Baranagar and Chanditala. The commandos and armed police cordoned off entire areas with the help of anti-socials, many of whom would become Congress leaders later on. The extremists were then shot in cold blood, often tied to lampposts, or at their very own doorsteps. Some were arrested and taken in police vans and many never seen ever again.' Jawhar Sircar, 'In a Calcutta Gripped With Naxal Violence and Police Brutality, People Lost Sons, Brothers and Friends', *The Wire*, 11 March 2021, <https://thewire.in/history/calcutta-naxal-violence-police-brutality-1971>, accessed 23 March 2021.

11 Gangopadhyay's poem, it's interesting to note, did not cause much consternation in the wider reading public, and what controversy there was soon died out. It may be noted that in the *muntra* chanted during the Devi's worship, the words used to celebrate her beauty include 'Kuchajugashovita Mukhtahare' (the two breasts adorned in pearl necklace. Acknowledgement: Biswajit Chatterjee). *Bhadralok* are Bengal's literate elite, mostly bilingual (Bengali and English) and having roots in landholding during the Raj. It is a capacious social group that ranges from ordinary pen-pushers to top professionals and intellectuals.

12 Ray, 'Growing Up Refugee', pp. 169–70.

13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzxjjYWmrs>.