Bengali settlers in the Andaman Islands

The 1947 Partition of India triggered one of the major flows of forced migration in the history of humanity. Dominant narratives on the history of Partition describe the exodus primarily as a wave of dispossessed Hindus migrating from Pakistan to India, and an opposite flow of Muslim migrants crossing the Indian border to reach Pakistan. After seventy years since Partition, the long echoes of loss and displacement are still impacting the lives of many, and several alternative histories of the open wounds of Partition are yet to be written. The story I present in this article concerns the policies of relocation of Bengali Hindu refugees. Although often discussed as a homogeneous community with a clear religious affiliation, numerous caste- and religion-based subcultures are clustered under the label ‘Bengali Hindu’ refugees. The Partition of Bengal resulted in a massive flow of migrants from East Bengal that continued in steady waves for several decades. West Bengal became the smallest and most overcrowded state of an independent India: an estimated number of six million refugees entered between 1947 and 1971.

Carola Erika Lorea

AMONG THE VARIOUS STRATEGIES of refugee crisis management, the one I refer to in this article concerns the very soluble solution of sending about 4000 families of low-caste refugees into the middle of the Indian Ocean under the governmental ‘Colonisation Schemes’ (sic) to cultivate and domesticate jungle-covered parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. From 1949, government officials started to promote the option of relocating to the Andamans impoverished camp dwellers who often were living with bystanders. This was interpreted in the context of the existence of such camps. Evicted families were carefully selected to ensure that they had a sufficient number of able-bodied working males: calluses had to be touched and approved as proof of hard-working labourers’ hands. Resettling on the Andamans was for many the only real option available with threats of the camp closing down, cash doles being stopped, and possibly being relocated to other hostile and distant regions, such as Dandakaranya, “where tigers would come to catch the children”.

Despite the initial hardships and unfavourable living conditions, the Bengali settlers transformed with time an unknown wild space into a familiar home space. Thousands of families of each Bengali settlement arrived on the Islands, both as free migrants as well as beneficiaries of governmental schemes, while in 1951 the Bengali-speaking population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was only 2,363, by 1991 the number had grown to 64,706 according to the Census of India. Today Bengalis make up the majority community in the complex and varied society inhabiting the Islands, with Bengalis as their mother-tongue. Despite these numbers, the journeys and lives of Bengali people on the Andamans are mostly an unwritten history. Exiled and confined to their new space at the margins of the subcontinent, the settlers heavily relied upon cultural traditions, religious festivals and music performances to deal with their physical and cultural isolation.

From East Pakistan to tropical islands: a new milieu for a different Bengalis

The Bengali settlers, and their descendants, may represent an estimated 98% of the entire Bengali community living on the Andamans. Since the colonial era, the Islands became home to people of different caste, language, religion and ethnicity: political prisoners from the subcontinent, deportees from Burma, Burmese minorities, Sinhalese Tamils, tribal labourers recruited from Ranchi, and decimated indigenous inhabitants of the forests. Even though the varied multi-ethnic society of the Islands is often described as a ‘mixed India’ and as the epitome of ‘unity in diversity’, tensions and more or less implicit conflicts are nevertheless at play between the different communities.

Within this diversified social spectrum, the old Bengali settlers perceive themselves as a marginalized majority. In 2005, they were given the status of Other Backward Caste (OBC) in the reservation policies of the Union Territory; the same category also applies for the Local Bom, Bhanits, Moguls and Karen communities. It is perceived as a disadvantage for the mostly rural Bengali community, since they have to share the reserved 38% seats for governmental jobs and higher education with four other groups of the around Port Blair, with accessible facilities for good quality education in Hindi and English, the official languages of the local administration.

In the Andaman Islands, tracing the construction of a cohesive Bengali identity is a difficult task and it reflects how diasporas are privileged platforms from where to observe how identities are always work-in-progress projections of constructed authenticities (if I may so paraphrase Avtar Brah). This context offers us a prism with which to unmask Bengalisness as a processual and a continuous exercise of ‘othering’ in order to build a shared sense of identity. What is perceived as Bengalisness on the Andaman Islands, where the younger generations are more comfortable speaking ‘Andaman Hindi’ than their grand-parents’ Bengali dialects?

The quintessential Bengalisness that is often associated with the songs of Rabindranath Tagore is related to a high Hindu Brahmanic culture that is widely absent from the Andamanese context. The vast majority of Andaman Bengali are people of Namashudra (nomenhlo) origin. At the time of their forced migration, many of them did not even know about the existence of such a thing as ‘being Hindu’, and even no many active members of the community are keen to identify their religion as a phils-Buddhist, Dait, anti-Brahmancial movement, rather than anything ‘Hindu’. In my research, I focus ethnographic attention on the members of the Bengali community that define themselves as Matua pandhi, or followers of the Matua religious movement (from matsya, meaning drunken, intoxicated in devotional love). This group emerged in the first half of the 19th century in the area of Faizpur, in East Bengal. While adopting theories and doctrines from an earlier Tantra Vaishnav religiosity, the sect gives particular emphasis to social equality. Its followers were mainly marginalised Cādālī, or pituchhals, of the Namashudra group. The movement started as a protest against caste-based discrimination perpetrated by Brahmanical hegemony, and it has much in common in terms of beliefs and practices with lineages named Badū, Fakir and Kortomindo pandhi. The Namashudra people of East Bengal were severely harmed by Partition, and the creation of East Pakistan displaced the majority of the Matua community. Here I discuss the role of music and oral literature in strengthening a sense of cohesive collectivity among Matuas, and the importance of singing sessions (jīpā dūr) as sites of identity-making.

Songs, dance, and the making of familiar soundscapes

Cultural history and social studies in the area of Bengal have produced abundant academic report on folk literature and folk songs. Similarly, there is a wide scholarly literature on the dynamics and political histories of Partition. But there is hardly any study on the relationship between these two, that is, on the ways in which Partition affected Bengali folk genres. My work aims at partially filling this particular gap in scholarly literature, a gap that reproduces in the field knowledge of the social and political indifference towards the unheard voices of subaltern and oppressed communities of composers, singers and practitioners.

After a very short preliminary fieldwork in 2012, I decided to plan my following visit to the Andaman Islands during the winter of 2017, intending to spend most of my time in North Andaman in the district of Diglipur. This was one of the most isolated and forested areas of the Andamans when the first settlers arrived in 1956. The Bengali agriculturalist community of North Andaman has been relatively homogeneous for several decades, providing fresh vegetables for the bazaars of the archipelago without much interaction with other communities of settlers. Between January and February 2017, every night within the Diglipur district there was at least one congregational music session (kartā in Bengali dialect), often sponsored by a single household of Matua practitioners. Such events can cost up to 80,000-100,000 Rupees (equivalent to 1,100 to 1,400 Euros) and can feed several hundreds of people. They generally start on a Tuesday — the opening day of a kirtan, known as aṭhālī and terminate on Thursday afternoon, with the gathering known as mil mahēsth. In kirtan events sponsored by Matua households, the festival takes place at a private Hērī Mēndīr: the household shrine dedicated to Haricand Thakur (1812-1878), the founding figure of the Matua movement. The main events, after the reception of the guests and the ritual offerings to the gurus’ images on the shrine, are mōndī and badhā kērtā. The first is a performance of instrumental music led by percussion and accompanied by frentic dance; as the name mōndī suggests, the dance is maddening, overwhelmingly intense, bringing a different state of bodily and mental awakening. It is performed through two indispensable instruments: the dōkālī — a big two-sided drum played with two wooden sticks - and the kōtī - a metal gong hit rhythmically with a stick — strongly linked to the practitioner’s Dait identity. As opposed to other percussion instruments, the dōkālī and kōtī are played by both men and women. Music instruments have a sacred status among Matuas practitioners and during festivals they are blessed with an offering of sandal paste; later the same offering is also given to the books of Matua songs and applied to the foreheads of the devotees.

The performance of homeland

The performance of homeland in which past and present, near and far, Kutir Kirtan, Kirtan Marriage, and Vandana songs are selected from the wide corpus of Matua literature. All the participants. Photo by author.

Above: Songs are offered to the guru’s images in the home-held shrine before the consecrated food is served by all present. Photo by author.

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