

## Remembering Displacement in The Making of Everyday Life in Kolkata: A Sociological Study

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### Abstract

Scholars have argued that the process of remembering takes place in a social context, and not in social vacuum (Miszta 2003). There exists a long history of the role of memory in the processes of inheritance, appropriation, and recognition that an individual or a family attach to a house. In this research paper, I focus on how house/home as space/site for memory making is not static, rather a fluid process. Through sociological approaches to memory, my work argues that the Partition (of British India and of provinces of Bengal) and migration of people thereafter has shaped the everyday life of displaced individuals who moved to the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and contributed to their sense of home and belonging. Moving from one house to another not only reflected the significance of associational memory but also the forms of social remembrance. Therefore, the meanings and values that individuals attached to their “new home” were conditional to the memory of their “old home”. The data presented here was collected through two rounds of qualitative fieldwork in Kolkata between September 2017 and July 2018, where remembering displacement happened among the middle-class at both the individual and community levels.

**Keywords:** Home, Social Remembrance, Middle-Class, Belonging, Partition.

### I

Urban spaces in South Asian cities are layered with meanings, values, and socio-cultural norms. This richness implies that even homes are not simply shelters but spaces which shape and are shaped by social interactions and cultural values. Here the role of memories is irrefutable. Sociologist Barbara Misztal (2003) noted that the process of remembering entails reflexivity on the part of the individual as well as communities. This she highlights constitutes our identities in the society, as the process of remembering takes place in a social context, and not in social vacuum. That is ‘the main assumption of the inter subjectivist sociology of memory is that, while it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than just a personal act’ (Misztal 2003:6). Here the aspect of inter-subjectivity seems to denote to the past as lived in relation to others. Thus, the central characteristic of studying

memory in sociology entails studying the relation between individuals in that society.

Furthermore Misztal (2003:11) asserts that 'Memory is social because every memory exists through its relationship with what has been shared with others: language, symbols, events, and social and cultural contexts'. Here the family plays a crucial role in the construction of memories along with social communities. Given this context, the house becomes an important site around which several memories are produced and maintained. Home is a coveted place of belonging and strongly attached to it is a sense of ownership. In lieu of this, a sense of continuity helps to recapture places of the past through familiar and treasured artifacts, especially in the case of refugees' and displaced individuals' attachment to one's roots, language, and memories.

Here I focus on how the house and home as a space and site for memory making is not static; rather it is a fluid process. Considering the Partition (of British India and of provinces of Bengal)<sup>1</sup> as a watershed socio-political event that has shaped the understandings on homeownership and sense of belonging in West Bengal is a significant one. Through sociological approaches to memory, I argue that as the city underwent significant turmoil and witnessed the influx of several people, this shaped the everyday life of everyone residing here, and both contributed and altered their understanding of the city, neighborhood, and home. In several cases, the meanings and values that individuals attached to their 'new house' were conditional to the memory of their 'old home'. Therefore, the patina of nostalgia that is being referred to here, in the context of the home, extended over a large section of society and over a very long period.

Through qualitative fieldwork conducted in Kolkata between September 2017 and July 2018, my work argues that the Partition and migration of people thereafter has shaped everyday life of displaced individuals who moved to the city and even contributed to their sense of home. Respondents often fondly refer to their *poitrik bari* (ancestral house) in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) as *desh* (village, country), from where they have been displaced and relocated in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Many even lamented of not being able to revisit the house of their childhood memories and wished to someday return to their natal place to relive the memories. Amongst other things, these narratives clearly highlighted the memories that people attach to home as a place. It is at this intersection that this paper is a study of mnemonic accounts attached to house/home and senses/spaces in everyday life among the middle-class displaced individuals. Therefore, the rich social and cultural history of the city suggests that different perspectives of the 'home' co-exist here, and it can be juxtaposed along with multiple imageries of the city.

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<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that 'there were three partitions in 1947 – of British India and of the provinces of Bengal and Punjab – that created the new nation-states of India and a spatially fragmented West and East Pakistan' (Roy 2012:3). In my thesis I engage mainly with the partition of Bengal as most respondents shared narratives of that. I also refer to the events which carved out Bangladesh in 1971 as and when respondents mentioned about it. Since the movement of people continued for few years around this time, the influx of people continued to have an impact on the population already residing in West Bengal. Following Roy (2012), even I see Partition as a process rather than a single event.

Discussions in this paper moves along three broad lines of thought. Firstly, using the narratives I speak about how respondents engage in negotiating the house and home. Secondly, I consider the respondents' reflections on Partition memories. Finally, I deliberate the respondents' accounts on memories and nostalgia related to the value of house and objects within it. These three trajectories assist in shaping the everyday meanings of house and home among the middle-class in Kolkata.

## II

As I entered the field, I would frequently ask my respondents – 'What comes to your mind when you think of the house and the home?' This was specifically asked to initiate a discussion on the 'house' and the 'home' as two separate categories in the field and to map out the points of convergence and divergence between them. Though the words such as 'house', 'home', and 'dwelling' are interchangeably used, there remains a difference between these (Samanani and Lenhard 2019). While 'house' indicates the physical structure, 'home' primarily denotes the social and symbolic aspects. In the vernacular context familiar to the Hindu Bengali speaking respondents in the field, it was observed that both the terms were invariably referred to as '*bari*'; with the presence of few other words such as '*ghar*', '*basha*', '*neer*', prevalent among people speaking different dialects of the Bengali language. Within the Bengali community those who came from East Bengal are referred as '*bangal*' and those from West Bengal as '*ghati*'. Thus, the partitioned landscape of Bengal shaped the practices of identity formation in everyday life. This also influenced how they made sense of the terms house and home. It was observed that for many *bangal* families, a reference to '*bari*' (home) took them back to their '*desh*' (village) in East Bengal and reminiscing about their family back there was often an emotional journey. During an hour-long interview of a respondent, who is a professor of physics in a government college in Kolkata, he revealed that he was born in Mymensingh in purba Pakistan (east Pakistan, now Bangladesh). After his father's demise, initially his eldest brother shifted to Calcutta to their *pishi'r bari* (aunt's house). Then his mother and other siblings (including him) shifted here in 1966; and they started living in a rented accommodation near Dumdum. He called this their 'border transition history' which took place for over 1960-1966. For him the theme of house and home seemed abstract as he shared that there were several things that came to his mind related to it, yet not everything could be put into words. Nevertheless, he expressed that:

I consider that there are two words that are very closely related. One is '*bhalobasha*' – that is love between people and in this case amongst family members and another is '*bhalo-basha*' – that is having a good home. For both, trust is very important. *Bari* for me has been freedom within constraints and will always continue to be so (Chandan Goswami, 12/12/2018).

In the course of the interview, I realized that the respondent is a man of few words but his observations on house and home were apt.<sup>2</sup> Engrossed in pouring his heart out about their ancestral house in Mymensingh, he even took to mapping out his childhood home surrounded by a variety of fruit-bearing trees. Thus, this narrative highlighted the place of childhood home in our memory.

<sup>2</sup> I have translated these narratives from Bengali into English, keeping their meanings intact and thereby including them here.

Several other respondents also agreed that the house can be in many places, but the home is only in one place. While some narrated the significance of the three necessities of mankind – *khaddo, bostro, bashosthan* (food, clothing, and housing), most agreed that being surrounded by loved ones made life peaceful. Reflecting upon this question on the house and the home, one respondent, who is a teacher in an affluent English medium school in south Kolkata indicated that it is the people inhabiting the house that make it a home and over the years many incidents and memories help us to shape our sentiments attached to the home (Lily Chatterjee, 27/12/2018). It may not have any extravagant arrangement but the comfort of being close to a loved one matters the most and is always remembered. Another respondent, who is a retired government sector employee, fondly recollected that whenever someone mentions the word ‘house’, she thinks of the joint family structure that was earlier prevalent across India, where family members of different generations inhabited the house – grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles, and aunts. She added that:

I do not think of the house as a physical structure in terms of the four walls but of the residents. In our ancestral house in Maulavibazar in East Bengal, so many members lived together under the same roof. However, over time, mostly because of demanding jobs, they started getting scattered. Even my father moved out of that house because he got a job in Shillong (in India). Then the meaning of house for me became a place where I lived together with my parents and siblings (Pratima Deb, 22/06/2018).

This narrative highlights the transitions in the meaning of home and how memories are attached to spaces. She recollected an incident from her childhood. In the year 1950, she was 6 years old; one morning when she woke up, she saw that their house (in Shillong) was full of people. Being young she could not understand what was happening but was able to recognize few of their distant relatives and acquaintances. She narrated that she overheard that the country has been divided and these people from East Bengal have come to stay in their house. As many people shared their stories of escaping torture and leaving all their belongings behind, the situation affected her quite badly and even she was traumatized. Thereby the respondent highlighted that the incidents in the years around Partition had shaped her childhood memories of home.<sup>3</sup>

When enquired about his *bari*, another respondent who is a businessman residing in north Kolkata, clearly said that:

Our *poitrik bari* (ancestral house) was in Kushtia in Nadia district (in Bangladesh). *Ektur jonno ota Bangladesh side e chole gelo Partition er somoy* (During the time of Partition it became a part of Bangladesh). From Calcutta it would hardly take 5-6 hours to reach our house. I have heard my father used to visit Calcutta for work related purposes and again return to *desh*. Gradually he settled in Calcutta around 1938-40, even before Independence (Debopratim Saha, 18/12/2018).

<sup>3</sup> On another note, the respondent added that her doctor has recommended her to sit and think about past events, mainly the pleasant memories, as that is a great way to combat neurological problems such as Alzheimer’s disease.

He lamented that they had a huge house in Kushtia built by his grandfather, but they received nothing in return. Driven by sentiments of his ancestral house he exclaimed that even the bricks in that land still bear the name and blood of his family. During the interview it was mentioned that while several thousand families moved to India in the years before and after Partition, their claims of homeownership in different localities in East Bengal were thin due to the absence of 'proper' documents.

The respondent continued to point out how reference to the Partition comprised of both learning about traumatic incidents that his family and close relatives faced around that time and some first-hand experiences related to recording the past. He pointed out that for his family and most of their relatives it was '*ek kapoore asha*' meaning that the family members moved with only a single set of clothes on themselves, sans anything else. Having lost everything that belonged to them, he recounted that his family was even unable to receive any compensation under the Enemy Property Act (EPA) of 1965<sup>4</sup> because of their lack of homeownership documents. Along with his brothers, he had made plans of visiting their house on the other side of the border and try to get hold of some proof. He claimed that some of their relatives had also vouched to help them in the process, but for them, the plan of visiting their *bhiti* (roots) has not yet materialized. There exists a long history of the role of memory and social remembering in the processes of inheritance, appropriation, and recognition that an individual or a family attach to a house. Therefore memory, memorialization, and commemoration are some of the common facets that guide individuals and collectives in their everyday life. However, what underlined this case was that the absence of documents meant that the family could not make claims of homeownership. Therefore, their claims only remained symbolically present in their memories and narratives. Here we also see how individuals often try to socially create and recreate certain aspects of their identity. In the absence of any marker of proof, this case highlights how emphasis is laid upon the individual and collective memory in recreating essential documents.

While his homemaker wife explained that their *desh* was in Kumilla (near Tripura) in East Bengal. She recollected from the stories that she had heard about her family history that her parents had moved to Jalpaiguri (in West Bengal) before 1947. Though it was a *muffasil*, her reminiscence of the neighbourhood spoke about the close bonding that existed among neighbours who had similar experiences of displacement (Sreemati Saha, 18/12/2018).

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<sup>4</sup> As economist Abul Barkat (2011) has noted, the Enemy Property Act was enacted by the Pakistani regime during the 1965 Indo-Pak War. The Pakistani ruling elites wanted to reduce the Bengali speaking population of East Pakistan by driving out the Bengali Hindu population. He notes that along with the EPA, Vested Property Act (VPA) has impacted on the forced migration of Hindu population, mostly to India. Therefore, reports have suggested that the Act was widely used against the religious minority in East Bengal. Barkat (2011) notes 'The East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Immovable Property) Act 1951, which was enacted for administering, preserving, and protecting the immovable properties of the evacuees, also affected the Hindu elite and zamindars who were the owners of huge property, lands, and buildings. He has estimated that a total number of Hindus affected by the EPA would be approximately 1.2 million.

Discussion of Partition memories and experiences of displaced individuals demands extensive engagement. Here I indicate how memories of house and living conditions remained etched in the memories of several individuals and families, even after years, even when they might not have experienced it themselves. Adding to this, the husband narrated that:

Many of our relatives came to our house and stayed. They wanted some shelter in Calcutta. Those who did not have any relatives here they stayed in refugee camps, but those with relatives stayed in their house for some time and then got settled, rarely did they return. *Ashte ashte nijeder jaega kore niyeche ekhane* (Gradually they made place for themselves). There were no refugee camps in proper Calcutta, mostly in the outskirts and *muffasil* areas, such as Barasat, Madhyamgram, Ranaghat. The houses that people left behind in Bangladesh were either abandoned, occupied by others and so on. Very few people were able to sell it off (Debopratim Saha, 18/12/2018).

Thus, in the backdrop of Partition, for many, house and home simply meant *ashroy* (shelter) or having a roof above one's head in the city. Bandyopadhyay (2009) has pointed out in his study that as refugees flocked to Calcutta in large numbers, several squatter colonies and refugee colonies came up in various parts of south Calcutta such as Jadavpur, Bejoygarh, Jodhpur military barracks, and near Dhakuria Lake area. What bound them together along with their lost property was the faint reminiscence of their forgotten lives that reflects the reality of entangled urban living in Calcutta till today. While for those families who were already residing in Calcutta, the Partition necessitated new kinds of negotiations with the moving in of refugees in their neighbourhood and the building of resettlement colonies across the city and its suburbs. This, therefore, leads to the shaping of multiple urban imaginaries of the city as well as understandings of everyday life in the city.

Another respondent, who moved from Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) to West Bengal around 1948 with his father, shared that in the initial years finding a place to stay was quite difficult. He recollected that his father would leave him at relatives' house and go searching for a place for them. During the interview, he reminisced that:

For a couple of months, we stayed in Dhubulia (in Nadia District) and then moved to Habra where we received a small plot of land from the government. It was a very menial construction with a tin roof, there was one room, one kitchen, and a bathroom. Everything happened gradually as it was not possible for my father to bear all the costs. When I started working in the postal services department, even I invested some money and did some remodeling of that house. Over time Habra has changed so much that I cannot even associate with the place I grew up and what it has become now. From Habra, I moved to Paikpara in 1979 as it was closer to my workplace and then shifted to this flat here in Kalikapur (along the E.M. Bypass) in 2007. But I still have the longing to return to our Faridpur house, it will never get erased from my memory (Bimal Halder, 23/06/2018).

In this narrative, we come across the instability that the respondent and others like him experienced while moving from one house to another in refugee colonies. It has been noted that often a relief to

refugees, such as dwelling places, were provided by the government as a temporary arrangement.<sup>5</sup> Various reports and academic writings have indicated that as the official definition of refugees kept changing, so did the promises of relief and rehabilitation (Chatterji 2011). Refugee rehabilitation and land distribution was taken up by the West Bengal government under the guidance of then Chief Minister Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy who by mid-1950 had declared that there was no more land available for refugee rehabilitation purpose. It was also declared that refugees would be sent to neighbouring states for rehabilitation purpose.

Speaking on this issue, several respondents shared their views. One respondent asserted that the Partition had tremendously affected Calcutta as innumerable displaced families came to Calcutta and took up land wherever they could find. He then cited the example of Jodhpur Park (in south Kolkata) and pointed out that till the 1960s it was all jungle and even in the early 1970s it was vastly empty. However, people started pouring in there through the railway connection following the years after Partition. He highlighted that places in south Kolkata such as Ganguly-bagan, Jadavpur, Garia, Bagha Jatin, and Naktala developed after the Partition. In the places beyond Tollygunj tram depot, where people started living in the late 1970s, most were not legalized. He mentioned that:

Development and improvement of the city started taking place after Siddhartha Ray's tenure when the CPM (Communist Party of India (Marxist)) won seats in 1968. To increase the vote bank for their party, the CPM not only helped the squatters get legalized but started constructing roads and helped in converting the *kaccha* houses (temporary) into *pucca* houses (durable) (Ashish Ganguly, 05/06/2018).

He also observed that in all these 30 years of CPM rule, there have been huge changes in these areas. Commenting on the socio-economic events that has affected the city, a respondent who was civil engineer by training explained that:

During the Partition, RR land (refugee rehabilitation land) was distributed by the government for free. They (refugees) built their houses on such lands. There was no mass housing policy as such. Eventually colonies developed over time. Restrictions on height such as G+3, G+4 was initially imposed and even that has been relaxed by the government over time (Amit Mitra, 19/08/2017).

Over the years not only has refugee colonies developed in the city and the suburbs, but several of them have also gradually gained legal status. Yet the sense of belonging that one longs for continues to remain engulfed in the past.

As I consider the Partition to be a watershed event in the history of Bengal, housing and the role of the state operatives gets enmeshed together. Be it about changing character of the neighbourhoods, the hierarchy of belonging, or the refugee-ness and precarity that several families experienced, I learnt

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<sup>5</sup> Manas Ray (2001) writes about the plight of refugees in their new 'homes' in Calcutta post-Partition, he mentions how steps were taken to formalize their lives in these localities through everyday practices and by setting up clubs and schools.

through these narratives about the heterogeneity of class in the city. Both *bangal* and *ghati* identities also plays a role in this context of homeownership. Sen (2015:424) notes that 'the East Bengali optees maintained a conscious social distance from the squalor and desperation of the refugee colonies and camps.' Fighting the stereotypes of refugee identity, they worked towards reclaiming their lost social status as '*bhadralok*'. Therefore, the refugee histories and sufficient validation of narratives clearly indicated that we cannot consider a homogenous experience towards their homeownership and belonging in the city.

The role of memory and nostalgia to understand the value that individuals attach to their house and objects in the house, therefore now demand our attention. During fieldwork, when people engrossed themselves in a discussion about their childhood homes, it was revealed that the role of memory within the algorithm of everyday life is immense. One of the respondents, a retired bank employee, pointed out that after his father moved to Calcutta from Jessore in East Bengal in 1940, he lived in a rented room near Vivekananda Road (in north Calcutta). He narrated that growing up in that humble *madhyabitta* (middle-class) setting and later being able to build a house of his own near Dumdum (in north Calcutta) was a transition not only for his father but for the entire family. The respondent shared that he and his siblings learnt about the Partition, traumatic incidents of their kin, and their house in East Bengal through the collective memories that were often narrated and recollected at home (Tapan Ray, 27/08/2017). The mnemonic accounts of the home shaped the experiences of individuals every day and added meaning to becoming part of the community. Therefore, social remembering is realized at two levels—both the individual and community level. Jointly recalling the past events or commemorating hence becomes a significant part of growing up.

This points out how amongst the refugees and displaced individuals who moved to West Bengal, their ordeals are recollected generation after generation. The practice of recalling and co-memorizing is thus strongly endured both at the family and community level. The younger generations are familiarized to the concepts of '*desh*' (village and sometimes country), '*bhiti*' (roots), and '*basha*' (house/home/literally nest) among other things close to their heart that they had to leave behind. Though the objects that were physically carried from *desh* to West Bengal were often few and far placed, each respondent had rich memories to share during their interview and most of these were based upon the family lore shared over generations.

At the time of the interview a respondent was preparing for her trip the following week to the US where her son and his family were now settled. Sitting in their tastefully designed living space with her husband who served in the Indian Army, she excitedly noted that:

I will be carrying a set of *kansa'r bashon* (bell metal utensils) that I had inherited from my grandmother's house in Sylhet (in Bangladesh) for my son this time. Those are part of an antique collection from our native home and must be over 100 years old I believe. Even my son is thrilled to display those there in his living space. Though he has never been to Bangladesh house, he has heard so many stories from me and my mother that he wants to keep these utensils and artifacts close to him (Kajal Dutta, 03/06/2018).

This shows how sometimes memories are not about one emergent event, they can also be of things

that one has not directly experienced and has yet influenced one's life. This can also be analyzed by bringing in Miller (1994:400), who have noted through keen observation that keeping certain artifacts at home creates 'an aura of being quaint or traditional'.



Image 1: Respondents' house filled with inherited objects. Respondents' house filled with inherited objects, *Chinar*, Salt Lake. (Source: Author)

Showing various objects and artifacts around the house, the respondent further added that:

This wooden arch was a part of my grandmother's bed. We did not have space to keep that huge ancestral bed, so we divided the headboard and the tailboard and utilized it here as an arch. Our dining table and side table are all from my husband's grandparental side. The lamp that you see there is 200 years old from our Chittagong house, the glass is now broken, and we have not been able to find a replacement for it (Kajal Dutta, 03/06/2018).

While the respondent narrated stories about different artifacts and things in their house, I observed that there existed a beautiful connection between their past with the present life. Not only were the material objects cherished, but the memories also connected to them were carefully retained and recollected. Therefore, discussion on memories related to place, people, and things can often merge to give a holistic meaning to certain memories and nostalgias related to *bari*. Through constant processes of remembering and forgetting this is often accentuated and assists in sustaining a sense of belonging or even create anew.

## III

The crux of this paper advocates moving beyond the brick-and-mortar structure to understand the memories, nostalgias, and values that individuals attach with *bari*. Much like the meanings that people attach to their house, in this paper I argue that memory is not a static thing, it is fluid. It travels across spaces, borders, and also generations. Though in certain cases, family members actively try and instill an associational memory through stories from the bygone days, in most families there can be a marked intergenerational shift in terms of memories attached to things.

Here we see that, displaced individuals and their families continue to preserve the memories of their 'old house'. They often voiced during the interviews how they coveted to visit their *bhiti* at least once in their lifetime. This resonated with how the processes of social remembrance sustained this desire both at the individual and community levels. Therefore, by remembering displacement in their quotidian everyday life, these individuals essentially engaged in a continuous process of making and remaking their identity against the backdrop of Partition.

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