

Citizen Refugee

This innovative study explores the interface between nation-building and refugee rehabilitation in post-partition India. Relying on archival records and oral histories, Uditi Sen analyses official policy towards Hindu refugees from eastern Pakistan to reveal a pan-Indian governmentality of rehabilitation. This governmentality emerged in the Andaman Islands, where Bengali refugees were recast as pioneering settlers. Not all refugees, however, were willing or able to live up to this top-down vision of productive citizenship. Their reminiscences reveal divergent negotiations of rehabilitation ‘from below’. Educated refugees from dominant castes mobilised their social and cultural capital to build urban ‘squatters’ colonies’, while poor Dalit refugees had to perform the role of agricultural pioneers to access aid. Policies of rehabilitation marginalised single and widowed women by treating them as ‘permanent liabilities’. These rich case studies dramatically expand our understanding of popular politics and everyday citizenship in post-partition India.

Uditi Sen is a historian of colonial and post-colonial India. She studied history at Presidency University and Jawaharlal Nehru University in India before being awarded a DPhil in history from the University of Cambridge. She has taught history and South Asian studies in various institutions, including the European University Institute, the London School of Economics and Political Science and Hampshire College. In 2018, she joined the University of Nottingham as Assistant Professor of Liberal Arts.

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Forging the Indian Nation after Partition

Uditi Sen

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Preface

Officially, this book began as a proposal for doctoral research at the University of Cambridge. Yet, the seeds of this history had been sown long before I had the skills and resources to write it, in a sphere far removed from the archives, libraries and lecture halls that usually inspire historical research. My interest in understanding and interrogating partition's aftermath was born of growing up in Calcutta, in a middle-class and Anglicised family that was nominally Hindu, and traced its origins to eastern Bengal. Partition, or *deshbhag* in Bengali, was not something I encountered in history books. Surprisingly, it was also not part of family histories narrated by grandparents. Though both sides of my family traced their origins to East Bengal, the stories passed down across generations in our family were not of violence, displacement or migration. Instead, I grew up with humorous, irreverent and even scandalous anecdotes regarding, what seemed to me, an army of eccentric relatives I could barely keep track of. Yet, partition permeated my childhood. As far back as I can recall, most social interactions with Bengalis who were not family members soon led to an attempt to place each other within the partitioned landscape of Bengal. Someone would pop the question, *Ghati na Bangal?* (Are you a *Ghati* or a *Bangal*?) In this ordering of social difference that only made sense in a post-partition context, a *Ghati* was a Hindu whose family came from the western districts of Bengal, while a *Bangal* was a Hindu whose family came from the eastern districts of Bengal – those areas, that went to Pakistan and eventually became Bangladesh. At times, the question would be phrased as *edeshi na odeshi*, which literally translates as 'from this country or that?' Though I was born in a nursing home in Calcutta more than three decades after partition, the correct answer for me was that I was a *Bangal* from 'that country', an *odeshi*. If further probed to answer where I was from, I had been taught to recite the following stock answer: 'Gram (village) Panchchar, Police Station Madaripur, Jela (district) Faridpur'. Reciting names of places in East Bengal that I had never seen, as proof of where I was from, seemed entirely natural in that social milieu. Growing up in Calcutta, partition was not a clutch of stories that

I had inherited. It became part of my identity, intertwined into my everyday social negotiations.

As I began to develop an academic interest in history and pursued the subject at Presidency University and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), I began to realise that partition haunted the social and cultural landscape of Calcutta. These hauntings included the differences in *Ghati* and *Bangal* cuisine, the passionate rivalry in football between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan and a world of stereotypes, both positive and negative, regarding the ‘other’ community, which generated a lot of inappropriate but satisfying humour. When I sought to pursue a doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge, it was this everyday aspect of partition’s aftermath, its myriad social and cultural manifestations, that I proposed to research. An early archival encounter with a ‘forgotten’ episode of refugee resettlement in the Andaman Islands disrupted my plans of writing this Calcutta-centric history. As I broadened the scope of my inquiry, I realised that the impact of millions of Hindu refugees from eastern Pakistan extended far beyond my hometown. In its final form, this book makes explicit these lesser known and under-explored consequences of the presence of millions of unwanted refugees from eastern Pakistan. In the process, it has strayed quite far from its origins in cultural history centred upon Calcutta. Yet, it is fundamentally shaped by a historical subjectivity born of the everyday presence of partition in the social milieu of Calcutta.

There are two fundamental ways in which the everydayness of partition, which I grew up with, has informed this book. Almost half of *Citizen Refugee* is built on analysis of refugee reminiscences and oral history. Looking back, I realise that it was my own intimate and everyday relationship with partition that inspired me to look for and understand other such intimate narratives, where history becomes intertwined with identity. The fact that I was able to identify respondents and conduct this research into partition’s history ‘from below’ derives in no small measure from my own social location. The ‘field’ I started my research in was the familiar alleys and streets of my hometown, and my first informants were family and friends and their friends and family. I scrupulously avoided all suggestions to interview grand-aunts, distant uncles and in-laws, but gratefully accepted phone numbers and addresses of refugee leaders, introductions to scholars and social workers and most importantly, copies and photocopies of out-of-print autobiographies, pamphlets and souvenirs produced by refugee organisations. While my affiliation to Cambridge opened the doors of numerous archives and libraries in India and the UK, my social and familial affiliations gave me access to this intertwined world of memory, history and identity. In the ultimate

analysis, this book is moulded by the creative encounter between the academic rigour of pursuing a PhD in history, and the personal impulse to make sense of the ways that partition continues to inform the personal histories and identities of millions of families.

Acknowledgements

In the course of conducting the research for this project and converting it into a book, I have been fortunate to accumulate many debts of gratitude, old and new, scattered across three continents. This book began as a proposal for MPhil research on Bengali refugee identity at JNU. It found its current focus of exploring the paradoxes and possibilities of the citizen-refugee in post-colonial India at the University of Cambridge, where an early version was submitted as a doctoral dissertation in 2009. The present book is born of substantive revisions and ongoing intellectual conversations with old mentors and colleagues in India and the UK, as well as new colleagues and mentors at the Five Colleges, in the USA. At each stage, I have enjoyed support that I am thankful for.

Tanika Sarkar mentored me into archival research and helped me to develop a feminist analytical framework at the beginning of my career at JNU. While I was fortunate to enjoy the support of Rosalind O'Hanlon and Chris Bayly in finding my intellectual feet at Cambridge, my doctoral dissertation took its final shape under Joya Chatterji. My research was inspired by Professor Chatterji's scholarship long before I met her and I was extremely fortunate to complete my doctoral dissertation under her. Joya Chatterji's insights, encouragement and unstinting support have been invaluable in completing the dissertation and in its long-winded path to becoming a book. The process of converting my thesis into a book manuscript gained new focus and impetus at the AIIS Dissertation to Book Workshop held at the 2013 Madison Conference in South Asian Studies. I am thankful to all the participants who read and discussed my work, as well as the workshop leaders, Susan S. Wadley, Geraldine Forbes and Pika Ghosh, for their invaluable guidance. I am grateful to Hampshire College for granting me leave from a busy teaching schedule that has enabled me to complete this book.

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Political Economy Society, Smuts Fund, Prince Consort and Thirlwall Fund, Holland Rose Fund and Clare College. I am grateful for the help and cooperation of the staff, archivists and librarians of the University Library and the Centre for South Asian Studies in Cambridge, the British Library and the School of Oriental and African Studies Library in London, the International Institute of Social History Library in Amsterdam, the National Archives and Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi and the Central Agricultural Research Institute and the State Library of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in Port Blair. The bulk of my research was carried out in various libraries and archives in Calcutta, including the National Library, the West Bengal State Archives, the Police (Intelligence Branch) Archives, the Centre for Women's Studies Library in Jadavpur University, the Jadunath Sarkar Resource Centre for Historical Research and the archive of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS). I thank the archivists and librarians of these institutions for guiding me safely through the maze of bureaucratic hurdles that greets researchers of the post-colonial state in West Bengal. I am particularly grateful to Kamalika Mukherjee of CSSS and Saktidas Roy of the Anandabazar Patrika Library and Archives for their guidance and help.

Conversations and interactions with a number of people have helped me to work out my ideas. I would like to acknowledge my debt to Tanika Sarkar, Samita Sen, Subhash Chakraborty, Gargi Chakravartty, Mrinalini Sinha and Asok Sen. Much of the material used in this thesis is derived from an alternative archive of oral history, popular memory and out-of-print vernacular publications, which are seldom stored in archives due to their relatively recent provenance. I acknowledge the incredible generosity of an army of friends, well-wishers and complete strangers who have helped me to locate these sources. I am especially grateful to Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh for sharing with me transcripts of interviews with refugee women. I thank Mr Dan, the librarian of Havelock High School, for his help in locating respondents in the Andaman Islands. Above all, I thank the refugee-settlers of the Andamans for their time, their trust and their willingness to share their memories.

I have presented some of the research and key findings of this book at various conferences and colloquiums, and I have benefitted greatly from the thoughtful comments and questions from the participants and audiences. I am particularly grateful to the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Cambridge, where I first presented the main arguments of my thesis, and to the participants and organizers of the conference on "Meanings of Citizenship in South Asia", hosted by the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford,

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where I received extremely positive feedback on the connections I proposed between refugees, citizenship and Nehruvian development. My conceptualisation of women as residues of rehabilitation benefitted from critical feedback at the work-in-progress workshop on “From Subjects to Citizens: Society and the Everyday State in India and Pakistan 1947–1964”, held at Royal Holloway, University of London, in 2009. I am thankful to the organisers and participants of “Caste Today: the Fifth Annual Contemporary India Seminar” at the University of Oslo, where I had the opportunity to further develop my explorations of how caste identity impacted partition refugees with feedback from an informed audience.

A version of Chapter 4 was published as “The Myths Refugees Live By: Memory and History in the Making of Bengali Refugee identity”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:1, (2014), 37–76 and is reprinted with permission. Some of the quotes from oral history interviews with refugees re-settled in the Andaman Islands, which are used in Chapter 3, particularly those on pages 137, 138, 140, 142 and 152, appeared in a previous publication, “Dissident Memories: Exploring Bengali Refugee Narratives in the Andaman Islands” in Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds.) *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration during the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). I am grateful to the publishers and the editors for their permission to reuse this research.

No research thrives in isolation and this book has been nourished by several vibrant intellectual communities. I thank my teachers and friends in JNU, including Neeladri Bhattacharya, Radhika Singha, Majid Siddiqui, Tanika Sarkar, Rachna Singh, Shipra Nigam, Sanjukta Sundersaon, Mahesh Gopalan and Aditya Sarkar, for encouraging and enduring long debates on history and methodology that laid the foundations of this book. During my doctoral research at the University of Cambridge, I was fortunate to find a community of scholars who have remained supportive readers and informed critiques of my scholarship over the years. I am particularly thankful to William Gould, Rachel Berger, Eleanor Newbiggin, Taylor Sherman, Zirwat Chowdhury and, above all, Erica Wald for their generosity in either reading through drafts or thinking through ideas. My friends and colleagues in the Five College Consortium have provided crucial support in the last leg of this marathon process. I am particularly grateful to Jennifer Hamilton for her unwavering support, Yael Rice for her invaluable company in weekends spent writing and Hiba bou Akar for always making time for my last-minute request to read drafts. I would also like to thank Amrita Basu, Pinky Hota, Amina Steinfels, Kavita Datla, Krupa Shandilya, Sujani Reddy, Nusrat

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I thank my mother, Indrani Sen, for encouraging my every endeavour. She has been my unofficial research assistant in Calcutta and this project has benefitted massively from her ability to dig up a ‘contact’ almost anywhere, including the Andaman Islands. I thank my sister, Ishani Sen, and my brother-in-law, Santanu Datta, for their unconditional support. I regret that my grand-uncle, Asok Sen, did not live to see the completion of this project. It is only in his absence that I have come to fully appreciate how far his incisive comments, suggested readings and gentle critiques have informed the analytical trajectory of this book. I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Udayan Sen, who glorified my teenage precociousness with the motto of ‘plain living and high thinking’.

Last, but not least, I thank Onni Gust, my strongest critic, most reliable reader and partner in intellectual growth for over a decade. Their patience, support and love has kept me sane and seen this project through.

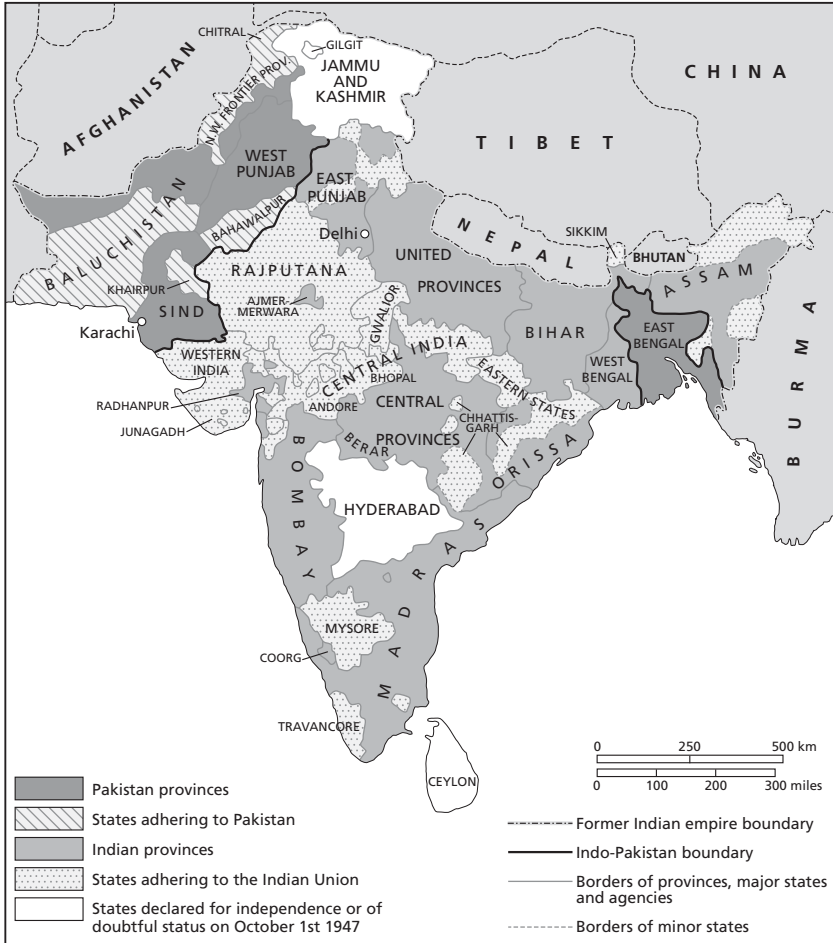
Note on Spelling and Translations

In recent decades, several states and cities of South Asia have been renamed to reflect non-Anglicised pronunciations. Most of these changes in names amount to changes in spellings, such as Kolkata instead of Calcutta and Odisha instead of Orissa. However, during the period under research, i.e. 1947 to 1971, the older names and spellings were in use. In order to avoid confusion and to maintain consistency, I have used the older spellings throughout the text. For example, I use Calcutta instead of Kolkata.

All the interviews with refugees in the Andaman Islands were conducted in Bengali. The oral histories of refugee women living in permanent liability camps were accessed primarily as transcripts written in Bengali. In addition, this book also draws upon numerous Bengali sources on refugee life in and around Calcutta, ranging from pamphlets and autobiographical accounts to collections of oral history. Instead of reproducing the Bengali original, I have translated the interviews that are cited in the text. Occasionally, specific words and phrases have been reproduced in the original Bengali, accompanied with a translation. This is mostly designed to retain some of the texture and cadence of the interviews. In order to ensure readability, and in keeping with common practice, I have avoided the use of diacritical marks while transliterating Bengali words and phrases into the Roman script. I have attempted to replicate Bengali pronunciation, as far as possible, using the Roman script.

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Map 0.1: India and Pakistan in January 1948