

# Tracing the Impact of Migration in Bangladesh: From Partition to the Pandemic

Sabrin Sarwar\*<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The challenge of migration has been multidimensional, with ramifications that range from economic, social, cultural, and even psychological. People have suffered deep trauma, which is reflected through their experiences of homelessness, the act of leaving their homeland or known habitat behind and being forced to travel due to societal pressure. This paper attempts to study migration-based literature and films with a special focus on two films from Bangladesh, *Chitra Nodir Pare* (Quite flows the River Chitra) and *Maati* (Back to its Roots). The first part of the paper examines how partition affected the subcontinent and caused trauma to multiple people in different ways by creating divisions and further turning friends into strangers. It also attempts to analyse the economic as well as identity crisis brought about by the large inflow of migrants. Migration caused by either war or disease causes multiple problems in our society such as panic, chaos, homelessness or violence. The second part of the paper studies the societal impact of migration on the gender scale with a focus on inter-communal relationships. Through Sudipto Roy's *Tasher Ghawr*, made during the pandemic, the paper examines the problems of women's abuse at home during the lockdown. Furthermore, the third and concluding part of the paper attempts to analyse migration from the prism of the Partition to the Pandemic.



## Introduction

As a result of large-scale migration, people have suffered deep trauma, which is reflected through their experiences of homelessness, leaving their homeland or known region, and being forced to travel due to societal pressure. This paper attempts to study migration-based literature and films with a special focus on two films based in Bangladesh, *Chitra Nodir Pare* (1998) (Quiet flows the River Chitra) and *Maati* (2018) (Back to its Roots). It also examines how partition affected the subcontinent and caused trauma to multiple people in different ways. There are multiple cinemas based on partition and migration, however, Tanvir Mokammel's film *Chitra Nodir Pare* is perhaps one of the only films made by a Bangladeshi director based on partition and migration. Another interesting film is *Maati* (2018), a recent film based on a partition by

---

<sup>1</sup> \*Lecturer at Department of English, East Delta University, Chattogram, Bangladesh

Saibal Banerjee and Leena Gangopadhyay. In *Maati*, the trauma of partition is portrayed through three generations. Meghla Chowdhury, the lead character in the film *Maati*, travels to Bangladesh to visit her ancestral home and revisit history which caused her to take up history as a subject she studied and taught and researched. The brunt of partition history and personal trauma never left her family. In both films, migration-related trauma is focused upon and how it caused divisions between people once known as friends turned to strangers. Furthermore, a film made during the pandemic shows the problems of women's abuse at home during lockdown through Sudipto Roy's *Tasher Ghavr*(2020). Migration caused by either war or disease causes multiple problems in our society. It causes panic, chaos, homelessness or violence. Hence, this paper sheds light on the problems created by migration, especially since the Partition to the Pandemic.

### **Trauma**

Migration due to the Partition or the Pandemic caused immense trauma in people's lives. The narratives are shared in various ways through different tales either through history or literature. As Urvashi Butalia recorded in her Partition based historical text, "Never before or since have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly. In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan."The film *Chitra Nodir Pare* unfolds the dilemma of the Migration for many Hindu families in East Pakistan after Partition in 1947. The story revolves around Lawyer Shashikanto (Momtajuddin Ahmed) and his family who faces the constant question of migration and hears of their neighbours moving slowly to West Bengal. Widower Shashikanto lives with his two children Minoti and Bidyut in their house in Narail on the banks of river Chitra. Anuprava Devi (Rowshan Jamil) is an affectionate aunt who looks after the motherless children. Many neighbours eye the house but Shashikanto has an unbending will to not leave his ancestral land. Minoti and Bidyut are friends with the neighbouring Muslim children, Badal, Salma and Nazma. Minoti (Afsana Mimi) and Badal (Tauquir Ahmed) develop a deep emotional bond as they grow up. The children grow up. Minoti, Salma and Nazma are students of Narail Victoria College while Badal is a student of the University of Dhaka. Badal gets politically involved in the anti-military student movement against the Pakistani Government in the 1960s and is shot dead by police during a protestation rally. Nidhukanto is the elder brother of Shashikanto who lives on the other side of the River Chitra. He is an idealist doctor who treats the villagers with great passion. During the Hindu-Muslim riot of 1964, his widowed daughter is raped. Later Basanti, his daughter drowns herself in the river Chitra. After the death of Basanti, Nidhkanto's family shifts to Kolkata. The stress of all these unpleasant incidents and the pressure of migration affects Shashikanto's failing health causing sudden stroke and death. In the end, Minoti and Anuprava Devi leave tearfully in a heart-wrenching state to Kolkata to an unknown future.

In the movie *Chitra Nodir Pare*, the opening scene is symbolic of the trauma of the refugees, as little Minoti says metaphorically about the wild ducks that come to Bengal from a faraway land in reply to her friend's comment that it's an interesting life the wild ducks have, as they roam around from one place to another. Minoti replies "My father said those are the most miserable ones who don't have a home of their own." Throughout the movie, a regional song plays in the background,

*"In the land of others we make a home and stay;/ however the home doesn't belong to me"*. It shows the transitory status of the home for the refugees. In this movie, the minority Hindus in Narail show their constant fear of being driven out of their homeland. In a scene Lawyer Shashikanto tells his colleague Salauddin, that he is afraid as his neighbours are eyeing his property. It is a matter of grave concern when your known circle becomes your enemy for the sake of property. Throughout the movie, we hear about the problems of refugees in Kolkata and how they live in dire situations. When Bidyut is sent to Kolkata to Biren Kaka's house, Sashikanto complains of his shabby two rooms flat in Barasat (A place outskirts of Kolkata) in cold and dark surroundings.

Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* is a story of the Das family set in old Delhi, before the Partition. The house is symbolic of the undivided India where the four siblings had an unusual childhood in a family where the parents were partying at Delhi's Roshanara Club while the children were looked after by Mira Masi, their widowed aunt. Bim and Raja were very close but slowly drifted away as Raja went to live with the Hyder Ali family, their Muslim Landlord's house in Hyderabad. Raja's abandonment wasn't accepted by Bimala, Tara too left the house after her marriage to Bakul and never came back to help Bim with Baba or the death of Mira Masi. The novel shows that despite all the differences the family comes together in the end. Bim forgives Raja and invites him back to the house.

In *Clear Light of Day*, the only mention of refugee camps portrays the trauma felt by Bim:

"Here there was no light except for the dull glow of small cooking fires, blotted out by smoke and dust and twilight. They swarmed and crawled with a kind of crippled, subterranean life that made Bim feel that the city would never recover from this horror, that it would be changed irremediably, that it was already changed, no longer the city she had been born in"(Desai 1980: 131).

Throughout the film *Chitra Nodir Pare*, the topic of migration repeats over and over again foreshadowing the inevitable migration of the protagonist in the end. When asked about whether they will migrate or not by a neighbour in Jessore, Minoti replies "Father says we will never leave Narail. There is no peace even in heaven leaving the Chitra River"

The last scene of the film *Chitra Nodir Pare* evokes a cathartic effect amongst the audience as Anuprava Devi cries and tells Minoti, "how this unfortunate situation befell them" to which Minoti replies, "Don't Cry, aunt! Time will heal all scars."

In *Maati*, it is observed that time doesn't heal the scar of migration; it shows that the trauma is passed on through generations. Meghla Chowdhury (Paoli Dam) the protagonist of *Maati*, goes back to her ancestral land of Bangladesh in search of her roots. After various struggles starting from her home when her visa is not extended beyond three days. The irony is visible through the struggle to travel to one's ancestral land. As Meghla Chowdhury travels to Bangladesh by Biman Bangladesh Airlines, a song plays in the background (I would be born again in this land) which sends the message to the audience about Meghla's attachment with her ancestral land, her patriotism and her love for Bangladesh. She feels an unknown attachment even though visiting Bangladesh for the first time. She internalizes the pain undergone by her grandmother during the Partition and how she (Aparajita Adhya) has been killed later by her servant trying to save her ancestral property. Meghla (Paoli) is deeply troubled when she is aware of the fact that Jamil (Adil Hussain) is the descendant of her grandmother's murderer.

In the film *Maati*, the trauma unfolds through the revelation of the present owners of the Chowdhury mansion to Meghla. As she comes across the news from Jamil that he lives in Meghla's ancestral home with his mother, the news brings shock and unhappiness to Meghla, causing a rift in the friendship of Jinia (Monami Ghosh) and Meghla. She keeps reliving the trauma of the past through her first experience of visiting her ancestral place Kutubdia. She cannot accept the fact that her grandmother was killed by Jamil's grandfather. However, after spending some time with Jamil and getting to know his family better, she overcomes her trauma and realises that one cannot be blamed for the faults of one's forefathers.

### **Economic and Identity Crisis**

After the Partition, many people became homeless and stayed as refugees both in India and in Pakistan. In the movie *Chitra Nadir Pare (1998)*, in a conversation with Comrade Jatin (Ramendu Majumdar), a very important topic comes up regarding the rise of the Muslim middle class in Bangladesh and the fall of the Hindu middle class. Lawyer Shashikanto states that most of the cases at court are about properties and disputes over land problems of most Partition based property cases. How the minorities are suffering in both the countries and none of the political parties are bothered about their basic human rights. The topic of usurping Hindu properties comes up in the movie several times, in a conversation with Salauddin, as he states how corrupt lawmen areas they know the loopholes in the rules of law; they are buying up Hindu properties at very cheap rates. Shashikanto suggests to Salauddin that he should buy too, to which he says "I want to make property in an honest way". In another conversation with Nipen (a friend of Shashikanto), the audience becomes aware of the dire situation of the refugees in Kolkata and West Bengal. How thousands of refugees are suffering for basic human rights in West Bengal.

The idea of home is deeply related to migration, through literature and films the representation of trauma is portrayed through different characters from pages to screen. The cultural representation of the people reminds the migrant of the homeland. In *Maati*, when Meghla's grandfather comes to know Zinia's identity, her being the granddaughter of Munir, his childhood friend, she brings her country and region along with her as he tells her "I have seen people of Kutubdia after decades! As I touch you, I feel I am touching Kutubdia". Later when Jamil's mother tells her tale of migration from Kolkata to Kutubdia, she too finds that Meghla represents her homeland and she expresses her longing for homeland and nostalgia through her past experiences. The journey from Kolkata to Kutubdia, Meghla Chowdhury's first visit to Bangladesh shows her search of her roots and her visualization of her ancestral home and finding out the similarities with her grandmother's narrative of Bangladesh. She feels an unknown bond with the place she never visited but only heard tales of. Her experience of trauma is shared, passed on from her grandfather, her father and through descriptions of her grandmother's diary. She finds out the ancestral history of the Chowdhury family through her grandmother's diary and finds out more once she visits Kutubdia and from Jamil who now lives in her ancestral home.

## **Gender**

Due to the communal violence, people had to migrate during or after the Partition. The victims were mostly women and children. In *Chitra Nadir Pare*, Bidyut, the little brother of Minu suffers from child abuse from a Muslim villager of Narail when he is accidentally caught while urinating at the graveside. He is called a "Malaun" a slang that means an infidel and probably thrashed or abused physically which leaves him traumatized for days until he is forced to send off to Kolkata to his uncle's home. Later during the time of Hindu-Muslim riots which was a repercussion of a riot in India, Minu's cousin was gang-raped by a Muslim mob and forced to drown herself in the river Chitra. At the beginning of the film *Advocate*, Shashikanto is asked by a villager named Ramanandokathi if he is going to leave, to which Shashikanto answers that one walks firmly on ancestral land. Later Ramanandokathi shares his concern about three grown-up daughters and also how difficult it is to marry them off due to exorbitant dowry asked by the bridegroom's family. Shashikanto accuses him of looking for excuses to migrate. At this point a key character, a mad man comes to the scene saying "Are you coming? Or going? It's the same thing to go or come". This is quite symbolic as it represents the pain that the migrant feels. Though the Partition caused two countries to divide because of communal differences, the ancestral homeland has a deep impact on a person's life. It is a part of their identity and self.

From the interview of Daimanti Sehgal, stories of abduction and recoveries are known through Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, Voices from the Partition of India. Sehgal recounts her story of going to Pakistani villages, in the name of selling eggs, asking for Lassi, and inquiring after abducted women right after the Partition. Once they recovered a Pakistani woman after searching for months however the

child was lost as she says “Not all tales ended so happy and there were thousands of women who were unsuccessfully spirited away, never to be found.” (Butalia 1998:147). Butalia further states in her book, about the impactful relationship of women’s bodies with honour. In Basant Kaur’s interview the horrific stories of mass murder of girls by family members are told in a spine chilling narrative, as she says “one girl from our village, she had gone off with Musalmaans. She was quite beautiful, and everyone got worried that if one has gone they will take all our girls away...so it was then that they decided to kill the girls.”(Butalia 1998:199)

In the film *Maati*, the Hindu villagers of Kutubdia complain about girls being abducted at night and returned in the morning, during the time of partition causing several families to migrate.

### **Inter Communal Relationships**

In the film, *Chitra Nodir Pare*, the two lead characters Minoti and Badol has a deep bond of friendship since childhood which develops into a romantic relationship as they grow older. The children play with each other and also different dialects are used in different communities. Often children from each community enjoy the festival of the other. The cultural amalgamation of the two communities is visible in this film. When Minoti is asked about their relationship by a friend she says casually that she hasn’t told her father yet. Later Badol dies during a demonstration by the students at Dhaka University for the Liberation of Bangladesh and Minoti is heartbroken at the news.

In the film *Maati*, we see that there is an interreligious marriage that takes place under the guidance of social activist Jamil and though it causes riots in the village, however, the two families agree to the marriage. This shows that over time, in recent times though it’s still a taboo, however people are becoming more open to the idea of interreligious marriage. The friendship of Shottobroto Chowdhury and Munir shows that inter-communal relationships can be strong too, later the friendship between Jinia and Meghla and finally a friendship between Meghla and Jamil portray a communal harmony which indicates a better future for the two countries and communities.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Raja’s deep interest in Islamic culture and literature portrays the intertwined lives of Hindus and Muslims in the pre-partition era. The Das family, especially Bimala, fell out with her brother due to this very reason, as Raja abandoned his family to be united with the Hydar Ali family. Raja and Bim had been the two closest siblings in the Das family, however as soon as Raja started going to their landlord Hydar Ali’s family he adopted their culture of reciting Urdu poetry and have been awestruck by the Zamindar culture which seemed too glamorous to him in comparison to his home surroundings. As Desai describes Raja’s obsession with the Hydar Ali family,

“Raja naturally inclined towards society, company, applause; towards colour, song, charm. It amazed and enchanted him that in the Hyder Ali household such elements were a part of their lives, of their background. In his own home, they were alien.”(Desai1980:75)

## **Pandemic**

The Pandemic in 2020 created mass havoc in the lives of people all over the world. Just like war or the Partition created panic and migration, so did the Pandemic create multiple problems. People faced unprecedented situations that they never faced before. In both India and Bangladesh apart from other countries, due to the large population, people had to face severe problems during public gatherings and due to the ignorance of people about health safety, many died without taking the vaccinations despite being available quite early on. Apart from health hazards, people had to face deep trauma due to loss of near ones and also people lost their jobs, a large no of people had to shift from cities to villages due to lack of jobs. The low-income groups had to suffer due to lockdown and many people were trapped in either their own homes or in some other places where they were not comfortable. Near ones were separated during the Pandemic due to sickness or due to lockdown.

“Those who are working in the unstructured and non-mainstream employment sectors, such as taxi drivers, restaurant workers, day labourers, small vendors, construction workers, industrial labourers and so forth, are facing a serious crisis to maintain their earnings (Abdullah and Hossain, 2014, Ali, 2014) and their jobs will remain uncertain for an indefinite period. Many have been rendered jobless (Sumon, 2020), have lost their jobs or received low wages or no pay (BB (Bangladesh Bank), 2020a, BMET (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training), 2020). The economic impacts of COVID-19 on migrant workers will hugely influence the remittance flow and the economy (Sutradhar, 2020), with serious impacts on the GDP growth rate of Bangladesh.”

Many women faced violence during the pandemic at home since people were stuck at home for a long time, the violence was inescapable. In the film *Tasher Gharwr* (2020) directed by Sudipto Roy, Sujata Sengupta (Swastika Mukherjee) tells her narrative differently, directly talking to the audience and describing a smell attached to everything around her. She describes her husband's extramarital affair to be something that smells rotten. She narrates the story of a neglected housewife working endlessly for her home. Despite that, she is often criticised for her cooking. Soon the audience finds out that her husband likes to abuse her emotionally and has an extra-marital relationship. She even feels that her physical relationship is forced and a detachment has grown between the couple after several miscarriages. In the end, she describes how she poisons the rat who doesn't like her cake, referring to her husband. She feels suffocated in her own home during the lockdown, due to the constant presence of her husband which

bothers her immensely. She can even hear him talk to his lover while she overhears them talking in an inappropriate manner. The mental trauma of an abusive relationship makes her more claustrophobic in her private place; due to the Pandemic, it becomes unbearable to tolerate her husband's constant presence. The end shows her end of trauma in her way.

Apart from the rise of domestic violence, there were serious issues of lower caste and lowerclass financial struggle due to the Pandemic. According to a survey,

“For example, the lockdown has pushed Dalits with disabilities even further to the margins, with reports of low-caste people with a disability unable to access relief due to lack of documents or exclusion.” (Minority Rights International.21/07/2020)

“In the context of the pandemic, social stigma against returning migrants is high, with returnee migrants facing discrimination in their home settlements, being perceived as bringing the virus even if they have not tested positive for COVID-19” (The Himalayan Times 01/04/2020; Mobarak et al. 2020).

Due to the pandemic migrant workers from the subcontinent faced multiple problems including the financial crisis. According to a survey, a subsequent amount of remittance was reduced for both Bangladesh and India.

“BRAC data indicates that 87% of returnees from overseas have no alternative sources of livelihood and that more than one-third of them are likely to run out of savings in less than three months (Dhaka Tribune 22/05/2020).”

Apart from the financial problems due to the pandemic for low-income groups and migrant workers a new problem had arisen due to the citizen amendment bill which caused Bangladeshi migrants to return during the Pandemic in a chaotic situation. As stated in a report, “In late 2019, India passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill, which has been widely criticized as anti-Muslim and accused of stoking fears of detention, deportation and statelessness for Muslims, including Bangladeshi migrants (BBC 11/12/2019).

Fearing increased discrimination amid the pandemic, migrants in India have been returning to Bangladesh (Mixed Migration Centre 04/2020).

In both India and Bangladesh, internal as well as external migrant workers suffered due to the lockdown. There was a dilemma as the daily labourers couldn't afford lockdown. It was either death due to the pandemic or due to poverty. A report supports this claim:

However, the coronavirus outbreak has threatened 13 million migrant workers and their livelihoods. Thus, Bangladesh has become one of the most severely affected countries by the COVID-19 pandemic. Travelers as well as returning migrant workers and their relatives coming from China, Italy and the



Middle East are believed to be the original bearers of the coronavirus to Bangladesh, and it has since spread throughout the country. With the increase of incidents of COVID-19 around the world as well as in Bangladesh, commercial flights have been limited in and outside the country. As a result, an immense number of migrant workers are trapped, affected and in dire circumstances (Palma, 2020).

## Conclusion

To sum up, the impact of migration and its effects on both citizens of Bangladesh and India had been traumatic. Migration due to Partition, war or, Pandemics caused people to be disoriented and face multifaceted issues with daily lives. Whether the problem is financial, or emotional the impact of migration had a deep scar on the lives of people who had been affected. Some gained out of this as seen in the movie *Chitra Nadir Pare* and *Maati*, a class has risen and another fell to poverty, to oblivion, death and homelessness. Due to the Pandemic, people lost near and dear ones and many lost an entire family and had to leave the homeland due to dire circumstances. Some migrated voluntarily like Raja in Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, and some were forced to migrate like Jamil's mother in *Maati*. The longing for the ancestral land is seen through Meghla's eyes as she falters to leave Bangladesh at the end of the film. Most of the migrants feel an identity crisis in the migrated land, never feeling at home as seen through the character of Shottobroto Chowdhury in *Maati*. According to a survey during Covid 19, unfortunately, migrant workers were forced to return to their home country and due to the Citizenship policy, many migrants came to Bangladesh from India to a land where they have no jobs, no savings and no homes for some to return to. This gives rise to many new problems; feeling alienated in one's own country is one amongst many other dire situations creating a condition of poverty leading to depression and even suicide.

## References

- ACAPS (2020), "Migrant Vulnerability in Bangladesh, India and Nepal: COVID-19 and Labour Migration", October 2020.
- Butalia, Urvashi (1998), The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India, Penguin Books, London.
- Desai, Anita (1980), Clear Light of Day, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York.
- PMC 2020 "COVID-19's impacts on migrant workers from Bangladesh: In search of policy intervention", August 2020.
- Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin (1998), Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition, Pauls Press, New Delhi
- Saibal Banerjee, Leena Gangopadhyay. 2018, *Maati*
- Sudipto Roy, 2020, *Tasher Ghawr*
- Tanvir Mokammel, 1998, *Chitra Nodir Pare*