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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 47 - DISPLACED PEOPLE, ABANDONED HOMES

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Experiences of Displacement Through Fiction

- Paradoxically, while Partition persists as the **defining moment** for those engaged in **reinterpreting cultural and national identities in contemporary South Asia**, Partition historiography remains trapped within a teleological and chronological barrier of 1947.
- In recent years, academic scholarship has shifted away from the pre-histories of Partition to its immediate impact, from causality to '**lived experience**', in order to render a human and gendered narrative of the Partition and its aftermath.
- **Ethnographic studies** focus on the period leading up to the Partition and its immediate repercussions on the experiences of the displaced and on the narratives of the horrific acts of rape, violence, and murder, both between and within communities in Punjab.
- The scholarship on refugee rehabilitation itself remains problematic, as **researchers till recently have viewed refugees as an undifferentiated mass whose experiences of migration and resettlement are similar.**

Experiences of Displacement Through Fiction

- **Relocation**, the timing of their **migration**, whether after 1947 or after the riots of 1950, or beyond, was critical to how they were viewed by the state and their subsequent rehabilitation.
- In actuality, the **reconstitution of identities** depended on a variety of factors, some of which were created in collusion with the official policies of the new nation-states.
- In the case of divided Bengal, citizenship followed a different path. Migration from one territorial unit to another, even if temporary, defined one's nationality; it signalled the **intent of acquiring new citizenship and simultaneously giving up the original identity**.
- In the years between the Partition and the enactment of appropriate legislation laying down the regulations and definitions of citizenship in India and Pakistan, **individuals who crossed the border had to constantly negotiate the ambiguities surrounding their migration, residence, and putative and 'natural' national identity**.

Experiences of Displacement Through Fiction

- For each newly independent state, the **security of the minorities** within India and East Pakistan became the acid test of legitimate nationhood.
- Minority migration has always been connected with the lop-sided majoritarian politics, both in India and Pakistan, as each accused the other of creating conditions that stimulated the **protracted migration on the Eastern border**.
- India claimed a moral edge as the **Census of 1951** recorded that more Hindus had migrated there from East Pakistan than did Muslim migrants leave India for East Pakistan.
- India alleged that East Pakistan did not guarantee minority rights and the latter countered by accusing India of creating '**pull factors**' for the East Pakistan Hindus.

Experiences of Displacement Through Fiction

- In 1948, the East Pakistan state legislated the **Evacuee Property Act** to assure its minorities that authorities would guard their property and hand it back to them if they returned from India.
- For East Pakistani Hindus, migration was not always predicated on permanent uprooting but on the belief that they would be able to **retain their kinship and social ties with their ancestral homes**.
- They were also following the traditional pattern of **urban-rural migration** that took place in the region during colonial times.
- In the past, there had been the possibility of return. However, the requirements of post-Partition states to define their boundaries and identify their loyal citizens made it almost impossible for the continuance of such ties.

Acharya Kriplani Colony

- The refugees, who crossed over to **West Bengal from East Pakistan** in the late 1940s and early 1950s, primarily belonged to the **upper or middle classes**.
- Their logical choice of destination was **Calcutta**, where they hoped to find acceptable careers or professional prospects.
- In Calcutta, many of them had friends, relatives, and acquaintances who originally assisted them with their relocation.
- As a result, the **social network structure** of these displaced people played a critical role in assisting them in rebuilding their lives on the other side of the border.
- Even individuals who did not come from wealthy families or have a lot of money but were from a higher caste did not want to live in the refugee camps because of their **maan** (honour).



Squatter Colonies

- Almost all respondents at the squatters' colonies in and around Kolkata revealed that refugee camps were meant for **chhoto jat** (lower caste people).
- They were conscious about their **caste identity** and decided not to take shelter in the camps.
- In some cases, where the land was acquired through legal means and procedures, the government termed the areas of refugee settlement as '**private colonies**'.
- But, in other cases, apparently vacant land, owned by the government or by big landowners, was acquired through forcible occupation.
- This process of '**collective takeover**' was known as **jabar dakhhal** (Waber 2003: 67).

Acharya Kriplani Colony

- In **Bihutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's "Acharya Kriplani Colony"**, the narrative plays around the **quintessential obsession of refugees** with the setting up of a **home**.
- With emotionally charged images of verdant shrubbery, extensive fields, delicious food, sunshine, and the general warmth of the lost home rife in their minds, the refugees searched for the idyllic peace in the present displaced state of exile.
- **Manas Ray** - speaking about **Netaji Colony**, says, *"In the beginning the people tried to recreate their desher bari in Netaji Nagar; the landscape of Netaji Nagar was the landscape of nostalgia"* (**"Refugees: One Memory and Locality"**)
- The protagonist in Bandyopadhyay's story chances upon a newspaper advertisement for a plot of land that spells his **utopian vision of nostalgic idealization**.

Acharya Kriplani Colony

- The “Acharya Kriplani Colony” is advertised as **“being built on the vast and adjoining land of a certain station, only a few miles away from Kolkata, amidst beautiful natural surroundings. The clear and holy waters of the Jahnabi River flow past its southernmost point...”**
- **Rachel Weber** in her paper **“Re (creating) the Home: Women’s Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta”** has focused on how the buildings in the colonies **“emphasize the village-like ambience”**.
- The romantic portrayal of the **‘Promised Land’** of **Acharya Kriplani Colony** emanates a similar **earthy romanticism of a utopian existence** and acts as an **objective correlative** to the protagonist’s yearning for building a home.

Acharya Kriplani Colony

- The emphasis on **water** and extensive **land** in the advertisement is remarkable.
- The fixation with **flowing water or building habitat close to a water body** is a **leitmotif** in refugee testimonials.
- **Jayanti Basu** asks a refugee respondent what he remembered most when thinking about the past. *“I remember water. Everywhere there was water”* (***Reconstructing Bengal Partition***).
- Another respondent - *“It was a land of rivulets and lakes. The jute plants were tall as full-grown men, but water flowed above them.”*
- The nostalgic ***idée fixe*** with water would after **Jungian psychoanalysis** be related to *“birth ideations, as water is the archetype of birth.”* It signifies abundance and prosperity.



Acharya Kriplani Colony

- **Otto Rank** - obsession with water refers to the pre-birth security in the mother's womb surrounded by amniotic fluid (Rank, The Trauma of Birth).
- In the plot, the **metaphor of flowing water** and extensive premises with all modern amenities sound too attractive a proposition to the protagonist to be missed and therefore he registers.
- When he ultimately visits the land, owned by a doctor with an unenviable medical practice, he discovers the advertisement was an an ironic compliment to the material reality of the swampland that Archarya Kriplani colony actually encompassed.
- *"The roads were damp and muddy. There were cowsheds and cattle grazing grounds everywhere. A foul smell filled the air, and mosquitoes buzzed all around ... A mile away, by the side of the road next to a forest, I saw a metal hoarding which displayed in bold letters the words– "Acharya Kriplani Colony".*

Acharya Kriplani Colony

- Struck with amazement, the protagonist realizes how the metaphorical panorama of the advertisement stands in juxtaposition with the material reality of the actual swampland.
- **Bibhutibhusan** captures the **anxiety of refugee** relocation that made them easy prey to exploiters at the time of partition.
- The profiteers exploit the migrant's idealized nostalgic perception of the lost homeland by offering the prospect of a second homecoming to attract their customers.
- The doctor waves a wad of receipts in the narrator's face to show him how profitable the prospect of establishing the colony has been for him.
- It is only the narrator who realizes that the promise of the primordial stability of the past is unachievable in the swampy marshland setting of the colony.



Acharya Kriplani Colony

- The advertised rural setting that is an ideal and an idyll is eventually contrasted with the reality of the overcrowded city bereft of greenery, where the refugees are forced to survive on railway platforms and in congested colonies.
- **Bibhutibhusan** points out that **the idea of a second homecoming is a generic dream that can never be fulfilled because, ultimately, a lost home cannot be spatially transferred into a reconstructed present.**
- Therefore, any relation, except imaginary, between one's former and latter home cannot exist.

Wild-Goose Country

- **Amar Mitra's** story '**Wild-Goose Country**' - set on the Hili border of West Dinajpur in 1996, the story is about the **reality of borders** reflected by the **barbed wire fence** defining the border between India and Bangladesh.
- The author has utilised the figure of a lone goose, separated from its flock, unable to control the "**vertigo of fate**" in order to express the **futility of national borders as political divisions**. (Boym 280).
- In their study of borderlands, **Michiel Baud** and **Willem VanSchendel** use the term "**border**" to refer to the "**political differences that resulted from state-building**", emphasising how "**all across the world boundaries became key elements in the new, increasingly global system of states.**"
- "**The border between countries is a sharp line, an impassable barrier**" from the perspective of national centres of authority, whereas as a ground reality, "**borderlands are vast sceneries of exchanges**" between individuals on both sides of the border.

Wild-Goose Country

- The borderland in the Hili area has a life of its own, similar to **Taswi's "The Wagah Canal,"** ("Wagah ki Nehar"), where we see an unsuspected unity of split populations at a marketplace.
- In the pedestrian reality of their lives there *"was no sign of ... the border ... there was just a sea of people who has swallowed up all the marks which demarcated one country from another"*.
- People who own a house on one side of the border come to mow the grass on the other side, sugary delights are sold, and smuggling is an unequivocal reality.
- These intricate network borderland transactions may have sparked political squabbles, resulting in the decision to create a barbed-wire barrier to keep trespassers or "infiltrators" at bay.
- It is **only the wild geese in the sky that they can't catch.**
- **Mazrul's visions of birds** serve as a **leitmotif** in the novel, **symbolising his longing for a lost motherland.**



Wild-Goose Country

- *“On tremulous wings, these flew across from the east towards the north-west”*. Subir believes they are warplanes, while Mazarul believes they are geese. The gap in their perspectives point to how they perceive a geopolitical space – as a continuity or an irreconcilable gap.
- **Mazrul resembles the lone goose that had apparently wandered away from its group and was now wobbling across the sky.**
- Mazrul's, Aloka's, and Subir's families have been divided by the Partition.
- Despite the fact that two of Mazrul's uncles fled with their families in 1953, when Mazrul meets **Amal Bhattacharya**, who has stayed in Bangladesh, memories of his family and cousin, his beautiful aunt whose whereabouts are constantly marked by an absence.
- He is desperate for news about them and makes frantic inquiries to Amal, a mutual acquaintance, regarding their location. In order to fulfil his desire to travel across time, he set off on a journey.
- Mazrul grasps the barbed wire that wounds his skin, leaving red spots as proof of his **failed attempt to infiltrate the past and transcend Partition's reality.**



Wild-Goose Country

- As Aloka, Subir, and Amal struggle to free him from the wire, they realise that despite the flair of nostalgia, **reconstructing a long-forgotten house is impossible.**
- These folks have been trapped and their identities have been altered by the boundary.
- Mazrul, with his hypertrophied sense of the past, is left trailing in disenchantment, like the flock of wild geese who have flown away to oblivion, leaving behind the lone straggling goose.
- He refuses to cross the border, which has already eliminated the option of a return home. He could migrate to the other side as an Indian citizen and return to be identified as a fugitive or outsider. In the end, he sees that Partition is a break in one's destiny, depicted by barbed wires ripping through one's flesh.

Thank You

