

The Politics of Space: Refugees, Displaced and Stranded

By

Amena Mohsin *

My first encounter with the notion of space was in the concentration camps of Pakistan from early 1972 to December 1973; when I was interned with my family members and the families of other Bengali military officials in the various camps in Pakistan. In the aftermath of Bangladesh's liberation on December 16, 1971, Bengali military officers and soldiers who were in Pakistan and had opted to come to Bangladesh were interned in their homes and later taken to different camps. My first camp experience was in Kohat and then Mandi Bahauddin. Much later, I learnt that we were the "Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan." The word "stranded" has an unsettledness attached to it, where one is left wandering with no specific direction or rootedness. Indeed, those were days of extreme unsettledness; yet within that unsettledness, the Bengalis known as "stranded" tried to find or rather create for themselves a "settledness" for themselves. While states and nations create their own divides and identities often attached to land and territory, human minds have their own agentive capacity, which is broader and often more empowering; and this I link to the cognitive "space" created or constructed within the confines of the restricted physical space. The latter for me was more cognitive than the actual. As a young girl, living within the confines of fenced electric wires, my young mind created a space and land of freedom, a land without fear; to which one day we will return. Our parents used the camp space to give us the semblance of a "normal" life by setting up open sky schools and celebrating the different Bengali festivals while the Pakistani soldiers guarding the camps watched us with their rifles. In those days in my cognitive space, I learnt the meaning of freedom, culture, and identity.

It, however, took me many more years well into the mid-90s to understand the "politics and the internal dynamics of space and space creation," as opposed to the positivist statist notion of territory or the

* Amena Mohsin, CRG-IWM Visiting Fellow 2022, and Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.
Email: amenanabeel@gmail.com
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frontiers. The notion of space that I am alluding to is not necessarily spatial; it is more in cognition, linked to memories, beliefs, myths, yearnings, or a future that one longs for. In other words, territory or territoriality has a fluidity to it, which is often lost to the eyes or minds unless experienced so; the latter however is a multiplex and multi-layered process with state, nation, community, and the everydayness embedded in it.

My first attempts to ink down or even think back and write about my days in the camps in Pakistan, which were known as the concentration camps were extremely difficult; this is not to suggest that I find it easy today. Quite interestingly I have observed that “we”—the children— who were in the camps don’t talk about those days much even in our conversations, except as passing references. Personally for me, since I have been trying to pen down those days for quite some time, and in fact, the monograph, *The Other Side of the Fence: Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan*,¹ published by the Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka, has a collection of a few narratives, but it was a very difficult journey as people were not willing either to talk or write about their days in the camps.

I too have been trying to ink down those days for quite sometime now; but find myself either lost, scattered, my mind somehow refuses to recall those days; yet those were very critical and formative years of my life and in a way shaped my ideas, my passion and love for my homeland, Bangladesh, a land with which I had very scant familiarity at that stage of my life. Despite this unfamiliarity with the objective in my subjective realm I had indeed created a Bangladesh of my own, which I carried through my camp days. I waited eagerly along with the other stranded Bengalis to come back to Bangladesh, for me it was the land of freedom after all! I have been wondering why this inertia; is it because of the present state of politics, my own frustrations with the state of affairs, the oft-repeated allegations of “Pakistani mentality” of the repatriated military personnel; or is it the person within me which does not want to talk about it. It is a long journey that one has to take down the memory lane, when many of those, my parent’s generation, who took the major brunt of those days are no more there. I believe it is both. My mind is battling with two levels of politics, both very personal and emotion-laden; the challenge is to wrest myself out of this battle within.

When the liberation war of Bangladesh started, it did not take me long to realize that the Bengalis stationed in the then West Pakistan had become ‘aliens’ and objects of suspicion. We could see that people in civilian dresses were guarding our houses, my parents would get alerted at any knock on the door; those were very fearful days indeed, my parents had instructed us not to talk to strangers! In the school things changed, my class mates started asking me when we are going back, and I had no answer to their queries. With the wisdom of time, I now realise that what my young mind had thought to be “sudden” was not sudden alienness; but I had lived as an alien in a land whose foundations were based on a myth of religion constituting the basis of a nation! My contention would be the alienness was in-built. I will come back to this later. However, while carrying on this work, I discovered that looking

back turned out to be very difficult for my family and friends, who were stranded or interned in Pakistan. I was more puzzled and surprised and to some extent saddened by the realisation that the unwillingness had a bitterness to it as well. A sense prevailed that things would go wrong for them if they were identified as returnees from Pakistan. Many of them asked me not to go ahead with this write-up, they expressed their anxiousness that it might hurt me. A cousin of mine who was studying engineering in Lahore and was interned in camp with a Bengali family said to me that he does not want to talk or write about his post-‘71 days in Pakistan in this political situation when there is always the fear of being misinterpreted or misunderstood. He went on to add, “who else would know it better than you.” It then dawned on me that for many of us, the personal remains political, more so when it comes to recording people’s narratives if you are or were on the “other” side of the fence, just spatially and circumstantially not ideologically and cognitively.

At this point let me dwell a little on the alienness between the two wings of Pakistan, that I alluded to earlier.

Pakistan: The Myth of a Nation

The two wings of Pakistan, East and West Pakistan were indeed historical anomalies and a political puzzle. The politics of Bengal preceding the Partition of 1947 witnessed divides and differences existing between the then Muslim leadership on the question of the Partition of Bengal. On the one hand, one sees differences between Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who was the organisational genius and the builder of the Muslim League in Bengal. Then there were differences between Suhrawardy, Jinnah and Fazlul Huq who was the leader of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), the most popular party in Bengal. Fazlul Huq was also the mover of the Lahore Resolution, later popularly known as the Pakistan Resolution. It must be remembered that in order to establish Pakistan it was important and critical for Jinnah, whom Ayesha Jalal² argues had appeared as the “sole spokesman” of the Muslims to control the support of the Muslim majority provinces, the Punjab and Bengal, of the two the latter was more critical since one-third of the total Muslim population of India lived in Bengal. Though Jalal forcefully makes the case for Jinnah being the sole spokesman, but one does observe challenges to Jinnah emanating from Bengal, and Jinnah too appeared to be cognisant of it. He deliberately tried to side track Suhrawardy, who regarded the latter to be unpredictable and not the kind of person who would ever remain loyal to the boss.³

The relations between Fazlul Huq and Jinnah were also tense, though despite being a Praja Party man he was agreeable to the League organisation in Bengal. Huq had formally rejoined the Muslim League at its Lucknow session in October 1937 and played a decisive role in winning the support of the Muslims and establishing the prestige of the party, yet Jinnah removed him from membership of the League Parliamentary Board on charges of insubordination and disloyalty. Jinnah sought an explanation from Huq, to which he responded sharply in the following manner,

You have had the impertinence to ask for an explanation from me ... You are not working for Muslim solidarity at all but seem to be playing a deep game ... Your conduct in Bengal has surprised everyone ... I call upon to explain your conduct⁴

Pakistan was based on the Two-Nation theory of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The theory claimed that the Hindus and Muslims of India constitute two separate nations based on religion. The course of the Indian nationalist movement had engulfed the Muslims of Bengal within its fold. During that period, their Muslim identity took precedence over their Bengali identity, though the latter was never lost. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan adopted an assimilative policy in line with its understanding of the nation state. Language, more specifically a common language for the entire population of the state was considered to be an essential part of nation-building; and not surprisingly this language had to be reflective of Islamic traditions. In this context, Urdu written in the Arabic-Persian script was considered to be the product of Hindu-Muslim and the attendant Persian-Hindu contact during the days of Muslim rule. It had become exclusively associated with Muslims and their culture in India. Accordingly, Jinnah declared (in English) in Dhaka in March 1948,

Let me make it very clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language ... without one language no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function.⁵

A religious orientation was given to the same by Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. He stated that "the defence of Bengali language in front of Urdu, is against the laws of Islam."⁶ In 1949 the Central Minister for Education openly proposed the introduction of Arabic script for Bengali. It was argued that,

[n]ot only Bengali literature, even the Bengali alphabet is full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu pantheon...to ensure a bright and great future for the Bengali language it must be linked with the Holy Quran....Hence the necessity and importance of Arabic script.⁷

To resist the imposition of an alien language and cultural identity upon themselves, the Bengalis counterpoised it by a secular nationalism with language and culture as its core. Thus, Bengali language was adopted as a counter-weapon to fight the hegemony of the Pakistan state. Language thus acquired an immensely political and emotive connotation for the Bengalis. On February 21, 1952, the police opened fire in Dhaka on students who were protesting the imposition of the Urdu language, resulting in the death of four. They instantly became national heroes of the Bengalis. The day henceforward became a day of national glory and celebration for the Bengalis. It is

celebrated as a day of martyrdom as well as victory. Bengali language thus became the basis as well as the symbol of Bengali nationalism. From the demands of linguistic and cultural autonomy, the Bengalis later moved to economic and political autonomy culminating in the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

The Stranded

Following the liberation of Bangladesh, many Bengalis found themselves on the “other” side of the fence. This “otherness” and “alienness” perhaps was always there at the political level which was later substantiated by the genocide of 1971. But for the Bengalis, after the liberation of Bangladesh who were stranded in Pakistan and had wanted and later opted for Bangladesh, the state of Pakistan became the “other” in a political and conceptual sense. The Bengali military officers were given the option of choosing their allegiance, those who opted for Bangladesh were put under surveillance and their movements were restricted. Later on, they along with their families were taken to camps, which my young mind had conceived that we were prisoners of war (POW). I do not know why my generation had thought so. Though as Brigadier General (Retd.) Shakhawat Hossain who was also interned in one of the camps stated to me that, there was no line up for the stranded and detained Bengalis, which made it more dangerous, since one did not know about one’s location within the realm of rights.

Content analyses of newspapers, *Pakistan Observer* later *Bangladesh Observer*, and *Dainik Purbodesh* during the period of March 1971 to June 1974 show no discussions regarding the fate of the stranded Bengalis in Pakistan. A few reports, however, appeared in the international media, for e.g., the *New York Times* on April 13, 1972, reported, “Official Reports 2,000 Bengalis Held in Pakistani Jails”; again, on November 12, 1972, the *New York Times* reported, “Wave of Bengalis Fleeing Pakistan.” On May 29, 1973, the *New York Times* reported, “Bhutto Threatens to Try Bengalis Held in Pakistan.” The silence on the issue in the public domain in Bangladesh may be explained by the exigencies and trauma that Bangladesh was going through, not to mention the day-to-day administrative disorder.⁸ However, at the political level, the issue of POWs loomed large for India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Bangladesh was eager to get the Bengalis stranded in Pakistan back. In March 1973, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh wrote to the UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim seeking his assistance for the repatriation of the stranded people. The matter could only be resolved through the involvement of the three nations, but the issue was complicated due to the non-recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan. The Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan paved the way for reconciliation in the subcontinent. Following the Simla Agreement, which was welcomed by Bangladesh, on August 28, 1973, the Delhi Agreement was signed between India and Pakistan with the consent of Bangladesh. According to this agreement, it was agreed that the three countries would exchange all POWs except the 195 war criminals wanted by Bangladesh. Once this repatriation

was complete, Bangladesh and Pakistan would negotiate directly regarding the 195. Two weeks later, on September 13, 1973, Delhi began the repatriation of the Pakistan POWs in exchange for stranded Bengalis and Indian nationals. This exchange also involved a substantial number of “non-Bengalis” in Bangladesh who had opted for repatriation to Pakistan.

By the end of October 1973, huge air repatriation was underway with aircraft loaned by East Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. There were six planes on mission duty carrying an average of 1,200 people per day. By late January 1974, some 90,000 people had been transported from Pakistan to Bangladesh, and over 44,000 from Bangladesh to Pakistan. By mid-February 1974 over 200,000 people had been repatriated under the terms of the New Delhi agreement. By September 1974, some 9,000 people had been transported by sea between Bangladesh and Pakistan and some 231,000 people had been airlifted across the sub-continent. Those airlifted included some 116,000 Bengalis who went from Pakistan to Bangladesh, some 104,000 non-Bengalis who went from Bangladesh to Pakistan, and some 11,000 Pakistanis who were airlifted from Nepal to Pakistan. They had fled from Bangladesh. It was at that time the largest emergency airlift of civilians ever organised.⁹

Following the recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan in February 1974, a Tripartite Agreement was signed between India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan for the normalisation of relations in the subcontinent in New Delhi on April 9, 1974, which endorsed and acknowledged the Simla and the Delhi Agreements. Some important provisions of the “Agreement on the Repatriation of Prisoners War and Civilian Internees” are,

3. The humanitarian problems arising in the wake of the tragic events of 1971 constituted a major obstacle in the way of reconciliation and normalisation among the countries of the sub-continent. In the absence of recognition, it was not possible to have tripartite talks to settle the humanitarian problems, as Bangladesh could not participate in such a meeting except on the basis of sovereign equality.

4. On April 17, 1973, India and Bangladesh took a major step forward to break the deadlock on the humanitarian issues by setting aside the political problem of recognition. In a Declaration issued on that date they said that they “are resolved to continue their efforts to reduce tension, promote friendly and harmonious relationship in the subcontinent and work together towards the establishment of a durable peace.” Inspired by this vision and “in the larger interests of reconciliation, peace and stability in the sub-continent” they jointly proposed that the problem of the detained and stranded persons should be resolved on humanitarian considerations through simultaneous repatriation of all such persons except those Pakistani prisoners of war who might be required by the Government of Bangladesh for trial on certain charges.

5. Following the Declaration there were a series of talks between India and Bangladesh, and India and Pakistan. These talks resulted in an agreement at Delhi on August 28, 1973, between India and Pakistan with the concurrence of Bangladesh, which provided for a solution of the outstanding humanitarian problems.

6. In pursuance of this Agreement, the process of three-way repatriation commenced on September 19, 1973. So far nearly 300,000 persons have been repatriated which has generated an atmosphere of reconciliation and paved the way for normalisation of relations in the sub-continent.¹⁰

The Stranded; The Space

I did not realise looking back or talking about a period of one's life would be so difficult and there would be so much reluctance and resistance to talk or write about those days of uncertainties. As a young girl growing up in West Pakistan, I was aware of the political fervours taking place in the then East Pakistan. My father was then posted in Sialkot. He was a senior Major in the Army Medical Core (AMC) and was the second in command of a Field regiment. If memory serves me right it was the 6 Field Ambulance, but to be honest, I don't remember it and my parents are no more there to tell me. Strangely after our repatriation from Pakistan, we never much talked about our camp days and whenever we did talk about our childhood it was about the fun times that we have had in our pre-1970 days and our drives to Swat, Murree, and all other places. My father was fond of travelling and he drove us all in our small Austin car to the remotest parts of West Pakistan for sightseeing; these were the things that we talked of, NOT the camp days. Those definitely were not happy times and looking back I realise my parents did not want us to remain disturbed; as our post-repatriated lives too were full of struggles of settling down.

But importantly for me and perhaps for many of my generation, those days were and remain very critical. During the 1971 wartime, the Bengali military officers came under heavy surveillance. My father's promotion was due well before 1970 but it was stopped just because he was a Bengali. I recall how our parents started instructing us to remain guarded in schools. Some of our West Pakistani schoolmates started taunting us as "traitors." I still remember our English teacher telling the class that as a people Bengalis cannot be trusted. Yet there were friends who were very helpful. Those were very uncomfortable and uncertain times. I could see the greying hairlines of my parents. When the war started on a full scale on the Western front, the members of the Bengali families were sent to the Mangla Dam city. There we found that the family members of the West Pakistani military officials were also there, but they were kept in separate places. There was no intermingling between the two—the Bengalis and the West Pakistanis. I remember, how the "Bengaliness" started taking shape in my mind in the dark rooms in Mangla Dam city. The windowpanes were painted dark, and trenches were dug in front of our houses as warning sirens were often heard and we all ran into the trenches. It was difficult to keep my little sister who was only four years old from crying. We had another Bengali family with us, whose daughter was only six months old; her cryings would also not stop in those dark trenches. My father was alone in Sialkot and all the Bengali military personnel were grounded.

On December 16, 1971, victory came to us. We heard on the radio about the surrender of the Pakistan army. We were overjoyed but were scared to death, as our houses were strictly guarded, and we were worried about my father. Finally, we came back to Sialkot. I don't recall the month, but only remember how I had embraced my father! We started hearing that we will be sent to prisons or interned in camps. I watched my parents selling off our furnishes and the small car that had carried us all to the different parts of the country, that we considered once to be our own. Our houses were being guarded and our fates were uncertain. Bengali military officials were given the option to stay either in Pakistan or to opt for Bangladesh. My father, along with a majority of the Bengali military officials had opted for Bangladesh. Those were very intense times, I had mixed feelings, I was scared because we felt like prisoners, it was like being stranded in a "no man's land"; but I was also filled with a sense of patriotism for my homeland, with which I had little familiarity. I guess the human capacity to hope for and dream never dies off; and it is cognitive states like this that create empowering spaces that allow people to carry on under adverse circumstances. In March of 1972, the Bengali military personnel stationed in Sialkot were sent in packed trains to Kohat Camp. The mental state of feeling like prisoners had become very much physically real. Kohat was primarily used as army training barracks. The camp was surrounded by barbed electrical wires and sentries were on guard 24/7. There were no houses, but instead, there were rows and rows of single-room units. Each family was given two rooms. There were common-use bathrooms for which the septic systems and sanitation were terrible. Salaries for all the officers were reduced to subsistence allowance, and we had to learn to live with even lesser resources.

My father had a passion for education. Under no circumstances he was willing to give up and let our studies be stopped. He took special permission from the Camp commander to allow me and my younger brother to be admitted to school so that our education might continue. He cited from what I understand now, the Geneva Convention on the Rights of POWs. My brother and I were admitted to Kohat Convent school. I recall we were taken to school by a guarded *tonga*. However, it was not to last for more than a week; as one of the interned Bengali military officers tried to escape and was electrocuted in his attempts, the fences had electricity passing through them all the while. I don't recall his name now, but remember he left behind his wife and a small 6–7-month baby in the camp. The school going stopped but I was very happy about it. By then I had drawn my lines and felt awkward in school, as the other students knew that I was coming from the camp.

Soon we were moved to Mandi Bahauddin Camp. It must have been late 1972 since it was wintertime. Mandi Bahauddin Camp was a huge and centralised camp designated for Bengali officers and their families. There were bungalow houses in the camp and each house, which would normally accommodate one family, was made to accommodate three families. In Mandi Bahauddin, the Bengali officers were becoming very restless. There was uncertainty about our fates, we had little access to news. During this period of moving from one camp to another, we had no communication with our

extended families back home. In Mandi Bahauddin, things began to take a more formalised shape. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was involved, and I recall how my mother used to write very censored letters to her sister in Manchester, UK. The letters were collected by the ICRC and then posted to the UK. Through the ICRC officials, we would receive replies from our family members in UK and Bangladesh. Through those letters, we came to know that both our maternal and paternal houses had been burnt down by the Pakistani military. My mother was inconsolable!

The Bengali military officials in the camp decided to take matters into their hands and bring some semblance of “normalcy” in our otherwise “prisoned” lives. They set up schools in the rooms and verandas of the bungalows. Schools were also set up under the open sky. There was a canteen in the camp, and writing copies and pencils were bought from there. If I remember correctly, the thrust was to teach Bangla, Maths, English, and other subjects. Since the future had become uncertain, the parents did not want the children’s future to be disrupted. This now makes me realise how important the *right to education* is. The officers, their wives, and the elder children were the teachers in that school. It needs to be noted that the school and the classes created an empowering space for the inmates of the camp. The children had academic as well as physical activities. The homeworks were done diligently, and monthly tests were held. My elder sister and father too taught in that school. Classes were held from nursery up to class VIII. Children growing up in West Pakistan had little knowledge of Bangla, so Bangla was a major area of emphasis, with the recitation of Bangla poems and learning of Bangla alphabets, young Bangladeshi citizens were being born imbued with Bengality and Bangla culture.

Bengali cultural activities held in the camp area was another major arena of this nation crafting process within the barbed electric fences of Pakistan territory. We observed the *Rabindra Jayanti*, held Bengali cultural festivals, Bengali dramas, and poems were performed. After every program, we sang the national anthem of Bangladesh, “*Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomae Bhalobashi*.” We observed all these programs right in front of the eyes of the Pakistani soldiers with their guns on their shoulders. I now realise that all our parents were doing, was to create a Bangladesh in our imagination; create a space that would empower us, keep us going, and instil into us the belief that we have a home and land to come back to; an identity, a culture and above all a language of our own. And to this homeland, we will one day return, so life needed to go on. Spaces, as Foucault observes are sites of oppression as well as resistance and sites of identity formation;¹¹ and for us, the camp space was a site of resistance and identity formation. While the states have their “high politics,” the individuals through the everydayness of their lives, communications, education, and cultural activities create a “high politics” of their own. The “Realist” conception of drawing lines between “high” and “low” or “hard” and “soft” politics, indeed is a hegemonic one, which prioritises the state over the people, yet interestingly, the modern state premises itself upon the “nation” or people.

As for my story, my father never knew how to give up. He wrote to the ICRC again and sought permission for me to sit for my matriculation. I just could not make my father understand that I had been out of the formal education system for quite some time by then and had no clue of the curriculum. Through the ICRC, he made me get in touch with one of my childhood friends from Rawalpindi whose father was a very high-ranking military official in the Pakistan Army Medical Core. Aqduş Rashid, my childhood friend was more than happy to send me the syllabus and the books. I got permission to sit for the exams in early February 1973, and the exams for the Sargodha Board were scheduled for April 1973. In the confines of one little room which I shared with six other girls, including my elder sister, I self-educated myself. I used to pray that something would happen or miraculously we would be repatriated, and I would not have to sit for the exams. However, that was not to happen, and then the exams started. Three other Bengali students also got permission to sit for the exams along with me.

We were taken to the examination centres, which was a public school, in an army-guarded vehicle. I still remember, how while leaving the camp premises, I had to fill up a register copy, which read, *Prisoner's name, Time of going out, Time of coming in*. My father stood by the fence and waved at me and would wait there till my return. In the exam hall it was awkward since we were under the watchful eyes of the military guards who had accompanied us. I came to know about my results from Aqduş, all of us had come out with flying colours. The day the results were announced by the camp authorities, the entire camp celebrated, my father embraced me and burst into tears. I had done exceptionally well. I could not believe it and kept on thinking that there were some errors and that soon the actual results would be published. Aqduş sent me my marksheet and a box full of chocolates and some trinkets; this was handed over to me by the camp authorities. Till date, my only proof of my matriculation is that marksheet that my friend had sent to me. I could never get my matric certificate.

We were repatriated in December 1973. In the camps I received my lessons of life, that space gave me the power to dream, to look beyond tomorrow, and more importantly shaped my life, my mind, and education. Indeed, in the confines of the camp life I had dreamt of freedom, of rights as a free citizen, a homeland, and a Bangladesh of my own.

The Displaced

I hated my mother. She used to force me to talk to the military officials who visited our house frequently. I was very young and quite beautiful. The military personnel loved to talk to me, my mother knew what their intentions were, yet she would force me to go and talk with them. The military had taken away my father; my mother hoped that if I befriended the military, they would release my father.¹²

This is how Kabita Chakma, former President of Hill Women's Federation (HWF) narrated her childhood experience to me. But Kabita no longer blames

her mother; she now understands that all her mother was doing was trying to protect her 'family', their 'home' and hoping to get the release of Kabita's father who was in army captivity. Being grown up now and having experienced a political movement, Kabita not only understands the helplessness of her mother; but also understands the dynamics of state politics. Kabita blames the state today, which, according to her forced her mother to do what she did. At this point, one needs a serious introspection on the nature of state, the 'given' notion of state as a guarantor of citizen's rights and the issue of citizenship. How equal we are as citizens? The attempt to change people's lives through state power in the name of law and national interest takes away people's lives from them. The resistances take varied forms. In the above instance, Kabita's mother, a homemaker tried to protect the family by appeasing the military. In other words, in this instance, the military derived its impunity socially from the family concerned by creating fear within the family.¹³

The above is not an isolated incident in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. The CHT situated in the southwestern region of Bangladesh comprises of three districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. It is populated by eleven ethnic groups who are culturally, and linguistically different from the Bengalis. The topography of the region is mainly hilly, which is different from the rest of the districts of Bangladesh. The region comprises almost ten per cent of the total land area of Bangladesh. The CHT had its own administrative system, largely administered by three circle chiefs, known as the Rajas. The three circles are: the Chakma circle, the Mong circle, and the Bohmong circle. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulations, 1900 popularly called the CHT Manual 1900 promulgated by the British colonial power constitutes the benchmark for administration for the Hill people, as they consider the Manual to be protective of their identity, rights, and privileges. The intrusion of the modern state has seen the erosion of their rights, and changes brought about in the name of "development" led to a widespread displacement of the Hill people and loss of their traditional land.

The first major blow and displacement of the Hill people came through the development endeavour in the CHT undertaken by the state of Pakistan through the construction of the Kaptai Dam. In order to accelerate the industrialisation process of East Pakistan, the Pakistan government undertook the project to harness the water resources of CHT. A hydroelectric project was constructed on the Karnafuly river in Rangamati. A huge lake was created to the north and east of a barrage at Kaptai village between 1957–62 with US financial and technical assistance. The construction of the dam had far-reaching implications for the Hill people. No social impact study was made prior to the construction of the dam. The dam submerged an area of about 400 sq. mi. including about 54,000 acres of cultivable land making up 40 per cent of the district's total acreage. Almost 90 miles of government road and 10 sq. mi. of Reserved Forest (RF) also went under water. It made more than 100,000 Chakma persons landless and homeless. The Hill people regard the Kaptai dam as their teardrop, and very symbolically for them, a large chunk of the Royal palace had also submerged under water, which can still be seen on

moonlit nights. Quite ironically, this is projected as a tourist attraction by the state-run *Porjaton*, or tourism department.

A section of the Hill people, however, regard the Kaptai dam as a watershed in the political awakening of the Hill people. Being deprived of land resources, since the Hill people were mostly dependent on agriculture; they took recourse to education. It was a period of intense political movements in East Pakistan, but the Hill people had never been incorporated within the fold of those movements; moreover, the Kaptai dam was constructed for the development of East Pakistan, and it facilitated the migration of the Bengalis into the region. The Pakistan government also withdrew the Special Status of the region in 1964. These incidents gave rise to political consciousness among the Hill people. The seeds of a “nation” distinct from the Bengalis began to germinate. The Rangamati Communist Party (RCP) was formed with Manobendra Narayan Larma as its leader. This was the beginning of the growth of nationalism among the Hill people; though there is abundant scope to debate on this issue, but in a post-colonial setting the idea of a separate identity in a political sense saw its birth in the CHT with the creation of Kaptai. One may argue that it was the politics of development which created the displacements and the displaced; the loss of land which for the Hill people is sacrosanct and is considered as the abode of their ancestors; the displacements gave birth to a new form of politics, which was more vocal and formal in nature in the CHT.

The formation of the Parbattya Chottogram Jonoshonghoti Samity (PCJSS) in 1972 in independent Bangladesh was a continuation of the same process. The PCJSS’s demand for cultural recognition and autonomy for CHT within the state of Bangladesh saw the onset of an insurgency, which began in 1975 and concluded with the signing of an accord in December 1997. Over two decades of insurgency saw the full militarisation of the CHT; and the settlement of Bengalis in the region as a counter-insurgency measure. The settlements were made in the name of “development”; and the claim that there were empty spaces and vast tracts of idle land in the CHT. The latter claim was indeed incorrect since most of the land in CHT was not fit for cultivation; and the entire region being hilly and sloppy constitutes a fragile ecological zone. The government claimed that Bengalis were being settled in *kehas* or government-owned land. However, the Hill people claimed these as communal land. The settlements not only had economic consequences, but it also made 100,000 Hill people homeless. About half of them crossed over to Tripura and Mizoram as refugees, and the rest became internally displaced persons (IDPs). The settlements also changed the demographic composition of the region.¹⁴

The land and the Bengali settlers’ issue are the major bones of contention between the Hill people and the Bangladesh state. The autonomy movement saw the birth of “*Jumma*” nationalism of the Hill people. The movement witnessed the active participation of women and the general people; one can discern the rise of indigenous women’s rights and human rights movements during the period. These movements developed national, regional, and international networks. Though ironic, yet the CHT crisis saw

the birth of an indigenous people's movement within the state of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh state does not recognise the existence of indigenous people within Bangladesh. There are many stories in the CHT like Kabita Chakma, her mother was later forced to dismantle their house by the Bangladesh military personnel; as it was regarded as a shelter place for *Shanti Bahini*, the armed wing of the PCJSS by the Bangladesh military. The homelessness and displacement strengthened the resolve of Kabita Chakma. Till date, Kabita Chakma remains an activist for Hill people's rights and women's rights. The displacements and loss of land made the Hill people more conscious of their rights and more importantly, the notion of land ownership also marked a change from communal to private. Land, thus became a "property." This was a displacement of their identity too, known as *Jhumiyas* or people who do *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation, they either became landless or took to plough cultivation. It is no surprise then, that the nomenclature Jumma was taken as their collective identity marker by the PCJSS. The Hill people had been looked down since the colonial period because of the *jhum* mode of cultivation; the adoption of the jumma identity was a reassertion of their selfhood, a move to give the Hill people their pride back in their tradition. The latter indeed has immense empowering effects, both in the physical and cognitive sense, and cuts across the temporal scale.

The Refugees

Bangladesh today hosts more than 1.1 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh, officially they are known as forcibly displaced persons from Myanmar. The Rohingya influx into Bangladesh began in the late '70s, and the second wave came in the '90s, the latest being the massive influx in August 2017; the latter has been described as a classic case of ethnic cleansing by the UN Secretary General. The Rohingyas are victims of genocide committed by the Myanmar state. They are stateless and one of the most persecuted people in the world. Today, the Rohingyas who took shelter in Bangladesh are housed in 34 camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf *upa-zillas* in the district of Cox's Bazar and over 30,000 of them have been relocated in Bhasan Char.

As part of collecting the testimonies of the victims/survivors of the genocidal violence, I have been going to the camps and talking mostly with women to document the nature of gender-based violence (GBV). It was revealing to observe that, women irrespective of their arrival periods in Bangladesh, whether in 1992 or in 2017–18; and their age were very vocal about the atrocities committed against them. Their daughters who have been born and raised in Bangladesh also knew of the stories and talked about the sufferings of their mothers, aunts, and relatives. The memories are being transmitted within the confines of the camps. These inter-generational stories of suffering have created a bond, a living history/herstory among the Rohingya women. The stories came live as women talked of men in olive green uniforms, some had masks on their faces and had long hair. As they spoke, I could see that they had gone back in time; their body language and the tone of their voice changed. There was anger, at times helplessness about

the present, and deep concerns for the future of their children. But in no unequal terms, they wanted justice.

Women also said that age was not a factor for the “Burmese.” They raped old women and young girls and killed the men in the family. Apart from torture at personal levels, women in general talked of the lack of freedom in Myanmar. They had no freedom of movement or education. They needed permission to move from one locality to another and had to constantly bribe the Chairman of their respective areas to get the minimum requirements. They had no access to medical facilities and hospitals. The new arrivals said that they send their children, meaning sons to madrasas, for if they learn the Holy Quran then at least they will get some job in the mosques. There is no other employment opportunity for them. The newly arrived women also said that it was a sin for girls to acquire education, so the girls receive only religious education. It is interesting to note that, despite the extreme conservativeness and patriarchal nature of the Rohingya society, the Rohingya women were very vocal about the violations and atrocities committed against them.

“We are not ashamed of telling the world that we have been raped, we are not ashamed.” These words were said by many women, and quite fiercely. Even the Rohingya men showed me to the tents where women who had been violated were staying. This assertion, that too coming from a deeply conservative and patriarchal society where most of the women I talked to were clad in burkha and many had their faces covered, might appear to be at odds with the conventional understanding of shame and honour. Being violated or raped is generally equated with the loss of shame and honour for a girl and the community.

These people, otherwise very conservative, who even consider girl education to be a sin, bring forth not only their anger but also the determination to expose the perpetrators. Underlying these claims and assertions is the reflection of a deep-felt scar of being violated as a people and the demand for justice. The assertion that they were not ashamed does factor in that it is a matter of shame, but they through their assertions are crossing the traditional boundaries of shame and honour; purity and pollution; and establishing a norm were speaking out and holding the perpetrator accountable is no longer silenced. The notions of purity and pollution so integral to conventional constructs of womanhood and honour of a community/nation are also crossed and challenged in order to attain their rights as human beings. These assertions, it is argued here are major challenges to the world community on its normative principles and standards; and also, the social constructs of norms and practices supposedly regulating the society. This might be seen as an act of desperation under desperate conditions, but there is no denying that traditional boundaries are being crossed by very “traditional” communities and women who belong to those communities, which the world labels as “backward.”¹⁵

It is important to note the contributions of various international and national non-governmental NGOs in the process of space creation for the refugees. The Rohingya camps are dotted with friendly/safe spaces, namely, Women Friendly Space, Child Friendly Space, Men Friendly Space, Elderly

Friendly Space, Orphan Friendly Space. During the focused group discussions (FGDs) with the refugee women in the camp, they said that in Myanmar their movements were restricted by their family. Security concerns and religion were major factors behind this. Parents often kept their daughters inside the house, protected from any contact with males. In the camp, the creation of women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) have emerged as a key strategy for the protection and empowerment of women and girls affected by the conflict. According to UNFPA, the idea of a safe space is a space where women and girls feel physically and emotionally safe.¹⁶ The term "safe," in the present context, refers to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or fear of violence), or abuse. It is a space where women and girls, being the intended beneficiaries, feel comfortable and enjoy the freedom to express themselves without the fear of judgment or harm.¹⁷

During FGDs with the women, the participants stated that they enjoyed the space. This meeting place has created a bonding between them. They sing songs, chant rhymes and gossip about things. This is a space where they also come to dispense tensions. They sometimes discussed about the issues and problems that they face in their camp lives. Physical security and safety are major issues for them. Women talk about domestic violence and try to create bonding among themselves. It was observed that over the period of time, due to external interventions by the INGOs and NGOs, women have been sensitised about their rights. They speak out against domestic violence and console each other. Women speak of polygamy and assert that it is wrong; though polygamy is quite common among the Rohingyas. Child marriage is common among the Rohingyas. Rohingya women now speak out against child marriage. They also want their children to be educated, both male and female. The ideas of Friendly and Safe spaces have their strong limitations. These may be looked upon as tools to "manage" people, an NGO, and INGO device to carry on their assistance; but in the process the key concerns and issues remain unaddressed, and the perpetrators go free while the global powers appear as the defenders of humanitarian laws and rules. The geo-economics and geopolitics surrounding the refugees is often lost sight of. In the instance of the Rohingyas, one observes a kind of complacency and acceptance of things, as they feel that at least they are safe in Bangladesh.

The Rohingya women are well aware of citizenship and its entitlements. Very frankly they stated that citizenship entails, equality of opportunities and freedom. They talked of their deprivations and lack of freedom, education, religion, movement, basic services, and so on. They felt that they need to have their own "kings" in the decision-making processes and institutions in order to vocalise their voices. They look towards a future where their children will get opportunities for education and decent jobs. They will be free to practice their religion and move around without fear and will be able to sleep in peace in their homes. One can observe the process of selfhood and political identities being created within them. The spectre of fear haunts them but the fearless soul within them looks towards a future without fear. Years of persecution, disenfranchisement, and the stripping off their citizenship have instilled fear, an absolute lack of trust on the Myanmar state,

and a bonding among the Rohingyas. The physical space of the camp has exposed them to INGO, NGO, and Bangladesh government's interventions at multiple levels. The Rohingyas also remain virtually connected with their relatives still living in Myanmar and their relatives who are part of the Rohingya diaspora. The physical and virtual space has created a bonding of trust and the sense of a community, a people; as the Rohingya women stated, that they are persecuted because they are Rohingyas and Muslims. Many Rohingyas stated that while fleeing Burma, they felt relieved as they approached a "Muslim" country. It is plausible to argue that the religious identity is being flagged to consolidate their bonding with the Bangladesh people, and the local host community, the majority of whom are Muslims. This suggests the role that religion continues to play in the lives of people and how it is adopted as a negotiating strategy. Indeed, there are Hindus and Christians also among the Rohingyas, who have taken refuge in Bangladesh; they constitute a minority within a minority.

Life in the camps is a restricted one. People live on rations. Camps are not homes. The need for belonging and being tied to a land, which gives one a sense of ownership is eternal in human beings. With the passage of time, the yearning for one's roots and the desire to go back to one's own home is understandable. The Rohingya women realise that Bangladesh is not their home, this land can provide them shelter in camps but not "home." Clifford Geertz pointed out that it is the collective memory of suffering that builds a nation.¹⁸ There indeed is a collective memory of persecution, atrocities, and torture that prevails among the Rohingya people. History, as experienced as common history, has been cited by Deutsch as a major ingredient in nation-making.¹⁹ The Rohingya community has experienced a common history of collective suffering, which binds the community together. Their lack of trust in the state of Myanmar and the assertion that they would return if members of their community assure them of safety back home is an articulation of faith and bonding of the community. The Rohingya women claimed themselves as Rohingya Muslims. They argued that they are being persecuted because of their religious identity; this one can argue is being used as an identity marker to negate the negativity that had been associated with it in Myanmar. Ashis Nandy's observation that a nation is born out of the sins of another nation,²⁰ perhaps is applicable here to suggest that a Rohingya nation is being born out of the sins committed by the Myanmar state.

Conclusion

This write-up is an attempt to traverse a personal journey at different phases of my life as an individual and a researcher. Though the three scenarios are different, but a common thread weaves them together, and this is the *modern state*. The situation of being "stranded," "displaced," and "refugee" or "forcibly displaced" are the consequences and creations of a state's oppressive policies. However, land/territory and borders too are integral to these creations. Here I would juxtapose the concept of "space" to "territory," which is otherwise a space as well; however, I would contend that space acquires a

different and larger connotation in situations like this. While having a physical realm, it extends beyond the spatial and penetrates the cognitive. The latter becomes a site of defiance, empowerment, and identity formation at the individual and community levels. To take the cue from Nandy, I would argue the politics of territoriality and bordered spaces gives birth to the politics of cognitive spaces which are borderless, and have a timelessness about them, which makes it a much more powerful tool of resistance.

Notes

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³ Harun-or-Rashid, *Inside Bengal Politics 1936–1947: Unpublished Correspondence of Partition Leader* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2003), 7.

⁴ Fazlul Huq to Jinnah, October 30, 1936, in Rashid, *Inside Bengal Politics*, 8.

⁵ Jamiluddin Ahmad, ed., *Speeches and Writings of Mr Jinnah*, vol. 2 (Lahore: Ashraf publications, 1964), 490.

⁶ Safiqul Islam, "Failure in State-Building: The Case of Pakistan," *Asian Profile* 12, no.6 (December 1984): 585.

⁷ Anisuzzaman, *Creativity, Reality and Identity* (Dhaka: International Centre for Bengal Studies, 1993), 107.

⁸ A.K. Khondokar, Moidul Hasan, and S.R. Mirza, *Muktijuddher purbapor: Kothopokothon* (Dhaka: Prothoma, 2014).

⁹ Mark Cutts, *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Actions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74.

¹⁰ "Bangladesh—India—Pakistan: Agreement on The Repatriation of Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees [Done at New Delhi, April 9, 1974]," *International Legal Materials* 13, no. 3 (1974): 501–5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20691263>.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage 1990); Jeremy W. Crampton, and Stuart Elden, eds. *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2007).

¹² Kabita Chakma (former President of Hill Women's Federation), in discussion with the author in Dhaka, February 18, 2010.

¹³ Amena Mohsin, The History of Sexual Violence, Impunity and Conflict The Bangladesh Context, in *Of The Nation Born, The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Hameeda Hossain & Amena Mohsin (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016), 55–56.

¹⁴ Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997).

¹⁵ Amena Mohsin, Caught between the nation and the state: Voices of the Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Volume 5 Number 2, June 2020, pp. 144–157

¹⁶ UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub, *Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Guidance Note Based on Lesson Learned from the Syrian Crisis*, March 2015, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/women-girls-safe-spaces-guidance-note-based-lessons-learned-syrian-crisis>.

¹⁷ UNFPA, *Women and Girls Safe Spaces*.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, "Primordial and Civic Ties," in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson, and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29–33.

¹⁹ Karl Deutsch, "Nationalism and Social Communication," in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson, and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 26–28.

²⁰ Ashish Nandy made the statement in his Valedictory Speech on, In *Revisiting International Relations (IR): Critical Reflections on 100 Years* (Conference), Dhaka, January 21, 2019.