

The politics of Space: Refugees, Displaced and Stranded

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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'. 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 '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 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.

Much later as a student and researcher of politics, I relearnt my lessons of my life in the camps. The Bangladesh government had settled Bengalis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the late '70s and '80s as a counter-insurgency strategy. This not only created wide scale displacement of the indigenous people of the CHT, but also led to change in their land ownership patterns, modes of cultivation and environmental hazards. Land, till today remains the major bone of contention in the region. But then this land is not looked upon as a piece of land by the Hill people, they link it to a space that is the abode of their ancestors and their identity. While settling the Bengalis in the CHT, a major rationale of the state was that there was abundance of empty space in the CHT and that needs to be 'developed'. The consequence is an unstable and highly securitized CHT till date.

The Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh are dotted with, 'friendly spaces', starting with orphan friendly to elderly friendly. While these spaces do give a breathing space to the interns of the camps, but then what do these small spaces signify? Are these spaces creating wider spaces in their imaginations or are these sites of human miseries, or both?

This essay will tread through these three spaces, in time and space, and will attempt to link it to the politics of state, nationhood.