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# **Witnessing the Birth of a Nation Narrative Frames of Refugee and Relief in Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971**

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**Witnessing the Birth of a Nation  
Narrative Frames of Refugee and Relief in  
Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971**

**Rituparna Datta**

**2022**



# Witnessing the Birth of a Nation Narrative Frames of Refugee and Relief in Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971

Rituparna Datta \*

“Co-seeing, if it were to happen, happens in the destruction that will be. The seen, or what is presumed as such, has intact eyes but those who claim to see, and therefore have allegedly seen, have almost-eyes.”

-Yousif M. Qasmiyeh<sup>1</sup>

On 19 March 2021, the Press Club of Kolkata hosted the *Swarnim Vijay Varsh Flame* ceremony amidst the presence of eminent journalists and the Indian Army to celebrate the fifty years of independence of Bangladesh. It was an event that not just reminded of the contribution of the Indian government in achieving the liberation of Bangladesh, but it once again retold the story of the intrinsic relation of war and media, especially print media which was most operative during the 1971 Bangladesh freedom struggle. While the army fought on the frontiers, the journalists, and photojournalists made inroads into various forward formations, sometimes accompanying the army and giving information about the valiant fight to the *Muktijoddhas* and the Indian Army, the reports on genocide, maintaining communication with self-declared independent Bangladesh government, to the world as foreign journalists could not go into erstwhile East Pakistan and its eastern frontiers. Soon Calcutta in 1971 became an international hub for journalists to spread information about the Liberation War to the world. While we live in the age of information and populist politics and mediated populism frame, in 1971 it was the journalist, especially the Bengal journalist networks was bringing the news of the war to the home and abroad. It was the collection and dissemination of the war diaries, that hardened the liberals’ opinion or what Sartre might have called the ‘constitution of contempt’ that disassociating itself as East Pakistan was an irreversible trajectory. History has its own tactics and its own logic but to know the history, one has to ‘move into the places where history, with a capital H, really happens’ and in 1971 media was that corridor of stepping into the narratives of the realities and building of the speculative gaze whether Bangladesh was going to become the powder keg of the region or enliven the ecstasies of the cause that led to the birth of Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup>

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## **‘Print Capitalism’ & Untr tranquil Times: A Story Foretold, A Story Retold**

Time is witness or is often said to bear witness to the happenings around the individual foci. But who bears witness to that time? The one who bears the effects or the one who had affective ties or an on seer? Perhaps all, it is the intertwining of the self and the other in the presence and in its perspective the act of seeing produces the activity of witnessing the time or doing ‘co-seeing’ producing a spectatorial gaze of an event. Thus, multiple bearings of the loci of time produce multiple makers of the temporality of events and generate narratives in permanence and in liminality and generate its own logic of sense<sup>3</sup> where the constant remains central and variables become affectual and epiphanic. 1971 was the year when the world was witnessing the birth of a nation-‘Bangla Desh’<sup>4</sup> in the South Asian region as also it was seeing the massive humanitarian crisis in both the Bengals—one fighting with bare resources and sacrificing themselves at the altar of the civil war to claim the ‘Bengali’ identity and seek a nation for themselves and the other as neighbour started receiving the burdens of genocide inflicted by West Pakistan with uninterrupted inflow of refugees who were left with no choice but to flee their homeland with traces of what could be called as remnants of visible ‘bare life’. According to the official statistics of the East Pakistan High Commission for Refugees, United Nations between March to November 1971, India received nearly ten million refugees from Bangladesh with around 6.8 million living in the refugee camps while the rest preferred to stay with their kith and kin outside the camps. The staggering human crisis once again attracted the attention of the global media and created a comparative gaze of South Asia through population dislocations within the trope of nation-making and certainly laid bare the questions of the problematics inherent in the ‘making’ itself visible to the ‘glocal’ audience receiving the war and its aftershocks on a varying scale of moralistic and realistic responses depending on the spatiotemporal distances from the theatre of the war. This act of seeing or precisely co-seeing the war rested on the triple axis of genocide as the narratives of the negatives; refugee mobility as part of the process of nation-making to be treated as temporary asylum seekers and not as nation seekers; and the recognition for a nation that will be born in the immediate future. The refugee locations became the sites or ‘spaces of indeterminacy’ where hopes of utopian possibilities of a new nation were juxtaposed to the dystopian realities of statelessness and responses to genocidal brutalities. The images of fleeing and seeking refuge in camps and the temporality of mobility through the non-camp sites became representative of dialectical complexities of viewing the imagined futures of seeking absolute cartography of a representative nation. The paper seeks to look at the discursive dialogic spaces of the linguistics and imageries used in portraying the event and the varying connotation of the refugee and war that emerged from the beginning of the war in March 1971 till they became the residual remainder of the war as returnees after the long wait of ‘nine months to freedom’.<sup>5</sup> It also tries to look through and beyond the materiality of the medium conveying the news of the war and treat the news itself as a circulatory value process that made the refugee dislocations becoming autochthonic spaces of cognitive maps creating situational representations of the refugee as a subject within the grids of humanitarian totality and became an ideological critique of solidarity as a global system of responsibility in a postmodern world and acted as refractors for the ideological formations of associative solidarity that came out in response to the Liberation War. The journalistic representation of the war gradually became the intimate theatre of getting involved with the war and generating an emotional response system to the morality of the cause of the war. The act of seeing the imageries of refuge in the Liberation War became symbolic of the way the global community (un)wanted to see Bangla Desh be born out of East Pakistan. The Liberation War produced spectral and spectatorial gaze glocally where the visuals of the war in images and through texts created an ocular-centrism

where the reality of the time was surgent through the need of an intervention of care for the suffering humanity. The populist politics of the time and the mediated populism attempted to narrate the unseen that made these vivid visuals intelligible which can be seen through the Deleuze-Foucauldian concepts of 'enunciative-modalities' that generated 'modalities of seeing'.<sup>6</sup> With the outbreak of the war, almost every newspaper was reporting on the event and was simultaneously generating an archive of opinion that was emotively assuming a structure of the self not in flesh but in the opinion of a neighbourly nation that mouthpieced the cause of the war to the global audience. And generating a window for practical engagement with the event through relief and aid networks—physical, moral, and material. The popular reception of the war generated a vocabulary of its own. Hence the global public was reading/ listening/viewing the war through the axis of *Sangrami Janagan* of Bangladesh fighting for an independent democratic nation. Thus, the reader as the public was both the platform for outreaching the eventualities of the war as well as the modicum of the performativity of the war in flesh and blood surviving the realities of the war either by joining the civil war or by fleeing or seeking refuge away from the war. In either case, a broader concept of the mass/public was formed as a global citizen that was geographically distributed regionally but functioning through a geometric core of the war theatre in Bangladesh that diametered out centrifugally in a larger response circle. Refugee protection became value generating process of public goods and will with the protection policy reflective of the collective action to resolve the crisis.<sup>7</sup> During the nine months, the war vocabulary and the corresponding rhythms of response it generated in polarities of supporting the cause of the war or the relief systems travelled topologically and description of the events were structured in terms of its position to the proximity to war centre and the responsibility it has to share morally as being neighbours and globally the world community was engaged in a communal ostrich act<sup>8</sup>—gradually what was considered as the internal affairs of Pakistan to deal with the anti-state secessionist elements in East Pakistan from March 1971 evoked much interest amongst the nations of the world. In either of the cases, 1971 showed how response spaces become organised as connected interlinked contours operating in a bio-continuous trefoil knot where India, Bangladesh & the Cold War superpowers operate as the three-leaf clover in understanding the righteousness of the war. This complex geopolitics made 'Bangladesh' a household name through the world press in 1971.<sup>9</sup> The war became the 'testimony of a tragedy...horrifying...story of millions hounded, homeless and dying' resonated with facts and 'faces' for the world to know of an altered dimension of butchered humanity.<sup>10</sup> Every account of the war became, thus, an 'eye-witness' account whether it was Mother Teresa, Allen Ginsberg, Nicholas Tomalin, John Pilger, Peter Hazelhurst, Martin Woollacott, Manas Ghosh, Anthony Mascarenhas and others or the millions of refugees in India or the billions of readers across the world, in 1971, it was everyone's war, everyone's account of witnessing. For Sayed Badrul Ahsan and many others looking onto the fate of the eastern arm of Pakistan, 1971 was a year when 'life took a quantum leap', as they witnessed the birth of a nation 'Bangla Desh',

"My father and I waited, with our little transistor before us, on the afternoon of March 7, 1971, to hear Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman speak in Dhaka. More than a thousand miles away in Quetta, we waited for the Dhaka station of Radio Pakistan to take us to the Race Course. We waited in the expectation that Bangabandhu would declare Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan...Nineteen days later, on the evening of March 26...the army had gone into committing genocide...was a story we did not know. Indeed, no one knew...And then the general came on the radio. His speech left everything splintered into a thousand pieces. At that point, I ceased to be a Pakistani, telling my father Pakistan was not our country anymore...Judging by the reports we were getting per courtesy of the BBC, Voice of America and All India Radio, the army was cheerfully

mowing down our people in what had now become occupied Bangladesh...My 1971 is part of my life's story. In early August, I heard Radio Pakistan broadcast news of Bangabandhu's impending trial, which would begin on August 11 before a military tribunal in West Pakistan. It was depressing. I spent the days composing poetry on the war, wondering how I could pass them onto Swadhin Bangla Betar, which I tuned in to every evening at low volume. The threat of collaborators eavesdropping was always there. And then came the day of deliverance. On December 16, life took a quantum leap when we heard Indira Gandhi on All India Radio. "Dhaka is now the free capital of a free country," she told the Indian Parliament. In my excitement, I decided I would not go to sleep that night. The transistor was my companion all night long."<sup>11</sup>

As accounts of the genocide were controlled and fabricated as curbing civil unrest by the then Pakistan government; adventurous and inquisitive journalistic forays on the situation in East Pakistan and such news in the print in India and abroad played a primal role in creating awareness of the genocide and the war and later webs of opinions on the war. 'Are you reading?'<sup>12</sup> was the central force in this mediated populism. Tajuddin Ahmed in April remarked that the 'people of West Pakistan are silent spectators to the genocide'.<sup>13</sup> This paradoxical silence according to Mascarenhas was due to tailor-made efforts of the propagandist Information Ministry in Pakistan that till July 1971 made every coordinated effort to curb the report of genocide and published reports of 'normalcy' following Mujib's 'civil disobedience'. Realities of genocide were replaced by narratives of 'atrocities' by the belligerent Bengalis who in the West Pakistani press was no better than 'miscreants'.<sup>14</sup> 'Conflicting information' came from the alternate media like radio broadcasts especially *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra*, All India Radio, BBC, Voice of America who were bringing every account of the war through special episodes and segments each day thereby enlarging the temporal coverage of the war as well making the private spaces in the war as much as accessible and public as possible. The war was a narrative of different histories with their own designated victims and perpetrators with their own selective silences.<sup>15</sup> The continued reportage of the events of the Liberation War and subsequent refugee influx into India in newspapers and broadcasts became a 'feel tank' that generated emotions and parallels of haptic proprioception of the already living realities of the coming out of the partition in 1947. The descriptive frames of refugism and genocide in the Liberation War generated an 'emotional mobilisation' where the refugee bodies became the site of the cultural production of retributive subjection of transgressive militancy of West Pakistan and the entangled lingua franca used to portray this suffering substantiated by the visual imageries created definitive spaces of emotional consumerism capitalising the refugee pain. The depictions became liminal spaces that transcribed beyond being descriptive categories and offered a window into the lifeworlds of the refugees where the private became the public generating newer emotions that Wolf-Sontag highlights as the pain of others realised through 'felt' mechanisms in understanding and outreaching the wellbeing in the passage of wait generating solidarity networks of speculation about the potential future of these refugees.<sup>16</sup>





**Image 1:** *Simante Abhijatrir dol*, Jugantar, March 26, 1971.

The study borrows from Bakhtin's Heteroglossia<sup>17</sup> in developing the approach of 'thinking through paper' where the lingua franca itself becomes a passive sculptor of the amorous image of the refugee while trying to map a social attitude distance between Arendt's 'We Refugees'<sup>18</sup> and Wolf's 'We' seeing the refugees. Thereby the visual tool of co-seeing becomes the central trope of analysing the combinatorics of the event through the representation of the fleeing masses and genocidal horrors creating sensual qualities of the mental spaces that invoke the global responses of the requirement of care and protectionisms not as abstractions but as considerate spaces rationally/morally cognised within the empirical intuition of the global socio-political consciousness. As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh opines that '[f]orced migration moves in and out of the public sphere, with political, media, and civil society attention ebbing and flowing across time and space.'<sup>19</sup> I argue for the same but in a reverse reordering ebb that graduates into flows from civil society to media that becomes political and gradually enters the public sphere. Operation Searchlight was the beginning point of the public expression to secede the identity as East Pakistan and dissent was being controlled through the punishment of oppressive violence and repression. In the initial days, the news of the struggle was an expression of the curious concern about ongoing processes on either side of the border and the act of confirmation of the gravity of reality and the gradual 'dimension of the depth' increased horizontally as the limitations of the flow of the migrants started increasing. The border remained the geographical location point of reference for the beginning of the gaze and slowly transferred into assertive reality as the native flows of migrants from *Opar Bangla* bearing the scars of violence transgressed the border to seek asylum in West Bengal. *Jugantar* published a report on 26 March 1971 titled '*Simante Abhijatri r Dol*' about the young members of the Explorers Club of India who bicycled to the Haridaspur Border and according to the Chief Secretary Shri Bhajan Nag this was an act of sympathy towards their brothers rebelling on *Opar Bangla* and remarks that the aim was to draw a common bond between the two Bengals. *Dui bangla ke eki sutre bandhte chai*'

(Image.1).<sup>20</sup> The same newspaper published another news ‘*Opar Banglar Manush Amader Hatchani Diye Dakhe*’ and the point of reportage was ‘*dui banglar simanta*’ (the border between two Bengals) and lamented that the border and the no man’s land have separated the two Bengals and the ‘*durlaghya bandha*’ the passport system as a preventive mechanism in controlling the access to the cross-border movement: ‘Jabar Upae nei, Ashbar upae nei.’<sup>21</sup> This act of travelling to the border has been called ‘*paribhraman*’ showing that in the initial days of knowing the war and its ensuing crisis was still a leisurely act of encountering the events either by the intelligentsia as part of everyday awareness of the changing geopolitics and its probable volatile effects or were curious encounters of seeing through an accessibly visible border of looking at a tethered nation rising in arms to come out of the garbs of the neo-colonialism. It was eventually with the rapid progress of the war that the image of the border as a barbed notion of ‘non-accessible’ crossways assumed a flattened contour and became a levelled corridor of influx.

The border till 26<sup>th</sup> March was the point of reference of the unresolved assertion of controlled seeing trying to create realistic narratives through the “glassy metaphors of mirror...[where] [s]hifting the frame of identity field of vision to the space of writing interrogates the

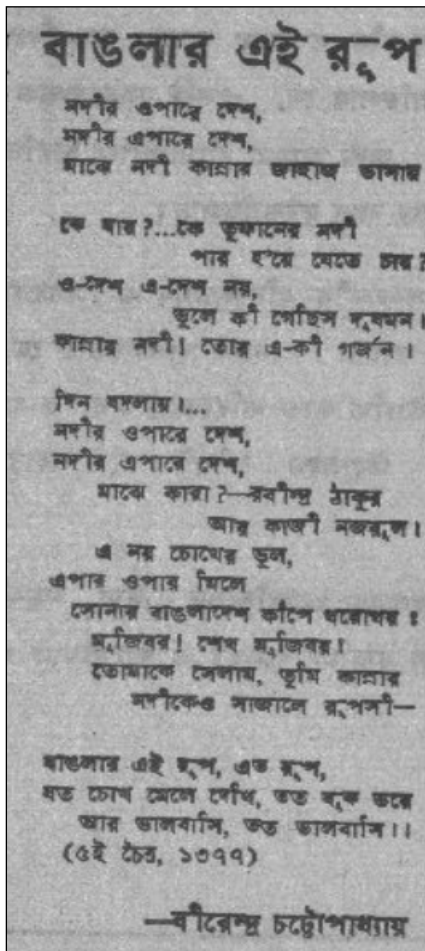


Image 2: Purba Banglar Mukti Sangram, Jugantar, 26 March 1971

third dimension that gives profundity to the representation of the Self and the Other....the realist metanarratives [that is the] ‘profound, geological dimension’.”<sup>22</sup> Swaran Singh, Minister of External Affairs on March 27, 1971, at the Lok Sabha Assembly said that the Indian Government on this solemn occasion and with firm determination stood ‘gravely concerned at the events taking place so close to our borders. We can therefore understand the deep emotions which have been aroused in this House and in the entire country’.<sup>23</sup> Border here could be looked upon as to borrow Bhaba’s expression as the “bilateral space of the symbolic consciousness... [that] constructs analogical relation between the signifier and signified.”<sup>24</sup> This continued consciousness of the ‘other’ as the ‘self’ kept reverberating throughout the reportages during the nine months of the freedom struggle. The geographical locations/indicators became the point of reference in connecting the similarities using terms like ‘*amar*’ (myself/our/own) prefacing these indicators and creating chains of ‘continued consciousness’ generating symbolic registers of depth of belonging that contributed to the production of empathetic solidarity beyond the constructs of temporality, thereby attributing not only elasticity but organic plasticity to the oneness of Bengal and Bengali nationalism beyond any cosmetic superimposition in consciousness production of geographical identity (Image.2). Borders hence became the performative zones of seeing across and seeing at the assimilative bond that materially exists in the haematological bond<sup>25</sup> embedded in the land that presupposes the continued unity before the long partition of 1905 and 1947. With the refugees crossing over the Indian mainland through different entry points throughout the nine

months and the Indian press expressing solidarity in receiving them no longer questions the right of entry but indicates the same as a fundamental right to claim through bonds of camaraderie and long ingenious brotherhood that colonial incisions could not sever. Refugee influx and border crossings became a sacrosanct act of mobility for self-defence and not a transgression of the border, but the act of refugee movement was looked upon as a safety shield against any planned aggression. This changing narrative of border crossings developed a new logic of via politics that allowed India to welcome the refugees as guests on the one hand and as making them foreigners on Indian soil on the other. India was thus seen through the lens of a resource frontier—supporting and providing for the war and hosting the refugees. And any act of retaliation from India would thereby also become an effective act of self-defence against the crisis of war and refugee influx.<sup>26</sup> By early May, it could be foretold that India and Pakistan would meet in an eye-to-eye situation and engage in a war of attrition on an expansive scale with the mounting pressure of the influx of refugees—'Bangla Desh was a fact of life'.<sup>27</sup>

### **'A Revolution by Consent': The Cultural Politics of Emotions**

H.N.Mukherjee in the Lok Sabha discussion on the 'Recent Developments in East Bengal' said that the war is,

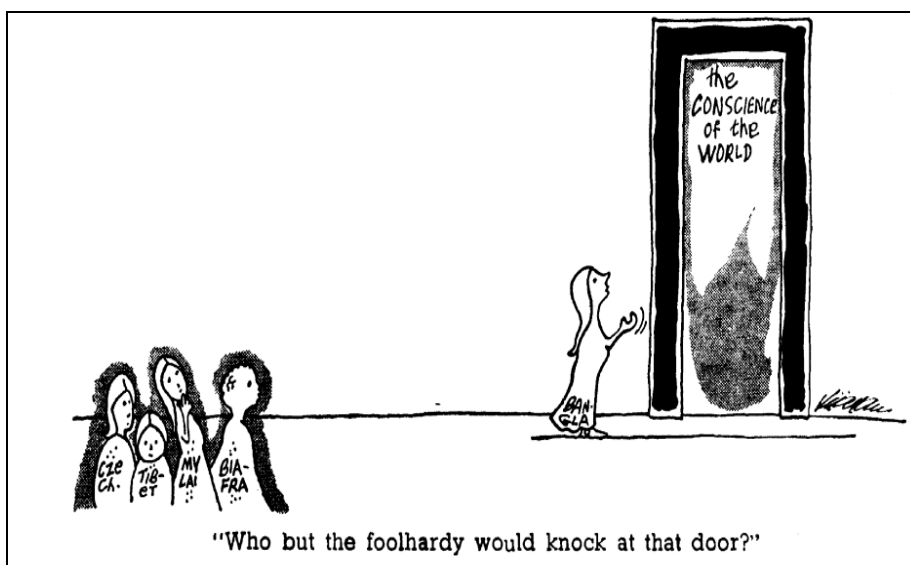
"an exceptional occasion when you will perhaps permit the expression of emotion of our people in regard to something which has happened which goes against the grain of all human decency. Bangla Desh to which many of us in this House also belong, is bleeding a thousand wounds because the people of East Bengal have risen almost without precedent in history and are now being sought to be punished by those who do not know anything but the law of the jungle...It was a revolution by consent. It was a result of the ballot that a preponderant...expressed themselves in the autonomous rights of that province. There took place spectacles which at least a country which sweats by the name of Gandhi should salute in the manner that is called for at the present moment of time."<sup>28</sup>

The Liberation War beyond being political was also an event that shook the moral core of modern nations. The Institute of Constitutional and Parliamentary Studies in New Delhi held a symposium on 'Recognition of Bangla Desh—Legal, Political and Moral Issues' in 1971 to fathom how the tragedy of the genocide transcended its geographical frontiers and 'today' Bangla Desh question is political, moral and legal issues wrapped in one and the conscience of the world could not remain deaf and blind to what was happening in Bangla Desh.<sup>29</sup> It was a peoples' war and at every juncture, a new image of people was being carved out on three pillars—firstly, people of Bangla Desh as resisting and fighting was carved out of bravery and sacrifice for the mother nation; secondly, people of West Pakistan; and finally, people as supporting pressure groups in the opposite camp of the war. Three different pronouns were more commonly used to designate their ethical composure of we, they and you/your/neutral pronoun respectively in common parlance. This classification can be more clearly understood as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman said, 'They have money, they have influence, they have the capacity to use force against the people. History, however, testifies that determined people can successfully resist and overcome such forces of oppression'. Bangla Desh affairs and its normative globality was compared with French Revolution—it was not a rebellion but a revolution as history was being written and made that would influence not only the next-door neighbour India but would decide the geopolitics of South Asia for decades to come and what has been called as the domestic affair of Pakistan is similar to the United Nations refutation of the domestic jurisdiction claim by South Africa during apartheid.<sup>30</sup> The extermination and political

cleansing of East Pakistan on racial, and cultural selectiveness made sophisticated armed massacre in East Bengal a cultural and political genocide—the Jallianwala Bagh of the East where people laid down their lives as the price of freedom and liberty.<sup>31</sup> Reporting on the situation in Rajshahi, for Robert Kaylor it was a war of ‘People versus Modern Arms’. They were fighting with the only capital which was determination for a free homeland and everything else that takes to fight a war including communications, weapons organisation was weak in this peoples’ war.<sup>32</sup> Although in 1971 it seemed that South Asia was at war<sup>33</sup> but unlike Biafra or Tibet, Bangla Desh was a solemn resolution of a revolution for freedom that rested on recognition of Bangla Desh, and this discretion drew more attention as the people of Bangla Desh despite the ongoing turbulence—men, women, and children stood united to Sheikh Mujibur’s call for Liberation War and as Chagla said,

“our hearts must go out in admiration to a people, to a nation, to a State, which is so united in asking for

a separate State and separation from Pakistan?...if people determined to be free, they will ultimately be free, if not today, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow...There is no doubt that the terrible carnage going on...What has happened to the conscience of the world?... crushing human rights into the dust...Even Hitler might have learnt a few lesson from what West Pakistan is doing in Bangladesh. Why is the world silent? Why is the world quiet?”<sup>34</sup>



**Image 3:** Romesh Thapar, *The Revolutionary Wave*,  
Economic & Political Weekly, Vol. 6, Issue No. 15, 10 April 1971

The narrative techniques of the daily events, war casualties, and the involvement of other nations shows the pathway of a sub-continental war going global. The soul of the war was the exquisite pain of agony in death and its brutality on one hand and the camaraderie of solidarity in the protection of rights of self-identification on the other or precisely to guarantee what freedom in its universal democratic essence meant and on humanitarian grounds what this war was disparaging and suffocatingly strangulating East Pakistan. War testimonials were not just simple objective statements of the event but had a personification of their own, in other words of life witnessed at the crossroads

of helplessness of refuge and yet at the resistance to succumb from its aspiration of self-determination that ascribes a special value to the political meaning of life in refuge. So at one point, they are helpless victims of the massacre, fleeing either as direct victims of genocide or to avoid one and on the other plane their plight made it possible to become the locus of resistance, thereby becoming the passively active catalyst that destabilised the development imagination of the ideas of new nationhood not only South Asia but also the elite imagination of the Global North and the narratives became testimonial voices that provoked the questions of seeking ‘meaningful enquiries’ into the political struggle of the Liberation War—a war looked through the narrative evidence of the dispossessed bodies of the refugee. Refugees thereby became an agency of granting the historical analytical tool the event of the war in its longue durée not in effects but in the cause. Death, despair, and debility that came out of the resistance were not just an empirical fact of one’s biological frailness but the wilful act of political desubjectification from the existing regime. Thus, refugee life here becomes a paradoxical agency of both imaginative intensity of seeking nationhood and at the same time marking the limits of the helplessness and pains of living as a stateless, the pain of living in refuge.<sup>35</sup>

Lévy remarked that the Bangla Desh affair was spectacular in its characteristics of bearing an exemplary value that marked the awakening of Asia.<sup>36</sup> Romesh Thapar in his columns ‘*Capital View*’ on Bangla Desh with Economic and Political Weekly wrote:

“Not a minute passes without some reference to Bangla Desh. The mood is excitable, electric — and despite the inevitable let-down which had to follow the miserable, exaggerated and concocted coverage of developments in East Bengal in the national press, After all, revolutions are not made in editorial or news offices. The excitement is a mix of good and bad emotion....Partition and its aftermath were not able to destroy the national urges and associations of people on both sides of the border...Interestingly enough, India is again emerging in the international community as an oasis of hope and promise.”<sup>37</sup>

Refugee hosting was not a novel situation in India already burdened with its attempts to ameliorate the condition of the partition refugees. Mahadeb Naskar’s poem *Notun Upadhi* in Nandinkar’s pamphlet ‘*Batrish Bachorer Udbastu Nirjataner Pratibade*’ published in January 1971 remains critical of the failure of the refugee rehabilitation policies of the Congress and promises of the Left in Bengal and metaphorically relates the bio-political realities of the refugee situation with a road and its unending peripherality as the reality the terms *udbastu* is inherent with. The partition refugees have been variedly termed as *udbastu*, *bastubara*, *chinnamool*, *saranarathi* and other synonymous terms in the popular discourse not only as an identifier of the new citizens that shows physical disconnect of uprootedness from the paternal home to the point of no return but with emotional reckoning for the left behind natal home. Between 1947-71 the Bengali refugee lexicography developed its connotation summarily to identify the refugee as a non-returnee. With the outbreak of the Liberation War once again fresh bouts of refugee influx started coming in and continued uninterrupted till the end of the war in December. The vernacular reportage in Bengal consciously tilted these refugees as *saranarathi* *udbastu* to identify them as temporary asylum seekers yet the past anxieties of demographic reorganisation and economic instability affected the operative psyche of the nation as it showed the markets in the initial months of the war, as the Government of India despite hosting the refugees remained indecisive in its stance on the war. Nishtar considered this anxiety as the indecisive mood of the economy and at the beginning of April the stock markets continued to remain bullish responding as such to the ‘tragic events in East Pakistan weighing heavily on their minds, operators continued to remain on the sidelines...the mood of indecision persisted’.<sup>38</sup> From March 27 onwards

events were reported as the happenings in 'Bangla Desh' instead of East Pakistan indicative of the cartographic consciousness demanding its physical recognition space in the global cartographic imagination to be realised in the near future—East Pakistan was slowly becoming only reminiscent of the atrocities and injustice that belied the aspirations of nation formation in 1947. Jean Vincent after his visit to East Pakistan as part of a foreign journalists venture commented that 'Free Bengal does indeed exist' despite the fact that they had insufficient armed forces and the visible wealth of the person fighting the war consisted mainly of courage and enthusiasm, and the tactics of the war included the mixed approach of combining 'people's war' of Mao Tse-Tung and 'non-violence' practiced in India—"behind the evident hatred, one senses people's terror due to the liberation army's weakness and expected pitiless efficiency of West Pakistan's "pacification operations".' The war was an example of utilising the maximum potential of the 'masses'. Masses that were helpless targets of the armed offensive were also effective combative in creating human walls of compact circles of unarmed families that cut off and paralysed the West Pakistani troops in the 'Free Bengal'.<sup>39</sup> The patriotism of common folk in arms, as opposed to the treason and dagger operations of Pakistan, made them a modern recollection of Ovidian description of 'Simplex, nobilitas, perfida tela cave'.<sup>40</sup> The images of genocide and the fleeting masses made the statement clear that the *Mukti Bahini* was fighting an unequal war with abundant courage and fervent nationalism. Although India's military intervention in the war came at a much later date but the support systems of aid, relief in ameliorating the condition of both the refugees, and supporting the *Mukti Bahini* started from the very outset of the war. The relief networks activated the involvement of civil society on an unprecedented scale locally and globally. Although no statics exist as to the informality of the aid delivered but,

"(s)upport from this side has evidently played some part in the stiffening of morale in areas along the border which is clearly discernible. But such aid as has flowed across the border has not materially affected the military situation in East Bengal, especially in view of the Pakistani army's understandable unwillingness to get involved in engagements very close to the border. The relatively tranquil situation in these areas is reflected in the ease with which hordes of newspapermen, Indian and other, are able to saunter across the border."<sup>41</sup>

Whenever journalists or war correspondents were able to visit parts of liberated territories of Bangla Desh, all they could hear with much disappointment and angst was, 'Why doesn't the world help us?'<sup>42</sup> The people demanded to know what was the opinion of the world was thinking of the war and what they were doing apart from India and Soviet Russia to prevent the massacre in Bangla Desh. The past experiences of the macabre of death stiffened the opinion of Bangla Deshi youth that politics of appeal and expectations of humanistic sympathetic response from Pakistan was not going to stop the bloodshed and said 'we need something to help us fight the war'.<sup>43</sup> Sumanta Banerjee reached the frontier village of Bhombra by crossing the Ichhamati on a country boat and was greeted with 'Joy Bangla' on his arrival. He was taken to the Awami League leader of the EPR camp where he was distributing the receipts for food parcels received from civilians across the border.<sup>44</sup> The networks of relief in the nine months of war pushed the boundaries of the analytical beyond the political. The war was the projection of the ruthless suppression of the aspirations of a Bengali nationhood. The travel diaries of the war correspondents are resplendent with the memories of the Bangladeshi national flag shining atop every frontier post. The reportage of the event was assertive in using terms like mood, desire, hope, neighbourliness, and morality projecting an optimistic perspective of nation formation and how slowly Yahya Khan's attempt of halting the war was becoming a remote hope and that creation of Bangla Desh was already a fact for the world to

recognise.<sup>45</sup> The juxtaposition of the verse in portraying the utopian hopes and the dystopian realities created a sense of emotive (de)attachment to the cause of the war where the expectations were set out at the beginning of the war that started with the clarion call '*Ei juddho mukti r Juddho*'. As early as April there were reportages that read, "It looks very much as if we are on the eve of developments which will announce the formal institution of a government of free Bangla Desh. "or "We have to take cognisance of the fact that, after the recent happenings, independent Bangla Desh is already a fact—Bangla Desh which could be India's only friendly neighbour."<sup>46</sup> The repeated emphasis on the actuation of the factual imaginative that the Mukti Bahini was fighting for created further channels of methodological praxis of supporting the cause of Bangla Desh building upon a structure and agency that slowly was gaining its own momentum conditioned by the social context. Although the Joy Bangla movement hastened the first signs of the disintegration of Pakistan's unity, but it was not necessarily about the creation of Bangla Desh but the assimilative association and association of the victory of the people of Bengal.<sup>47</sup>

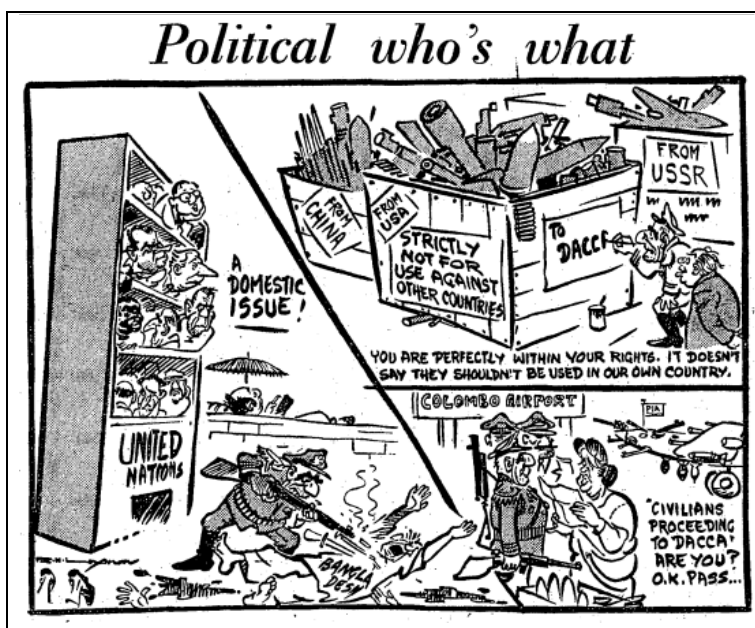


Image 4: The Times of India, April 4, 1971

It is interesting to see that the whole reorganisation of the frontier in South Asia was linked to the global cause of nation formation and 'consciousness' was the term that received plasticity of stretch and pull in involving the socialist and the capitalist blocks not only through their participation in platform opnionisation like the United Nations and its subsidiary agencies but also functioning as pressure channels by (un)providing material aid to the contending parties in the war. The global consciousness and global response was accorded a personification of its own and at different stages, depending on the involvement in the ongoing crisis, this personified human changed from being deaf and mute to an active individual forming a family of nations. The global approach to the problem is what Deshpande looks and metaphorises as the Siamese twins upon affecting the political health of

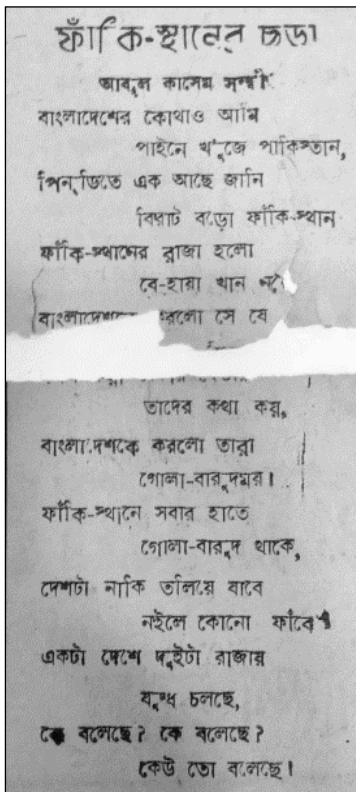
the country in its bilateral relation with neighbour Pakistan in its search for a qualitative relation of sympathy and support by looking for the precedence of superpower postures to the question of nation formation.<sup>48</sup> It was believed that the global consciousness ‘should not tolerate the existence of a regime in which the lives of the people...are not guaranteed by its administration’.<sup>49</sup> The centrality of support depended on the question ‘What is lawful in Pakistan?’ that could justify/negate the claims of the Liberation War. In April, an article in *Modern Review* tries to analyse the constitutionality of Pakistan in justifying the war as secessionist and anti-state activity and writes,

“Pakistan is supposed to be an Islamic Republic. But it is neither Islamic nor a Republic. For a military dictator cannot be considered to be anything Islamic like a Khalifa, a Paigambar, a Molla or a Pir. It is not Republic for obvious reasons, as it is governed according to the wishes of one person...The people of Pakistan are free to overthrow this dictatorial form of government in so far as Pakistan was never set up for the purpose of establishing a military dictatorship...Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is not a rebel, for nobody is really the lawful subject of a person who has grabbed power and not secured it in a lawful manner, as Yahya Khan has done....Pakistan is not in accordance with the purpose for which Pakistan was created in 1947. It is therefore constitutionally, legally and historically null and void.”<sup>50</sup>

The West Pakistani administration was often referred to as sadistic maniacs who went on to brigandage and the destitution caused was a part of their criminal lenacy that ingrained historically through its acts of coup d'états.<sup>51</sup> However, unlike the pre-71 Indo-Pak wars, the Liberation War

ceased to be just a bilateral issue and rather India's intervention was looked upon as a conciliatory role, mediated in favour of democracy and republicanism and transformed the local regional politics of nation-making in South Asia to the domain of international geopolitics. Thus, on one hand, it was a people's war and on the other it was also about India-Pakistan and ‘their’ war.<sup>52</sup> The war was beyond just being political. A report published in the *Times of India* in April said that certain political leaders of West Pakistan were demanding the West Pakistan Lawn Tennis Association to boycott the Davis Cup to play India in Ceylon in May 1971 since India was intervening in Pakistan's internal Affairs and suggested that Pakistan should not participate in anything that is Indian including the World Cup Hockey Tournament.<sup>53</sup>

Amidst the outburst and outcry of sympathy for courage and gallantry for the people of Bangla Desh, M. C. Setalvad expressed his concern that the need of the time was more to have ‘a fact point of view’ that goes beyond the outburst of feelings flowing out of the current carnage and tragedy was the question of ‘recognition’.<sup>54</sup> The dilemma and delay in supporting the cause of Bangla Desh rested in the question of the recognition and legitimacy of the claim nationhood of Bangla Desh. And in either of case, neither legitimacy was sacrosanct nor was recognition a ‘creative act’ but a ‘declaratory act’. In this act of negotiation of recognition in the world community that was often referred to as ‘family of nations, V. K. Krishna Menon posited that while a nation rises against imperialism, ‘what is the place of



**Image 5:** Dainik Basumati.



legitimism in revolution?’—recognition for Bangla Desh was the authority that came out of the ‘habitual obedience’ performed ‘by people’, 75 million in strength, to its own territory, where Pakistan does not exist anymore.<sup>55</sup> Abdus Salam, Secretary, Central Committee of the Communist Party of East Pakistan (Bangla Desh) appealed that as a signatory to the World Communist Conference, Moscow, 1969, hoped that the fraternity of the world communist movement and for that reason, all progressive democratic forces and socialist government to raise their powerful voices recognise Bangla Desh in their ‘just struggle’.<sup>56</sup> As Singhvi said that the struggle was a call for *de jure* recognition and not *de facto* recognition. In this politics of recognition, the policy of ‘quiet diplomacy’ as a grave failure was only a matter of time to prove as the war unfolded.

## **The Realpolitik of Relief in a ‘Mosaic of Misery’**

The war was managed and monitored on different fronts apart from the armed struggle. And one such front was the refugees. The refugees were the direct outcome of the war that made the Liberation struggle a regional issue and thence global. India as the immediate neighbour hosted the mixed and massive flow of suffering humanity. Sheikh Mujibur in his 1972 speech at the Ramna Racecourse thanked Indira Gandhi for caring for and feeding over a million citizens of Bangladesh who took shelter in India. He was also gratuitous towards the world community that stood beside Bangladesh in its war for freedom. What emerged in the discourse was a conceptualisation of ‘Good Neighbourliness’.<sup>57</sup> But besides providing hosting space for the refugees what remained crucial in the popular discussion was the question of providing life support and basic necessities for the refugees. The refugees were the constant modality for framing the relief policy of the Indian government and rehabilitation was not an end that was sought for as opposed to the case for the partition refugees. The anxiety that presupposed the approach of the governmentality was to slow down the flow of refugees. And the question that repeatedly resurfaced was ‘who is to feed the refugees’.<sup>58</sup> Within a month of the influx of refugees through the Indian borderland and news and stories of the Pakistani army set back in the countryside in Bangla Desh the euphoria of victory was gradually replaced by the anxiety of the locals ‘will they go back?’.<sup>59</sup> In general, civilians were openly supporting the government’s relief efforts based on the four axes of locating and confining the refugees at the campsites and at the same time attempting resource mobilisation through international assistance as well as creating conditions for their return by ensuring peace and security in the region.<sup>60</sup>

Although the refugee crisis created an exogenous immigration shock on Indian soil, the sympathetic responses in the political discourse of welcoming the refugees was an affirmative stance of support and instead of viewing them as the ‘other’ in the populist propaganda, the use of nativist ideology of bond and camaraderie by mainstream political actors in enthusiastically supporting the war did put up a humane front in managing the refugee crisis. Incidentally, xenophobia for refugees never percolated the public discourse during the Bangladesh War. Ajay Mukherjee’s Resolution on the Bangladesh issue was tabled at the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly on May 17, 1971, and all party response to it was an example of a cosmopolitan philosophy of addressing the questions of being and selfhood inherent in refugee figurations and ethically responding to the humanistic need of the other and to find meaning or signification of sense of humanity and the plausible crisis of living without an identity and in anarchy. His speech was reflective of the allegory of hopes and beliefs of a Bengal responding to the needs of the bereaved brotherhood. He calls the Liberation War a just and rightful war or ‘*nyayasangata sangram*’ and the Indian Government should support Bangla Desh and acknowledge its independent identity and as both Bengals shared an umbilical relation or ‘*narir samporkeo*’ and hence West Bengal cannot remain unperturbed to the sufferings of its own people.

Bengal despite being a demographically dense region heartily welcomed twelve to fourteen lakh refugees both Hindu and Muslim and provided them with food and shelter.<sup>61</sup> The continuous demand for the recognition of independent nationhood was also the result of increased anxieties due to the continuous flow of refugees and the limited ability of the provincial government to provide food and shelter even with aid from the Union Government. He even appealed for setting up more transit camps to transfer around five lakh refugees to other states. Jyoti Basu responding to the resolution said although there exist partisan differences in operational ideology from the Congress, the Bangladesh crisis united historically for the first time the Left-Congress alliance in supporting the cause of the war not only in the call for a sovereign democratic republic of Bangla Desh but also the support is required as a necessary safeguard to protecting democratic consciousness in India even it requires substantial sacrifices from the Left. ‘*Antarikota*’ was the substantial pull factor behind the resolute decision of the all-party coalition in furthering the cause of the war. Basu calls for the common conscience of the suppressed classes who faced oppression—the labourers, the proletariats, and the middle class to support the freedom movement and even in Pakistan those who support democracy will support the Liberation movement as ‘not everyone in Pakistan is Bhutto or Yahya.’ The emerging class-caste consciousness through the refugee discourse is what can be viewed from the Foucauldian perspective as the societal production of discourse which is representative of the desire for power relations.<sup>62</sup> The National Council of the Communist Party of India urged the presiding government and people of India to send all possible help including arms aid to the independent government and people of Bangla Desh to come out of the vestiges and bondages of enslavement and extermination and create a Bangla Desh fund where every party members must generously donate their one days’ salary.<sup>63</sup>



**Image 6:** ‘East Pakistan Refugees, 9 Million Flee the Country’. ”“Save The Children” hospital at Salt Lake Camp no.5, outside of Calcutta., Camp 5 shelters 260.000 people, and is crowded with another 340 who come to get rations but have no shelter. The hospital is a large shed filled with rows of board beds, where emaciated and fevered children lie with their dazed attending parents. A mother and daughter part of the Bangladesh refugees.” Photographer: Marilyn Silverstone. ©Magnum Photos, PAR155261

What formidably emerged from the war discourse was the horrific 'face' of brutal genocide that propelled refugee movements. And the self-representation of the victims in the fleeing masses showed the fallacies of the claim of the Yahya regime of a peaceful East Pakistan. Refugee influx in India had an awkward geographical dimension that involved the problem of logistics as well. Refugees from the prosperous jute belts of Sylhet-Chittagong were moving to Tripura, Mizoland, and Meghalaya which was less developed pushing up the inflation index and the resources required to manage had to be transported from the nearest industrial belt of Calcutta. Also, the greater addition of refugees to the existing Partition refugees was feared to push down the industrial wages further down the baseline which was already low Increasing the chances of unemployment.<sup>64</sup> By May 1971, 2.7 million refugees moved into India across 296 food distribution points inflating the population in many border towns like Hasnabad, Bongaon, Cooch Behar and in states like Tripura and the foothills of Assam. Although 1.8 million were accommodated in communal tarpaulins or hastily constructed huts, but many hopeless faces were seen in the open, on railway tracks, roadside, or in the fields.<sup>65</sup> Newspapers were resplendent with images of refugees walking home or on oxcarts carrying bare resources and sometimes it was limited to only a pair of clothes or a walking stick only, refugees staying in open shacks, or lying in hospital beds with emaciated bodies. Such images focusing on the faces of the refugee showing tired and withered bodies of traumatised souls create a connection of 'intersubjective social system of interaction and signification'<sup>66</sup> and generated a one-to-one palate of bringing the refugee and his pangs to the reader an act of individuation through the camera lens that ultimately became the signified pain of all refugees. The face to borrow Daniel Black's argument as sites of multiplex and layered phenomenon became an allegory of the violence felt on and through the body of the refugee.<sup>67</sup> These images were generating an 'affective aesthetics' of pain thereby cosmopolitanising genocidal horrors in Bangla Desh to the reading audience.<sup>68</sup>

Shri Biswanath Mukherjee said that twelve thousand refugees mostly belonging to the Scheduled Caste (Tapashili) crossed the border near Hakimpur in Basirhaat District in May 1971. Thousands were coming every day and feared many more coming in the next couple of days. No proper arrangements were made for the stay of the refugees. He continuously stressed the tension points caused by the infiltration of the refugees and uses terms like *asanka* (apprehension) to highlight the present condition of the refugees at the camp and squatting at the non-camp site and helplessly taking to roads and pavements as asylum sites. This squatting and hindering public life caused much stir amongst the residents and in probability will lead to violent outbursts of *danga* (riots) if the issue of the housing of the refugees was not taken immediately care of. He suggested the transit camp for the refugees be set up at locations far removed from the border.<sup>69</sup> Refugee sites became 'tactile geographies of homelessness'. The problem of refugee spaces as 'congested and contested' also became the site for transformation through temporary encampments or using existing infrastructures to host the refugee populations at places like school buildings, abandoned homes, etc., using thorough planning patterned on the concept of rural-urban renewal through reclamation strategy depending on the location of the campsite with a major focus on public health, hygiene, and sanitation as these campsites were prone to spread of endemic diseases. The principle of improvement underpinning all the relief efforts of rehabilitation was based on levers of balancing the demographic density.<sup>70</sup> According to the 1971 Census, the staggering influx of nearly 9.5 million refugees pushed the population density to 600 persons per sq. km. from 507 persons per sq. km. by October 1971 in West Bengal which suddenly became the most populous state in India.<sup>71</sup> Allen Ginsberg in his 'September on Jessore Road' (November 1971) writes,

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“Jessore Road, long bamboo huts,  
 No place to shit but sand channel ruts  
 ...  
 Millions of Souls in 1971  
 homeless on Jessore road under grey sun  
 A million are dead, the millions who can  
 Walk towards Calcutta from East Pakistan  
 Taxi September along Jessore road  
 oxcart skeletons drag charcoal load  
 past watery fields thru rain flood ruts  
 Dung cakes on treetrunks, plastic roof huts  
 ...  
 Refugee camps in hospital shacks  
 Newborn lay naked on mother’s thin laps  
 Monkeysized week old rheumatic baby eye  
 Gastroenteritis makes thousand die  
 ...  
 September Jessore Road Rickshaw  
 50,000 souls in one camp I saw  
 Rows of bamboo huts in the flood  
 Open drains, & wet families/waiting for food.”<sup>72</sup>

The camps set up along the border were all crammed and when a journalist asked the camp officials at Bagda High School about the floor space available for each family, the camp officials mentioned that any such measurement was impossible as the number of influxes increases every day while the camp space was not even half equated to host this deluge. ‘Spatial formula’ of refugee camps in relation to the ‘influx of migrants’ can be viewed as a concerted progression of ‘refugee urbanism’ where “urbanity” concepts no longer tally with the ‘cities’ as urban spaces but evolve a certain dynamics of transforming ‘spaces’ barren or wastelands into complexes of habitation where standards of humanitarian life are often designed as closed environments of providing healthy life in a transient stay at the camps in host countries and hence requires conditions to be provided for the fulfilment of ethically-morally persistent habitable life. But at the same time, these are enclosed spaces where loitering beyond the campsite is a threat of invisible burdens increasing on the actual demography of the country and hence needed to be restricted. Therefore, the logistics of mobility in the refugee camps are often portrayed as mass aggregations, of queues of constricted pre-designed movement spaces. Describing one of the refugee camps in Calcutta, *The Observer* writes, ‘It all looked very tidy, almost like a parade ground, because everyone was in a queue for something’.<sup>73</sup> Often it led to ‘technical frictions’ in demand and supply chain with a negative impact on the milieu of the refugee camps—“stagnant air and water accumulated in crowded areas, generating pockets of disease, moral pollution and social unrest, while the closed grid facilitated the operation of vagrants, delinquents and criminals“. Thus a whole rural-urban chain is put into motion to cater to the needs of the refugee campsites—the core-periphery relation ethos informed by the harmonising anthropogenic actions with dynamics and limited capacities of the earth’s ecosystem.<sup>74</sup>



**Image 7:** Women Queuing Refugee Camp for Food with Meal Cards/Refugee Cards,  
Photographer: Amiya Tarafder © Jadunath Bhawan Museum and Resource Centre, CSSSC, Kolkata

*Dhiren*, a new refugee who crossed the border in 1971 said that instead of going to camps in *labanbrad* (Salt Lake) refugee camp in Calcutta went to Raipur to seek shelter as news of death-disease-debility from the Salt Lake camps were spreading far and wide.<sup>75</sup> Refugee camps in Calcutta and in the border towns of Bongoan become the focal point of the suffered humanity in the global theatre as the former was also functioning as operational zones of Bangladesh Government in Exile whereas the latter served as the entry points of ‘becoming refugees’. However, conditions in most of the refugee camps mirrored the others. Although India was not certainly experiencing such a staggering crisis for the first time, it was only her previous trials of ‘tryst with destiny’ in 1947 and its aftershocks that the anxieties heightened about the sudden demographic upsurge due to the Liberation War, its obscure future implications and strains on the national resources. It was universally accepted that these refugees were an international responsibility but the demands of actualisation of hosting and caring on behalf of the world community had to be bore by India as they were on Indian soil. The influx and the impending calamity was compared to the Bihar Famines of 1966-67. It was estimated that in May, India was paying around £300,000 a day for food which was around twenty-five per cent of Britain’s annual aid to India.<sup>76</sup> Between March-November 1971 the direct budgetary allocation for only the camps stood at ₹240 crores spent on providing ‘care’ at the camps that included temporary shelters for living, rations and medical assistance—all aimed at temporary measures to preserve the ‘refugee bodies’ till their return to their own homeland. The quartets of genocide, climatic topography of the camps, seasonality of the migration and pre-existing malnourishment created a phenomenological milieu of diseased refugee bodies that made themselves demandingly visible. Since temporality was the basis of biopolitical care offered to the refugees, the camp situation and the nature of the earthwork showed signs of primitive living with insanitary conditions coupled with rainy seasons led to the massive outbreak of cholera epidemic in the camps which made mandatory inoculation for obtaining refugee cards and to live in the camps. Inoculation

was made mandatory by controlling the food ration supplies in the camp, i.e., refugees will not get food unless they have a meal card which will be given after they visit the medical camps for cholera and smallpox jabs.



**Image 8:** Refugees administered IV fluids at the refugee camp, Photographer: Amiya Tarafder, © Jadunath Bhawan Museum and Resource Centre, CSSSC, Kolkata

British Labour Minister John Stonehouse who visited the Calcutta camp on behalf of War on Want and Oxfam said that although the camps were well organised and managed by the Indian government and there was almost no one starving yet one has to be precautionous and adequate measures had to be taken in view of the onset on the monsoon<sup>77</sup> Although, *Dhiren* was sceptical of this vaccine and refused to take the shot yet could not avoid being affected by diarrhoea and was only saved by hospitals running at the campsite in Raipur and was finally vaccinated after prolonged treatment on IV fluids that he got a shelter in the refugee camp. At the time of the epidemic in the refugee camps, there was either shortage of IV fluids or trained phlebotomists or a shortage of hospital beds that trebled the count of the death at the camps. It was in this precarious situation when Dr. Dilip Mohalanobis already researching diarrhoeal diseases started working at the refugee camps of Bongaon and invented Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORS) as a supportive treatment for cholera in collaborative support from the John Hopkins Centre for Medical Research and Training, Calcutta for mass distribution at the camps. Since cholera was an endemic disease and could be treated best with IV fluids being administered and the reality of its shortage at the campsites yet the success of the ORS at the Bonagoan camps and the fact that it did not require skill to be administered it came to be termed as ‘oral saline’ to popularize its intake by the refugees, pamphlets describing how to prepare ORS were prepared and distributed at the border towns and even broadcasted on Bangla Desh radio. It was in 1978 World Health Organisation adopted ORS as a primary mechanism for dealing with cholera. An assumption that only came true as ‘human columns’

of hungry and homeless people continued marching towards Calcutta as the starvation situation worsened in East Pakistan. The population in Taki a small transborder town on Ichchamati swelled from 3,000 to 8,000. However, these (trans) border locations were mostly transit camps as the refugees eventually moved to westwards to the interiors of India.<sup>78</sup>

Relief channels were established much before the Liberation War started to cater to the needs of the victim of the cyclone in East Pakistan. But in the post-war scenario it became a dilemma for the foreign aid providers to distinguish between the use of relief materials to meet the needs of the starving emaciated citizens in East Pakistan suffering from famine, which they doubted was besides being induced by the natural calamity was also due to the unscrupulous policy of the government by withholding the food grains supply to rural areas. The Charity Commissioners in Britain had to withhold a relief fund of £1.5 million with the onset of the civil war. On the other hand, thirty tons of relief support for refugees in Calcutta from Oxfam, Christian Aid, and War on Want was arranged. Although a civil war appeal was launched in Britain, but it was hard to estimate the expected amount of donations from the citizens who have already donated for the cyclone relief and a 'second' wave of 'liberal' donations might see its ebbs. Ian Macdonald said suspected that with the invisible embargoes on British aid entering the interiors of East Pakistan amidst the civil war and with the available food stock that could last only a month or two, there was an impending famine by the end of June. Therefore, although the cholera season was going to be over, but the famine situation would lengthen the cycle of the disease as emaciated bodies with malnutrition had lower resistance strength.<sup>79</sup>

Apart from the treatment of wounded incumbents fleeing genocide or treating endemic diseases regular health camps were organised like eye check-ups, separate gynaecological units for the females, paediatric units were established, and a few refugee camps have milk donation camps organised by different philanthropic organisations. The refugee camps could be looked upon as dynamic ecological normative spaces of experimenting and adjusting to demands and supply of refugee healthcare which transgressed itself from the lexical connotation of providing for only diseased bodies but obtained a milieuistic providence throughout the via politics in refugeedom moving on the continuum of the shared meaning of loss from its cultural to health context apparent in the biological body of the refugee. Charitable institutions like Missionaries of Charity, Lions Club, religious institutions like Bharat Sevashram Sangha, corporate houses like Hindustan Steel, and international institutions like Oxfam, ICRC, UNHCR and others came to instant aid of the refugees. Some of these refugee sites had a 24/7 running hospital like Kushmundi managed by Hindustan Steel. The nine months of Liberation War was not only a fight for just demands of nation-making but also trials of suffered humanity in both the Bengals and precarity at the refugee camps through the trope of health of the refugee bodies as 'containment zones' of illness and care followed as supplementary tool in generating popular image of the refugees as wounded, traumatised and bereaved souls.

The descriptions of the sites of mass refugee habitations rarely differed in the prognosis of the severity of the crunch and crisis of healthy habitational space and failure of adequate health measures. The health crisis of the refugees percolated into the disease situation of spread amongst the citizens of the nation and caused the issue to be raised as 'calling matters of urgent public interest'. Shri Narayan Mukherjee, Dennis Lakra, Shri Harmohan Singh tabled a notice at the '71 assembly on the heavy influx of refugees from East Bengal.<sup>80</sup> The motion of Golam Yazdeen, Sudin Kumar and Nani Kar on the case of ration problems and rising price of rice and wheat and kerosene oil and shortage of sugar at the ration shops due to the refugee influx and the absence of special ration facilities for the refugees living with extended family members rather than at campsites. 'Want'

developed as a special category of requirement—for relief, for return of refugees, for assistance—embedded as the by-product of the ongoing Liberation and the amelioration was sought in the want of recognition as an independent nation and propelled the changing course of action and involvement of the Indian state in the road to independence for *Swadhin Bangla*. Want here transgressed from the individual requirement—asylum, protection, cares—to the collective demand of—region, state, nation—seeking independent Bangladesh and the necessary means to achieve the end.

“Let us now see the political and economic implications of what passes for India's Bangla Desh policy. The influx of nearly four milium refugees — about 65 per cent of whom being Hindus dispossessed of their farm land in East Bengal will not go back has brought out the economic cost of the bungling on Bangla Desh. By allowing the Bangla Desh struggle to prolong, with the people thrown on the defensive against a small minority of Pakistani troops, the Government of India has also lengthened the ordeal of Bangla Desh. Reports in some newspapers at home and abroad that India may be forced to take military action to stop the flood of refugees have made nonsense of the earlier so-called policy of peace at any price. While military assistance to Bangla Desh would have been legitimate, — which country has not done so vis-a-vis another in which its stakes are equally high — merely provoking a war with a view to stopping the inflow of refugees will provide grist to Pakistan's propaganda mills. It will raise the jibe that if India did not want the refugees it could have stopped them at the border.”<sup>81</sup>

“British High Commissioner in Islamabad, Mr. Pumphrey in his telegram drew attention to the growing anxiety and sensitiveness of Pakistanis and Yahya Khan to the outside criticism “and to the danger that external pressure for immediate improvements could be more harmful than helpful. In any public reaction we need to avoid condemning the President's proposal in so far as they may yet stand some, albeit slight chance of stabilizing the situation in East Pakistan and realizing the first essential objective of halting the flow of the refugees in India. If this once could be done it is just possible that an element of confidence may be restored and that some reversal of the flow of refugees could begin after the monsoon at a time when otherwise serious internal pressure are likely again to build up on Mrs. Gandhi to take more positive action.”<sup>82</sup>

It has often been said that India strategically delayed the monsoon months for open combat with West Pakistan as the war front on the eastern borderlands was yearly affected by floods which would be disadvantageous to the Indian army. Also, the monsoon was the time when the expected rise in refugee displacement was suspected to reach its height making India to feed a refugee population equivalent to an entire small nation. Although the UN agreed to provide India with medications worth £175 million and volunteers and medicines were arriving every day the Calcutta airport to care for cholera in refugee settlements, at the onset of the monsoon the main question that remained was the matter of relocation of the refugee camps to highland areas in other states which would roughly take a period of four months even if refugees were transported in seven large trains every day. It was not just a matter of transfer of population to other states in the wilderness but relocating them in a habitable atmosphere making sure that water was available near the campsite. Paralysed by the refugee problem, the government decided to start a parallel administrative service for the refugees.<sup>83</sup>

Indira Gandhi appealed to the countries of the ‘Aid Pakistan Club’ to stop providing West Pakistan with any economic aid till any ‘satisfactory political resolution’ was reached, as the region stands at a critical juncture and the continued influx of refugees will have disastrous consequences. Although the press and public opinion in India were in favour of extending recognition to Bangla Desh, yet the financial stress on Indian economy developing at 2 ½ per cent in the last decade, it



would have been easier to go for a second Indo-Pak War like 1965 than where the estimated expenditure was around £30 million than spending £15 million a month on refugees. By June 16, *The Times*, published a report on the possible threat to stop relief, as Mr. I.M.P. Cagill from Aid Pakistan Consortium after their visit from East Pakistan declared that no new pledge for commodity relief except for food that was already in the pipeline no new relief aid will be provided until credible steps were taken to resort to normalcy in East Pakistan in place of the currently ongoing 'material lawlessness'. Aid, therefore, became the lever to give West Pakistan a morally rightful political path as stoppage of such aid in the foreign exchequer would put stress on the already constrained economy.

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*The Times* correspondent Peter Hazelhurst was writing his eyewitness accounts of the daily life at the Indo-Pak border in West Bengal, his columns like many others were taking the daily events of the war to the international community. As the influx increased and started congesting the town and city life, effecting the economy and administration of the regions, the sentiments of hospitality for the refugees started waning thin. A series of letters published in *The Statesman* in May-June 1971 questioned the response of humanitarianism transforming into a permanent liability as one sees the unfolding of past experiences of history repeating itself of holier postures of Bengal bearing the burden alone. This mixed opinion of the Indian public besides the fake normalcy propagandised by West Pakistan only created dilemma and suspicion in the international community when it came to disbursing the relief. Gordon-Lennox of the League of Red Cross Societies said relief and aid could not be disbursed based on the questionable authenticity of press reports.

"In London, immigrants from East Bengal, no friends of the Islamabad government, complained of unbalanced reporting...and charged Hazelhurst of unbalanced reporting. Islamabad, London and even Calcutta are a world away from the frontier crossings such as Barasat, Krishnanagar, and Sabrum. In circumstances such as exist in Bengal invariably courageous journalists are the first to know what is really happening. They frequently risk their necks. In the earlier days, Hazelhurst was physically threatened, but apart from the respect of their colleagues opprobrium is their only reward...No one will ever know, but at time it seemed that authority—British and Indian—did not care it was too busy denying newspaper reports as sensational when correspondents could not hope to describe the full dimension of the tragedy...Its denials of newspaper reports become the reality in most capital cities, until it's too late."<sup>85</sup>

The realpolitik of charity in the Liberation War can be found in the attempts of the socialist and capitalist power blocks to maintain a status quo so that the balance of power is not greatly altered in the subcontinent and thereby turning a blind eye to the suffering of the people. Although South Asia was a location far removed geographically and a landscape unfamiliar to the capitalist and socialist blocks yet these images of genocide by photographers from Marilyn Silverstone, Raghu Rai, Bruno Barbey, Raymond Depardon, A. Abbas, newspaper reports, coloured images on television were exposing Dante's hell unleashed by the genocide, it was a wonder to many how it failed to touch the raw nerves of the nations and questioned 'how much emotion do they waste on misery?'. The continued appeals of India to draw sympathetic support for the Bangla Desh cause no longer keeps these superpowers as 'innocent' onlookers as history have time and again proved that states have sidelined 'small voices of humanity' and Sham Lal sadly asks, 'Don't they read their newspapers?'.<sup>86</sup> The hesitation in recognition with the fear of confrontation was a political mistake.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion: 'From Trickle to a Stream'

The history of Bangladesh that begins with 25 March 1971 is also a history of migration, of a nation that emerged out of the twin plight of the armed struggle and that of refugisms' in the 'choice' they made to flee when governmentality failed to secure the democratic aspirations and ultimately lead to the birth of *Gana Prajatantri Bangladesh*. Indira Gandhi in her December 6, 1971, speech in Parliament said that India was not guided by any emotions and acted 'precipitately' by doing an assessment of the existing and future realities in the matter of recognition of Bangla Desh and the birth of the nation 'rationalised the geography locally'. Any political settlement according to Anthony Mascarenhas was impossible within the ambit of United Pakistan. This delayed realisation by both West Pakistan and by the global community delayed the process of recognition of Bangla Desh and stretched the Liberation War and refugee influx for over nine months. It was the press that actively wrote the war for the global community. Ajit Bhattacharjea dedicated his book to these journalists and reporters who risked their lives to cover the war 'so that the world may know'. Knowing or knowledge of the war emerged out of the channels of continued reportage of the war and civil unrest in East Pakistan which was otherwise censored to be a lawful authority of the state to maintain peace and restore normalcy. What emerged out of the war narrative was not just a simple archaeology of knowledge of the war but a genealogy of deeper fault lines of trust that organically broke Pakistan into two sovereign nations. The nine months of struggle was a project of knowing and be known to the global audience to make audible the voices and to be seen not just as a 'view from nowhere' but a through a structure of what Foucault calls 'power knowledge'.<sup>88</sup> The war trajectory raises the question of whether the entire process could be looked at through the lens of the collective action of witnessing and accounting for the responsibility to achieve freedom. One interview by a *Jugantar* correspondent in a refugee camp with a young man details his desire that his family should be taken care of in Indian soil so that he could go back and fight as a *Mukti Joddha*. The whole process of cognition and hence the involvement was reaching the public sphere through the act of 'reading' and the ethical output of the 'witnessing' progressing on the capitalisation of debates about the status of recognition of the independent status of nationhood based on the foundational realities of genocidal horrors and resultant burden of refugees seeking asylum becoming a global responsibility to be cared for that needs protection. As Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh in his appeal for the public contribution to fund the relief operations of Oxfam, British Red Cross, War on Want, Save the Children Fund, and Christian Aid help raise a fund of £,500,000 said, 'We believe the public will be willing to give again because they are seriously upset by the horrors going on'.<sup>89</sup> War thus no longer was just a collateral of situated geo-political impasses but became a window of ethical-moral connection in analysing the cause of the war and receiving its aftershocks. The Bangla Desh freedom struggle was a people's war, fought by common people at par with the army also a 'people' war supported by 'people' as a global community and family—people as a sovereign community fighting for their own liberty. War thus left its garb of a political reading and entered a larger sociological understanding of the needs, wants and emotions that lay as undercurrent in expediting a war like situation.

## Notes

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