

## ABSTRACT

The research is focused on refugee migration from East Pakistan to West Bengal between 1947 and 1970. The primary sources are the oral history narratives that I have secured from the various districts of West Bengal. By historicising the period when individuals and families took to migration, I underscore the ethnocultural distinctiveness of the refugees. The central argument is that the definition of ‘refugee’ – a densely nuanced word with hardly any co-relative in Bengali parlance, and is, therefore, simply transliterated – changed considerably in the two decades after the Partition. I examine how, during the time of recollection, the operative framework of the word ‘refugee’ inspires the narrators to negotiate with their past. I contend that the identity of ‘refugee’ in West Bengal is rather a cultural than a legal-official marker for those who migrated from East Pakistan.

Since the refugees crossed the borders without any particular timeframe, their stories are not of any uniform pattern. A common thread, however, connects the different narratives. The refugees collectively emphasize that the social frameworks in West Bengal are not conducive to record their perceptions. I insist that the opportunity to tell their life stories, after almost seven decades, acts as an impetus to narrate diligently. Against this backdrop, I theorise the oral narratives as performative presentation of life stories. I discuss the refugees’ desire to speak, depict their involvement in the refugee movement and deliberate on how the act of narration directs them to dramatise their life stories through words, actions and bodily gestures. While most scholars have read the personal reminiscences through the silences and the stutters and stammers embedded in them, I conceptualise the tangibility of the narratives as they are recollected during the interview.

Hence, I have reformulated the oft-asked question – why remember? – to ask instead – how does one remember? It allows me to move beyond the rhetoric of violence and trauma to look at the dialectics of remembering and forgetting. It brings to the fore different narrative

techniques employed by the refugees when they narrate their past and discuss its enduring impact on the present. The East Pakistani refugees in West Bengal are not a homogenous group. They have migrated from varied regions, carried their societal dynamics and linguistic affinities, and subsequently, enriched the socio-political and cultural milieu of West Bengal. Through an affirmative subversion of the refugee identity, they lay emphasis on their cross-border lineage to put forward a renewed definition of how refugees can be agentive, enterprising and participatory in nature. In fine, I intend to establish that they have exhibited to the world how refugees, in general, can develop their own models of self-reliance to emerge as resilient individuals against institutional negligence and apathy.