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The Partition of India, Bengali “New Jews,” and Refugee Democracy: Transnational Horizons of Indian Refugee Political Discourse

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Abstract

This essay advocates “refugee political thought” as an autonomous category which needs to be centrestaged in global intellectual history. I concretise this by studying Bengali Hindu refugees who migrated from Muslim-majority eastern Bengal (after the Partition of British India in 1947 part of Pakistan, and after 1971, the sovereign state of Bangladesh) to the Hindu-majority Indian state of West Bengal, and occasionally their descendants as well. By studying the transnational horizons of Bengali refugees from the late 1940s to today, I posit them as part of modern global intellectual history. Bengali refugees and their descendants connected their experiences with those of refugees elsewhere in the world, seeing themselves, for example, as “new Jews.” Later, some of them aligned themselves with the Palestinian cause. Refugee politics became enmeshed with Cold War revolutionary currents. European, Soviet, and Chinese Marxist theory—and latent Lockean assumptions—propelled the everyday politics of refugee land occupation. Marxism, sometimes with Hegelian inflection, nourished the East Bengali—origin founders of Subaltern Studies theory and Dalit (lower-caste) thought. Ultimately, this essay shows how Bengali refugees instrumentalised transnational thinking to produce new models of democratic political thought and practice in postcolonial India. I describe this as “refugee democracy.”

Keywords: Indian refugees; Bengali refugees; new Jews; India; West Bengal; Pakistan; Partition; refugee intellectual history; refugee political thought; refugee democracy

Introduction: Defining an Agenda

Refugees have a marginal place in Anglophone intellectual history. There are, of course, excellent intellectual histories of select actors and groups of refugee thinkers. These include analyses of Byzantine scholars in Renaissance Italy; works on late-seventeenth/eighteenth century Huguenot refugees; a vast corpus of scholarship on Central European intellectuals who were forced by the rise of authoritarian regimes in interwar Europe to emigrate to the United States and the United Kingdom; and studies on the impact of “exile” on twentieth-century Arab intellectuals.¹ Nevertheless, refugee-ness

¹ Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); John Christian Laursen, ed., *New Essays on the Political Thought of the Huguenots of the Refuge* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

remains peripheral in the mainstream canon of intellectual history, where the relation between forced migration and the construction of new political thought does not occupy any significant place.²

This is not because “refugee thinkers”—to use a category which itself needs historicisation and problematisation—have not been central to modern global intellectual history. We can chant a litany of names to prove otherwise: Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Liang Qichao, M. N. Roy, Hannah Arendt, the Dalai Lama . . . one could go on. I would argue that the reasons are structural. The relation between the sovereign and the subject/citizen has traditionally formed the core of mainstream political thought, and, by extension, of its historiography. The political is about the *polis*. The refugee, who falls in the crack between different political communities, can only be something of an afterthought category here.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben advances an alternative agenda. He observes in *Homo Sacer* (1995): “The refugee must be considered for what he is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state.”³ Taking a cue from Agamben, this essay advocates “refugee political thought” as an autonomous category which needs to be brought to centre stage in global intellectual history. I concretise this by focusing on Bengali Hindu refugees who migrated from Muslim-majority eastern Bengal (after the Partition of British India in 1947 part of Pakistan, and after 1971, the sovereign state of Bangladesh) to the Hindu-majority Indian state of West Bengal. I also briefly focus on East Bengali refugees in the Andaman Islands of the Indian Ocean.

Uditi Sen summarises: “Official estimates of East Bengali migrants who sought refuge in India between 1946 and 1970 vary between 5.8 million and 4.1 million. West Bengal alone took in over 3.9 million refugees.”⁴ Joya Chatterji estimates that about 1.5 million Muslims in turn emigrated from West to East Bengal in the two decades following Partition.⁵ To contextualise this within South Asia, while exact numbers are impossible to determine, it has been estimated that overall between 11 and 18 million refugees moved between India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the Partition.⁶

From the late 1940s there were large-scale massacres, rapes, and the destruction and plunder of property of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh minorities in Bengal, Bihar, Punjab, Sind, Rajasthan, and Jammu and Kashmir. The perpetrators often worked with the connivance of Indian, Pakistani, and various princely state ruling classes. There was less bloodshed in Bengal than in the Punjab, but the migration of refugees was a more protracted process. East Bengali minorities, mostly Hindus, fled to India in periodic waves, especially after devastating majoritarian pogroms against them. These included the Noakhali massacres of 1946, which left at least 5,000 dead,⁷ and more than a million refugees entering

2009); Axel Fair-Schulz and Mario Kessler, eds., *German Scholars in Exile* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011); Han Lamers, *Greece Reinvented: Transformations of Byzantine Hellenism in Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Zeina G. Halabi, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile, and the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

² Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³ Giorgio Agamben, “Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,” trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017), 111.

⁴ Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 7.

⁵ Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166.

⁶ Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 2.

⁷ Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017 [2007]), 68.

India between 1946 and 1948;⁸ the 1950 pogroms, which left at least 10,000 dead,⁹ and an exodus of about 1.2 million refugees;¹⁰ the 1964 pogroms, which caused the flight of about 700,000 refugees;¹¹ and the turbulent politics of 1970–71, including massive Pakistani state sponsored massacres of Bengali Muslims as well as Hindus, which created an unprecedented exodus and culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation in 1971, following an indigenous liberation struggle and Indian military intervention.

Historians of South Asia generally study the Partition of 1947 and its long aftermath within the framework of subcontinental history. However, the 1940s and early 1950s saw a series of wars, partitions, forced migrations, and refugee tragedies unfold across Europe, China, Palestine/Israel, and Korea. But it is relatively recently that historians have—in tune with the broader transnational/global turn in history-writing—started tracking the connections between these different world regions. They have written about European refugees in India and China, about the transnational trajectories of Chinese refugees during the Cold War, and about the global (rather than just European) scope of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). In recent scholarship, “partition” has been visualised as a transnational phenomenon, with colonial policies and nationalist visions connecting different parts of the British Empire, from Ireland to South Asia and Palestine. Meanwhile, the refugee, the inevitable collateral damage of partition schemes, is beginning to be understood through global historical, and not just area studies, optics.¹²

The large and growing corpus of scholarship on Partition and South Asian refugee history has mostly focused on social, political, literary, and cinematic histories.¹³ This essay reconstructs the political thought of East Bengali refugees, and occasionally of their descendants, from the late 1940s to today. By studying the transnational horizons of their thought, I posit them as part of modern global intellectual history. Bengali refugees connected their experiences with those of refugees elsewhere in the world, seeing themselves, for example, as “new Jews,” and emphasising refugee contributions to host societies. Later, some of them aligned themselves with the Palestinian cause. Refugee politics became enmeshed with Cold War revolutionary currents. Many East Bengalis and their children drew upon extra-Indian political theory—from Hegel and Marx to

⁸ Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 42.

⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst, 1996), 96.

¹⁰ Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The Second Homeland: Polish Refugees in India* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012); Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London: Hurst, 2013); Rana Mitter, “Imperialism, Transnationalism, and the Reconstruction of Post-War China: UNRRA in China, 1944–7,” *Past and Present* 218, suppl. 8 (2013), 51–69; Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Laura Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016); Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019); Guang Pan, *A Study of Jewish Refugees in China, 1933–1945: History, Theories and the Chinese Pattern* (Singapore: Springer, 2019).

¹³ Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (Calcutta: Naya Udyog, 1999 [1990]); Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *Reflections on Partition in the East* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1997); Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Chatterji, *Spoils*; Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Khan, *Great Partition*; Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Debali Mookerjee-Leonard, *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Sen, *Citizen Refugee*; Jaydip Sarkar and Rupayan Mukherjee, eds., *Partition Literature and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

Toynbee, Heidegger, Liu Shaoqi, Arendt, Derrida, and Agamben—to articulate their concerns. Bengali intellectual history may thus not be abandoned to methodological subcontinentalism.

Admittedly, Indian refugee rehabilitation developed outside the postwar United States/Western-dominated international refugee regime in the early postcolonial years. Fissures had developed between the UNRRA's policies—perceived to be indifferent to Indian needs—and the Indian nationalists in the last years of colonial rule. Hence, Manu Bhagavan notes, “UNRRA's India-based activities had to be wound down over 1947, and its offices eventually shut in 1948.”¹⁴ The Indian state found itself equally at odds with the International Refugee Organization (IRO). It felt the international refugee regime to be callously indifferent to the material demands of South Asian refugees. Ultimately, it did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention. Pia Oberoi argues that this “refusal to accede to the Convention originated in the opinion that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was an instrument of the cold war, and consequently not relevant to the situation of the Indian subcontinent within the international system.”¹⁵

Despite the nation-state framework of Indian refugee rehabilitation, a lens of “connected history” proves useful in showing the links between Bengali refugee thought and the wider world. For Sanjay Subrahmanyam, connected history involves “seeking out the at times fragile threads that connected the globe.”¹⁶ Peter Gatrell applies this approach to refugee history. He argues: “The emerging body of work on refugees, refugee regimes and practices of protection nevertheless carries a risk of piling up a series of regionally differentiated and disconnected crises and responses [. . .]. Instead, we might ask how and in what terms refugees and non-refugees made connections between one crisis and another [. . .].”¹⁷ Similarly, A. Dirk Moses emphasises “tracing the intersecting and divergent imaginings of national belonging, state borders, and minority loyalty” linking India and Palestine from the 1920s to the 1940s.¹⁸

This essay offers a “connected history” of Bengali refugee intellectual history, from the 1940s to today. I show how Bengali refugees drew upon events, politics, and forms of thought emanating from other world regions to forge their own politics. Rather than imperial and nation-state sovereignty, sacral-national culture, or colonially dictated rule of property, all of which had pivoted political thought in colonial Bengal,¹⁹ post-colonial West Bengali thought found a new centre in the dispossessed refugee himself/herself. This was a refugee whose labour generated new models of property, value, and Lockean society from below; whose mutual organisation created the new political order in refugee “camps” and “colonies,” and ushered in Communist rule in the state; and whose ethics questioned the millennial heritage of Hindu caste hierarchy.

¹⁴ Manu Bhagavan, “Toward Universal Relief and Rehabilitation: India, UNRRA, and the New Internationalism,” in *Wartime Origins and the Future United Nations*, ed. Dan Plesch and Thomas G. Weiss (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 121–35, 131.

¹⁵ Pia Oberoi, “South Asia and the Creation of the International Refugee Regime,” *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 19:5 (2001), 36–45, 42.

¹⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997), 735–62, 762.

¹⁷ Peter Gatrell, “Refugees—What's Wrong with History?,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30:2 (2017), 170–89, 182.

¹⁸ A. Dirk Moses, “Partitions, Hostages, Transfer: Retributive Violence and National Security,” in Dubnov and Robson, eds., *Partitions*, 257–355, 258–9.

¹⁹ Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1982 [1963]); Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014); Milinda Banerjee, *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

This essay will show how refugees produced new models of democratic political thought and practice. I describe this as “refugee democracy.” This was a framework of democratic political being born from the unevenly subaltern margins of the postcolonial world. It was not an elite-liberal model of democracy, simply bestowed as a gift of Indian statesmen, the bureaucrats, and the Constitution.²⁰ This was a model of the political based on solidarity among the impoverished, rather than hinged on the friend/enemy distinction as classically outlined by the German jurist (and Nazi sympathiser) Carl Schmitt.²¹ This “refugee political” ultimately offers us blueprints about generating democracy through mutual cooperation between the dispossessed multitudes.

Being *Udbastu*: The Loss of Foundation

Though the Indian government adopted the term “Displaced Persons” from the UNRRA framework, the term “refugee” is more prevalent in everyday usage.²² Two terms are even more commonly deployed in Bengali: *sharanartha* and *udbastu*. *Sharanartha* derives from Sanskrit, where it denotes one “seeking refuge or protection”: *sharana* carrying meanings of refuge, protection, and asylum.²³ The word can already be found in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* (late first millennium BCE).²⁴ It is routinely used today by the government. The ancient and sacral connotations are occasionally invoked in activist contexts, such as demands for shelter in India for Rohingya refugees.²⁵

But *udbastu* has wider political traction. *Bastu* derives from Sanskrit *vastu*: “the site or foundation of a house, site, ground, building or dwelling-place, habitation, homestead, house.” It is associated with a “tutelary deity” who presides over the house and receives worship, especially during the building of the house.²⁶ The Sanskrit/Bengali prefix *ut/ud* signifies here “separation and disjunction”: “out, out of, from, off, away from, apart.”²⁷ Pre-Partition Bengali dictionaries define the *udbastu* as someone forced to leave their home, for example because of indebtedness.²⁸ Post-Partition dictionaries add the sense of being “forcibly expelled” (*bitarita*) from one’s land/country of residence (*basabhumii*), and not just from one’s house: occasionally adding an English term like “evacuee” to clarify this new meaning.²⁹

The designation *udbastu* is often adopted by a wider spectrum of people than those recognised as DPs by the state.³⁰ Simultaneously, many elite East Bengalis, who often

²⁰ Ornit Shani, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Madhav Khosla, *India’s Founding Moment: The Constitution of a Most Surprising Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

²¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1927, 1932]).

²² Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 9.

²³ Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986 [1899]), 1057; Shailendra Biswas, *Samsad Bangala Abhidhan* [Samsad Bengali dictionary], Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1973), 774.

²⁴ See, e.g., Vyasa, *The Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, <https://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/text/UR/MBh01.txt>.

²⁵ Protiti Roy, “Rohingya Crisis: India’s Selective Refuge a Moral and Cultural Evil,” *The Quint*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/rohingya-muslim-crisis-india-selective-refuge-a-cultural-wrong>.

²⁶ Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 948–9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁸ Jnanendramohan Das, *Bangala Bhashar Abhidhan* [Dictionary of the Bengali language] (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1917), 246; Subalchandra Mitra, *Adarsha Bangala Abhidhan* [Ideal Bengali dictionary] (Calcutta: New Bengal Press, 1943), 329.

²⁹ Unnamed scholars, *Bharati Bangla Abhidhan* [Bharati Bengali dictionary] (Calcutta: Bharati Book Stall, 1959), 117; Biswas, *Bangala Abhidhan*, 125.

³⁰ Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 9.

had property, long-standing jobs and educational connections, or at least kin in West Bengal, avoided taking up the term *udbastu*/refugee to describe themselves, due to its association with subalternity. They categorised themselves simply as *bangal* (East Bengali) as opposed to *ghati* (West Bengali).

Vastu/bastu is comparable, in its sacrality, to Greek Hestia and Latin Vesta, the goddesses of the hearth and symbols of the sanctity of the home in classical Greece and Rome. In Bengal, the household is often divinised, anthropomorphised, and ritually worshipped through Bastulakshmi, the goddess of the foundation. In the aftermath of the Partition, many refugees felt that their forced migration amounted to a loss of this divine foundation of their being.

The play *Natun Ihudi* (The new Jew, first staged in Calcutta in 1951)—authored by the refugee-sympathiser playwright Salil Sen, who was close to the Revolutionary Socialist Party—textualised such refugee perceptions: “*Bastu* is Lakshmi, one should not sell *bastu*.” The lower-caste Namashudra peasant Keshtadas saw agrarian work as service to this goddess Lakshmi (*Lakshmir seva*). For his wife Ashalata, “the *bastu*-house is the shrine of Lakshmi (*bastubari Lakshmir than*).” Selling their home (*bastu*) and agrarian land in East Bengal signified selling the goddess. For Keshtadas, becoming a factory worker in West Bengal meant embracing slavery (*dasatva*).³¹ Taking a cue from Sen, I would argue that industrial proletarianisation amounted to economic as much as theological alienation from the means of production.

Refugee fears often centred around the degradation of the *grihadevata/kuladevata*, the deity of the household (*griha*) or lineage (*kula*). Anecdotes circulated about Hindus being killed while engaged in the worship of the lineage gods.³² In Narayan Sanyal’s novel *Bakultala P. L. Camp* (1955), the damage caused to the *grihadevata* icon is compared to the rape of the daughter of the Brahmin household: in both cases, caused by majoritarian Muslim violence in East Bengal.³³ Many Hindus fled with their *grihadevatas* to West Bengal. Gautam Ghosh observes that there emerged in Bengal even a new notion of God as a refugee.³⁴

The refugee-poet Sunil Gangopadhyay (born in East Bengal in 1934), in his poem “*Smritir Shahar*” (The city of memory), captured the shattering of foundation experienced by many Bengali refugees, transforming religious sensibility, family life, and values:

We are all proponents of breaking (*bhanganer pravakta*), our joy is in destruction
From God to the poetic metres of Sudhindranath and Buddhadeb Basu
We have broken them [all]
We have broken our father and our mother as if they were Krishnanagar dolls [. . .]
In great joy we have broken the image of those who fragmented the country (*deshke jara bhengechhe*)
With the sweet sound that accompanies the breaking of a glass,
Values have been crushed one by one under our feet.³⁵

To understand refugee perceptions about loss of foundation (*bastu*), a rich source is a collection of essays which began to appear in the Bengali-language newspaper *Jugantar* from 1950 onwards, and were later collectively republished in two volumes as *Chhere*

³¹ Salil Sen, *Natun Ihudi* (Calcutta: Indiana, 1957), 25, 37, 46.

³² Gautam Ghosh, “‘God Is a Refugee’: Nationality, Morality and History in the 1947 Partition of India,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 42:1 (1998), 33–62, 48.

³³ Narayan Sanyal, *Bakultala P. L. Camp* (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1955), 67, 90, 93, 196.

³⁴ Ghosh, “God.”

³⁵ Sunil Gangopadhyay, “*Smritir Shahar* 20,” in *Kavitasamagra* [Collected poetry], vol. 3 (Calcutta: Ananda, 2014), 34.

Asha Gram (The village left behind, 1953 and 1959). The refugee voices are anonymous, but from the content of the essays, seem to be high-caste Hindus; probably, mostly men. The essays were born through encounters between Dakshinaranjan Basu, the compiler and editor, and the refugee protagonists. *Jugantar* was then the leading Indian nationalist newspaper in West Bengal, and Basu was its premier editorial face and an influential journalist in the regional public sphere. Basu started collating and publishing these essays in the aftermath of the 1950 pogroms and refugee exodus. In the preface to the first volume, he stated that his aim was “to try to give form in language (*bhashay rupayita*) to the form (*rupa*) of the whole village by putting at the centre one human being from each of the villages left behind.”³⁶

Each essay focused on a specific village in East Bengal. They poetically described the village shrines, the famous men, local history and antiquities, and the structure of agrarian society. They lamented how Hindu temples had fallen silent, and the festivals and ceremonies were fading away, because of majoritarian persecution.³⁷ “Dhamrai, the holy seat (*dham*) of [the god] Shri Madhava, is now sunk in the worship of the night.”³⁸ Occasionally, the protagonists grieved that the gods had abandoned them. “The goddess Durga [. . .] could not protect us from our enemies! [. . .] I do not feel any intimate attraction towards religious worship anymore.”³⁹ “Where is the protecting lord (*rakshakarta*) Vishnu in this time?”⁴⁰

In happier times, gods and ancestors had protected the Hindu elites. Hence, the village “blessed by the fathers and grandfathers (*pitripitamaher ashisputa*), intertwined with their sacred memories of many ages” was a “land of pilgrimage” (*tirthabhumi*).⁴¹ The “dwelling places built by the blood of the chest of many forefathers,” and the village more broadly, was a “field of pilgrimage” (*tirthakshetra*).⁴²

The political ideal here was that of a harmonious lordly hierarchy—a vast cosmic continuum of human and divine lords—fuelled by the agrarian labour of Muslims and lower-caste Hindus. The peasants offered agrarian surplus to the rentiers, who used a part of it to venerate the gods and ancestors. The gods and ancestors reciprocated by blessing the master class, who in turn were expected to be generous and loving to their subjects.

The Indian national community imagined by these Bengali refugees, and by their ancestors, was rooted in the patrilineal and patriarchal organisation of lineage property. The sacred nation was the agrarian household vastly enlarged.⁴³ *Chhere Asha Gram* legitimated this hierarchy in terms of Hindu religiosity and love, offering an economic theology of landed property. “Everywhere in East Bengal, thirteen festivals were held in twelve months in the village homes. Joy in these festivals did not belong to Hindus alone; we had seen our Muslim neighbours also share in it equally. [. . .] The fields of the middle-classes like us were cultivated through sharecropping by Muslim peasants. [. . .] A sweet relation of great love and neighbourliness had grown up with them.”⁴⁴ “The Hindu subjects (*praja*), the Muslim subjects, feasted with equal enthusiasm in the landlord’s house.”⁴⁵

³⁶ Dakshinaranjan Basu, ed., *Chhere Asha Gram*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1953), ii.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 26–7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 124–6.

⁴⁰ Dakshinaranjan Basu, ed., *Chhere Asha Gram*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1959), 147.

⁴¹ Basu, *Chhere*, 1: 145.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1: 24–6.

⁴³ Banerjee, *Mortal God*.

⁴⁴ Basu, *Chhere*, 1: 97.

⁴⁵ Basu, *Chhere*, 2: 130.

Only a few Hindu men among this rentier class were *zamindars* (landed magnates). The vast majority held medium or small plots of land; they often had to work as teachers, doctors, lawyers, clerks, and so on to supplement their rental income. Being a refugee, losing *bastu*, was about the annihilation of this “theopolitical economy.”⁴⁶ “Those who live on the vegetables of their gardens, fish of their ponds, and some rice and income from their rice-fields—what is their way out?”⁴⁷

In Narayan Sanyal’s novel, this rentier class is described as former “sovereign emperors” (*sarvabhauma samrat*).⁴⁸ The Sanskrit/Bengali term *sarvabhauma*—literally, (lord) of all land—connects mastery over land and political sovereignty. To borrow a comparable expression from Marx, this is an ideology of “sovereign private property” (*das souveräne Privateigentum*) or “sovereign landed property” (*der souveräne Grundbesitz*).⁴⁹

In eastern Bengal, the project of building Pakistan was, to a large extent, driven by the class anger of peasants, mostly Muslims, against landlords and moneylenders, mostly high-caste Hindus. The British-instituted Permanent Settlement of 1793 had intensified this polarisation. Class differences were increasingly translated, from the nineteenth century onwards, and especially from the 1930s, into Islamic vocabularies. The Bengali Muslim popular hope for Pakistan was that it would be a peasant utopia, where the colonial state and the Hindu elites would not be able to extort the peasantry through their high revenue and rent demands. Hindu and Muslim elites also competed over political representation, jobs, and cultural-religious hegemony—in a landscape where the British had long played off the two communities against each other to entrench the colonial state’s authority as a transcendental arbiter.⁵⁰

Chhere Asha Gram does not acknowledge these structural roots of antagonism. It describes a web of calm and loving relationships that is suddenly torn asunder, leaving Hindus with a profound sense of betrayal, grief, and exile. “When we bowed to the soil of the village and left, why, no Muslim brother came forward with moist eyes to say ‘I will not let you go!’”⁵¹

Another member of this East Bengali ex-rentier class, Ranajit Guha (born 1923) offered a strikingly different vision. Guha is famous as the founder of the Subaltern Studies collective. Having grown up in a high-caste Kayastha *khas-taluqdar* family of East Bengal, he admits his “consciousness of original sin” (*adim papabodh*). This was the knowledge of a border dividing his family, as masters (*manib/munib*) from the peasants who were regarded as subjects (*praja*). In conjunction with his participation in Communist politics, this led him to write *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (1963), on the intellectual origins of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which had shaped the agrarian hierarchy in colonial Bengal. (The Settlement thus constituted the material context underlying Muslim peasant grievances against Hindu landlords which had fuelled the Partition in East Bengal.) The first version of *A Rule of Property* was published as a series of Bengali-language articles in the Communist journal *Parichay* in 1956–57. Guha sought to understand how

⁴⁶ I draw the term from Devin Singh, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ Basu, *Chhere*, 1: 24.

⁴⁸ Sanyal, *Bakultala*, 197.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, 1843, http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me01/me01_288.htm, http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me01/me01_316.htm; Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right,”* trans. Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 100, 108, 113.

⁵⁰ Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992); Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sartori, *Liberalism*.

⁵¹ Basu, *Chhere*, 1: 29.

“bourgeois” French and British physiocratic ideas had transfigured in the colony to create a semi-feudal agrarian regime in Bengal.⁵²

Guha later famously theorised about the violent antagonism between the elite and the subaltern spheres of life and politics in rural India, and especially subaltern challenges to elite rule.⁵³ His East Bengal memories moulded the way he thought about “the dialectical relation between mastery and subordination” (*prabhutva o bashyatar dvandvik samparka*), and the “inequality between master and subject” (*manib o prajar asamata*).⁵⁴ In this light, Guha also read the lord-bondsman (*Herr-Knecht*) dialectic, as outlined in the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).⁵⁵ Hegel’s dialectic had also (partly) originated from a context of agrarian lordship: that of *ancien régime* Germany.⁵⁶ From a perspective of global intellectual history, Guha’s subalternist political thought can thus be traced to the intersections between East Bengali and German agrarian hierarchies and related intellectual visions.

The Subaltern Studies theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (born 1948) parents were also of East Bengali origin. In his book *Habitations of Modernity* (2002), Chakrabarty reminisces about his visit to his ancestral paternal village in (what is now) Bangladesh in 1991. The old Muslim villager, who had earlier worked for Chakrabarty’s father’s family, and was living in his house, offered the “two comfortable chairs” to the visiting father and son, saying: “You are the masters, you should sit on the chairs.” But Chakrabarty’s father responded: “No, no, those days are gone; we are not masters and servants. You should sit on the chair.” Ultimately, the discussion was resolved through considerations of age: Chakrabarty taking up a stool.⁵⁷

Chakrabarty’s analysis of *Chhere Asha Gram*, in *Habitations*, can be read as the second generation East Bengali’s critique of the conservative nostalgia of the first generation refugees.⁵⁸ (His academic interest in Partition studies was also instigated by a “global context,” which included “the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans” and “the murderous events in Rwanda-Burundi.”⁵⁹) Chakrabarty notes the book’s indifference towards the lives and concerns of the Muslim multitudes. He quotes the phrase by the German poet Hölderlin, “poetically man dwells” (*dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*), made famous in contemporary theory by an essay (originally lecture, delivered in 1951) of the same name by the German philosopher (and one-time Nazi sympathiser) Martin Heidegger.⁶⁰ Chakrabarty warns us not to be mesmerised by the “poetry of dwelling,” but rather to be critically aware of the “prejudice of dwelling.”⁶¹

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengali and German thinkers, including Heidegger, were alike obsessed with foundations: with the ancestral community, being,

⁵² Ranajit Guha, “Chirasthayi Bandobaster Sutrapat [Origins of the Permanent Settlement], in *Ranajit Guha Rachanasangraha* [Collected Works of Ranajit Guha], vol. 1 (Calcutta: Ananda, 2019), 17–25, 92–95, quotes from 17–19; Ranajit Guha, interviewed by Milinda Banerjee, “In Search of Transcendence: An Interview with Ranajit Guha,” 2010, https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/history/download/ranajit_guha_interview_2.2.11.pdf, 1.

⁵³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁵⁴ Guha, “Chirasthayi,” 19.

⁵⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271–313, 285; Guha, “Transcendence.”

⁵⁶ Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁵⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 147–8.

⁵⁸ An earlier version published as Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31:32 (1996), 2143–51.

⁵⁹ Chakrabarty, *Habitations*, 141.

⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger, “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 209–27.

⁶¹ Chakrabarty, *Habitations*, 115–48, quote at 137.

home, nation, and spirit. Chakrabarty's work draws valence from these long-term convergences between Bengali and German nationalist-philosophical thought.⁶² Simultaneously, it underlines the centrality of literature in building the Hindu-Bengali nation: a grand and ceremonious "poetics of dwelling" that hallowed the land of Bengal with gods and ancestors, but largely forgot or vilified its Muslim denizens.

"The New Jew": High-Caste Refugee Self-Fashioning

Transregional comparisons have been central to Bengali refugee self-fashioning. In a public address in 1948, the East Bengali-origin Jadunath Sarkar, arguably the most famous historian of late colonial India, "compared the migration from East Bengal to the flight of the English Puritans to Holland and thence to Massachusetts and of the French Huguenots in the time of Louis XIV to Holland, Prussia and England."⁶³ Sarkar hoped that East Bengalis would help build a vibrant society in West Bengal like Jews in Palestine. As both India and Palestine came to be partitioned, and the first Arab-Israeli War was in full swing, Sarkar threw his weight behind the Israeli nation-state. "And when the Jews have fought and won their national state in Palestine, it will have become [. . .] a spark of light in the midst of the mess of Muslim misgovernment and stagnation. [. . .] We must make our West Bengal what Palestine under Jewish rule will be, a light in darkness, an oasis of civilization in the desert of medieval ignorance and theocratic bigotry."⁶⁴ The anti-Muslim sensibility is unmistakable here.

Earlier, Syamaprasad Mookerjee, the most famous Hindu nationalist politician of the 1940s, and eventually founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, ancestor of the Bharatiya Janata Party, also drew on Huguenot history—specifically, Catholic massacre of Huguenots—to condemn the Muslim League government in Bengal. After the Calcutta killings of August 1946, in which Hindus and Muslims massacred each other consequent to the League's call for Direct Action, Mookerjee lamented on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly: "St Bartholomew's Day [. . .] pales into insignificance compared to the brutalities that were committed in the streets, lanes and bye-lanes of this first city of British India."⁶⁵ Later, in a public address in Calcutta in 1950, Mookerjee expressed the hope that the British-induced Partitions of India and Ireland would both one day be undone, alleviating the misery of refugees.⁶⁶

A chapter in the book *Chhere Asha Gram* also cast East Bengali refugees as "new Jews" (*natun ihudi*). Bengali refugees are further compared with "the expelled Greek Christians" who "five hundred years ago" had "lit the new light of wisdom and peace in Europe." "All Europe is illuminated today by that light." According to the author, due to this intolerant attitude of persecuting Christians and forcing them to flee, "torturer Turkey" was defeated today by the Europeans. In this anti-Muslim vision, the European Renaissance had been triggered by Byzantine refugees fleeing the Ottoman conquest. East Bengali Hindu refugees would similarly bring a "new torch of light" to India, giving "new life" to the country. "We are no more lords of small plots of land, now all India is our motherland. [. . .] We shall again raise our heads with pride, we shall again be human beings."⁶⁷

⁶² Andrew Sartori, "Beyond Culture-Contact and Colonial Discourse: 'Germanism' in Colonial Bengal," *Modern Intellectual History* 4:1 (2007), 77–93; Kris Manjappa, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014); Banerjee, *Mortal God*, 166–8.

⁶³ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 10.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁵ Bengal Legislative Assembly, *Assembly Proceedings, Official Report: Second Session, 1946* (Calcutta: Bengal Government Press, 1947), 139.

⁶⁶ Arpita Bose, ed., *Udbastu Andolan o Punarbasati: Samasamayik Patra-Patrikay* [Refugee movement and rehabilitation: In contemporary newspapers and journals] (Calcutta: Gangchil, 2017), 109, 111.

⁶⁷ Basu, *Chhere*, 1: 162, 168.

Colonial-era Bengali nationalists, and even celebrated non-Bengalis like Gandhi, not only internalised British self-comparison with the Roman Empire, but also presented Indians as successors of the Jews. Anti-colonial Indian nationalism was cast as a continuation of the Jewish-Christian spiritual and political challenge against empire. In the inter-war years, Bengali intellectuals, most prominently Rabindranath Tagore, closely dialogued with prominent Jewish intellectuals, and expressed deep sympathy for their plight at the hands of the Nazis.⁶⁸

Salil Sen's Marxist play *Natun Ihudi* (The new Jew, 1951) about Bengali Hindu refugees (later made into a movie in 1953), thus fell on fertile soil. Sen did not mention the Jews anywhere in the play apart from the title. His Bengali middle-class audience, thanks to their Western education, would have been familiar with the history of the repeated forced migrations of Jews, from Biblical times to the 1940s. Sen used the "new Jew" as a universalistic political category to align East Bengali refugees with victims of discrimination across the world:

In your mind, be one with all the oppressed, and take the vow that those self-interested people, greedy for wealth, who are playing with your fates, you will punish them. You will surely end the brutalities committed by heartless exploiters.⁶⁹

The wide traction of the phrase is recalled by Partha Chatterjee (born 1947), a celebrated East Bengali refugee-origin postcolonial theorist and member of the Subaltern Studies collective:

Sometime in my childhood, I came to hear the phrase *notun ihudi*—the new Jews. [. . .] It referred, I was told, to people like us, thrown out of our homes in the eastern half of Bengal which had now become part of another country called Pakistan. Both my parents came from there. Once every few months, I would wake up in the morning to find the house full of strangers—relatives from Pakistan who stayed with us for a few days and then moved to a more permanent dwelling. We were, I heard, the new Jews—refugees, forced to make a new life in a strange land.

I also discovered why our elders among the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan so loved the analogy with European Jews. The latter represented, they pointed out endlessly, the cream of European intellectual and cultural life. Some of the greatest scientists, writers, musicians and artists of our time had been driven into exile by European racists who hated Jews. They were, of course, quick to add that the same thing had happened to the Hindus who were the intellectual elite of East Bengal: they had been expropriated and expelled by an ignorant Muslim peasantry and its bigoted leaders.⁷⁰

However, as the Cold War progressed, Chatterjee grew critical of Israel, seeing it as an example of "colonial rule as well as apartheid," which persecuted Palestinians and also entrenched American power in the region.⁷¹

Cold War anxieties were also visible in the novel *Purva-Pashchim* (East-West, 1989), by refugee-poet Sunil Gangopadhyay. Gangopadhyay condemned the Western world, and especially the United States and West Germany, for their hypocrisy. While they lamented about Hitler's acts of genocide against the Jews, they turned a blind eye to Pakistan's acts

⁶⁸ Banerjee, *Mortal God*, 170, 175, 243, 284, 353, 360, 365, 371.

⁶⁹ Sen, *Natun Ihudi*, 136.

⁷⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "Why I Support the Boycott of Israeli Institutions," 2015, <https://savageminds.org/2015/09/09/partha-chatterjee-why-i-support-the-boycott-of-israeli-institutions/>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

of genocide against poor Bengali Muslims and Hindus. In an epoch when Pakistan was aligned with the Western bloc and India with the Soviet Union, this anti-West criticism was tinged with socialist anger.⁷²

In a magisterial history of the refugee movement in West Bengal, published in 1990, the refugee-origin scholar Prafulla Chakrabarti also cast Bengali refugees as Jews, “the children of Jehovah,” though “they are still a long way off Canaan.” Chakrabarti lamented about the indifference of the Indian state towards East Bengalis, whereas the postwar international refugee rehabilitation regime had helped the European displaced.⁷³ In such discourses, the category of “Jew” becomes an almost transhistorical category, overriding specific differences among Jewish communities.

East Bengali refugees deploy the “new Jew” image to describe themselves even today.⁷⁴ For many Bengalis, the murderous violence unleashed over years by the Partition, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and many millions displaced, brings to mind the Holocaust. The East Bengali-origin intellectual Subhoranjan Dasgupta observes: “each and every creative text on Partition which has survived the test of time, has condemned the Holocaust in aesthetic-humanist terms.”⁷⁵

Reflections on Jewish/Palestinian history go beyond East Bengali circles, and are a general part of West Bengali discourse today. Sumita Chakrabarti, a literary studies scholar, thus praises the “rebel consciousness” (*pratibadi chetana*) of twentieth-century émigré Jewish intellectuals. She is equally moved by the plight of Palestinian refugees, and meditates on the Palestinian-origin literary critic Edward Said’s ruminations on exile.⁷⁶

Comparisons with Jewish history are also central to present Hindu nationalism. The most famous contemporary East Bengali-origin Hindu nationalist politician is Tathagata Ray: a member of the Hindu nationalist ruling party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and Governor of Meghalaya. In his book *Ja Chhila Amar Desh* (What was my country, 2016), Ray compares the plight of East Bengali refugees with the atrocities suffered by Jews at the hands of Hitler, by the Chinese at the hands of the Japanese during the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, and by Black Africans at the hands of the Whites in Apartheid South Africa.⁷⁷ Ray holds an allegedly timeless Muslim spirit of jihad responsible for majoritarian violence in East Bengal.⁷⁸ His prescription, that India should pressure Bangladesh to safeguard Hindu minorities, remains one-sided.⁷⁹ He does not admit the complement: that Bangladesh and Pakistan be allowed to pressure India to protect Indian Muslims, who have suffered from regular social discrimination, political marginalisation, and pogroms—Nellie 1983, Gujarat 2002, Delhi 2020, and many more.

Lockean Foundations of Refugee Political Society

Despite the miserable conditions underlying their forced migration and resettlement, the high-caste gentry gradually recuperated a semblance of dignified life in West Bengal. They could sometimes rely on kinship, employment, and other networks in West Bengali

⁷² Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Purva-Pashchim*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1999), 459, 462.

⁷³ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 38, 252.

⁷⁴ Amar Mitra, “Natun Deshe Natun Ihudider Hahakar” [The lament of the new Jews in new countries], *Samvad Pratidin*, 21 June 2020, 4.

⁷⁵ Subhoranjan Dasgupta, “Life—Our Only Refuge,” in Samaddar, *Reflections*, 164.

⁷⁶ Sumita Chakrabarti, “Deshbhag o Sahitya” [Partition of country and literature], in *Deshvibhag o Bangla Akhyan* [Partition of country and Bengali narratives], ed. Uday Chand Das (Calcutta: Diya Publication, 2019), 11–20.

⁷⁷ Tathagata Ray, *Ja Chhila Amar Desh* (Calcutta: Mitra o Ghosh Publishers, 2016), v, xiii, xv, 3–5, 263–8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 83, 272.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 299–301.

society. Often, they organised collectively to occupy government and private buildings and lands. They set up squatters' "colonies," arguably the most famous being Bijaygarh (The Fortress of Victory) in Calcutta. In contrast, lower-caste refugees spent longer years in government refugee camps. They were sometimes shunted off to clear forests and waste lands and pioneer settled agriculture in remote areas like the Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya in central India. Even when many of them settled in West Bengal, living conditions were far more squalid and miserable than in gentry refugee colonies. Lower-caste refugees suffered much more from poverty, malnutrition, and disease than high-caste refugees.⁸⁰

Communist activists helped organise refugees to battle against the landed magnates who wanted to evict refugees from their property, and against the Indian state, bent on protecting elite private property from refugee occupation. Led by the Communist Party of India, several leftist parties came together to organise the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) in 1950. *On the Party* (1945), by the Chinese revolutionary Liu Shaoqi, offered inspiration. For Anil Sinha, "the prime mover within the UCRC," the text "defined rules that could guide the UCRC." Drawing on Mao's slogan "from the masses and to the masses," Liu Shaoqi had outlined that "the organizational and political line of our Party should stem genuinely from the masses and be genuinely relayed back to them." The UCRC took a cue from this to weave together refugee action and party politics.⁸¹ It developed sophisticated forms of assembly, where representatives of diverse refugee colonies would gather and take collective decisions.⁸² Refugee camp and colony committees were elected by adult members, and connected local committees to the central organisation, building "the organizational form of a direct democracy."⁸³

Refugee action was fuelled by Cold War geopolitics, especially the Zhdanov Doctrine, named after a speech given in 1947 by Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to the Cominform. The doctrine sketched a model of bipolar conflict between the Communist and the Western camps. Inspired by this, the Ranadive Line—after B. T. Ranadive, General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (1948–50)—called for revolutionary struggle against the Indian state, leading to rebellions in Hyderabad, Tripura, and Manipur.⁸⁴

To the Communist Party, "forcible occupation of land" (*jabardakhal*) by refugees "amounted to establishing liberated zones."⁸⁵ This ethos was strengthened by a Soviet journal article published in 1950, which condemned the Partition as a ploy of the "imperialist forces" and "reactionary communal elements."⁸⁶ The UCRC favourite Liu Shaoqi had also meanwhile, at the Trade Union Conference of Asian and Australasian countries in 1949, called on colonial and semicolonial countries to follow the Chinese revolutionary model of armed struggle.⁸⁷

Even after the demise of the Ranadive Line and phase of armed insurrection by 1951, Communists continued to support refugee claims to property rights and to basic amenities like running water, electricity, and drainage facilities in refugee habitations. In his address to the UCRC in 1954, the writer and journalist Vivekananda Mukhopadhyay (born in East Bengal in 1904) castigated the Indian state for failing to ensure economic rehabilitation for refugees; he contrasted this with the apparent successes of the West

⁸⁰ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*; Chatterji, *Spoils*; Sen, *Citizen Refugee*.

⁸¹ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 77–8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 62–75.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

German government.⁸⁸ In general, refugees demanded access to good food, clothing, education, and healthcare. Salaried refugees intensified the general demand by workers for better wages and pensions, and played a major role in strikes. Refugees demanded land reforms and redistribution of elite land to the poor. They allied with West Bengali low-waged middle-class professionals, impoverished land-hungry peasants, and exploited labourers who had similar material needs. Refugee activists eroded the legitimacy of the Indian National Congress, the premier nationalist party of India, which ruled West Bengal in the early postcolonial years. They helped the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), capture state power in West Bengal in 1977.⁸⁹

Prafulla Chakrabarti argues that “when the Left arrived, it meant in reality the conquest of power by an external proletariat, the refugees”: “a temperamental, mobile, pauperized and exceedingly violence-prone refugee population.” Communist parties performed a “vanguard function” initially for their grievances, before consolidating their hold over the peasantry and industrial labourers of West Bengal. Campaigns like “the Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Movement of 1953 and the Food Movements of 1959 and 1966” linked refugee grievances against commodity prices to broader anger against a state dominated by the propertied elites.⁹⁰

The term “external proletariat,” as used by Chakrabarti, derives from the British historian Arnold Toynbee’s theorisation in *A Study of History*.⁹¹ For Toynbee, the quintessential examples of the “external proletariat” were the “barbarian” invaders of the Roman Empire. Hence, for Chakrabarti, the “massed power of the entire refugee population behind the Left Front government” amounted to a transformative “barbarian energy which was missing in conservative polity of West Bengal.”⁹²

Taking a cue from Andrew Sartori’s work on colonial Bengal,⁹³ I would further suggest that East Bengali Hindu refugees, cutting across class-caste lines, operated through a “Lockean” logic in making their claims on land. The seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke observed, in *Two Treatises on Government*, that human labour, which made land, especially uncultivated land, productive, was the foundation of the right to property.⁹⁴ “Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joynd to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*.”⁹⁵

In West Bengal, as early as 1951, Syamaprasad Mookerjee argued against the Congress government, which sought to evict refugees, that “refugees had reclaimed land which was considered uninhabitable and had developed model settlements [. . .]. So eviction could not be the rule but an exception.”⁹⁶ The spread of the Lockean logic was not smooth. Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novel *Arjun* (1970) chronicles how East Bengali refugees had to overcome their scruples regarding the sacred (*pavitra*) nature of landed property right, before they could forcibly occupy land.⁹⁷

⁸⁸ Bose, *Udbastu Andolan*, 373–4.

⁸⁹ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*; Chatterji, *Spoils*; Sen, *Citizen Refugee*.

⁹⁰ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, xxv, 408.

⁹¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939); D. C. Somervell, “The Argument of *A Study of History*,” in Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial and The World and the West* (New York: Meridian Books, 1965), 320–4; Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 463.

⁹² Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, xxv–vi, also 406.

⁹³ Sartori, *Liberalism*.

⁹⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), bk. 2, chap. 5, “Of Property,” 285–302.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁹⁶ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 85.

⁹⁷ Sunil Gangopadhyay, “Arjun,” in *Upanyas Samagra*, vol. 3 (Calcutta: Ananda, 2016), 200, 228.

For Locke, “’Tis Labour then which puts the greatest part of Value upon Land, without which it would scarcely be worth any thing.”⁹⁸ Similarly, when the landlords upheld “the sacred right to private property,”⁹⁹ the UCRC insisted that it was refugee labour which had created value by making uncultivated land productive, and therefore the refugees had a natural right to the land they squatted on.

The UCRC protested against the demand for compensation. What should they pay compensation for? They reclaimed lands full of marshes and jungles infested with poisonous snakes and wild animals and raised the value of land throughout West Bengal. The UCRC asked, “Who would pay compensation—the squatters or the landowners?” Nobody turned to pay compensation. The Competent Authority then sent eviction notices for failure to pay compensation. But it was impossible to evict the squatters in the face of combined resistance.¹⁰⁰

Uditi Sen similarly underlines that Namashudra peasant refugees in the Andamans “were staking a primary claim upon the land and resources of Andamans by virtue of having pioneered agriculture in the islands. They project themselves as settlers and colonisers.”¹⁰¹ (In the Andamans, the settlement was sanctioned by the state.) In West Bengal, once the Left came to power, the refugee land-seizure model was replicated by “the landless and poor peasantry” across the countryside, with the complicity of the Communist government.¹⁰²

I use the term “Lockean” here as shorthand for a much older and broader tradition. The argument that human labour is the source of property rights can be found in centuries-old Sanskrit¹⁰³ and Islamic¹⁰⁴ legal-intellectual traditions. In India, a central text is Manu’s *Manavadharmashastra* (or *Manusmriti*) of the late first millennium BCE or early first millennium CE, which declares (Manu 9.44) that “a field belongs to the man who cleared the stumps and the deer to the man who owns the arrow.”¹⁰⁵

These precolonial traditions were referenced by anti-colonial thinkers and peasant rights advocates in colonial Bengal¹⁰⁶ and early postcolonial India.¹⁰⁷ The sensibility originated from the millennia-old history of agrarian expansion through clearance of forest and “wasteland” in South Asia. In riverine and marshy eastern Bengal, landed gentry as well as peasants traditionally organised these processes. In postcolonial India, East Bengali Hindu gentry and lower-caste peasant refugees translated into new landscapes far older trajectories of land reclamation, settlement building, and related ideological legitimisation of land-possession.

⁹⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 298.

⁹⁹ Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 405.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁰¹ Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 155.

¹⁰² Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 409–10.

¹⁰³ Timothy Lubin, “The Theory and Practice of Property in Premodern South Asia: Disparities and Convergences,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61:5–6 (2018), 803–50, 810–1.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Sartori, “Property and Political Norms: Hanafi Juristic Discourse in Agrarian Bengal,” *Modern Intellectual History* 17:2 (2020): 471–85.

¹⁰⁵ Manu, *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmashastra*, trans. Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192.

¹⁰⁶ Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, *Samajik Pravandha* [Social essays] (Hooghly: Kashinath Bhattacharya, 1892), 162–4; Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “The Theory of Property, Law, and Social Order in Hindu Political Philosophy,” *International Journal of Ethics* 30:3 (1920), 311–25, 313; Speech of Shah Syed Emdadul Haq, in Government of Bengal, *The Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, vol. 12 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1923), 72–3.

¹⁰⁷ Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, *Report* (Delhi: All-India Congress Committee, 1951), 36.

One should differentiate between Lockean settler colonialism, which violently exterminated indigenous populations in the Americas and beyond, and the abject condition of these dispossessed Bengali refugees. Tragically however, the land-settling drive of the Bengali refugees sometimes created further chains of displacement. In sub-Himalayan West Bengal, Tripura, and the Andaman Islands, indigenous lower-caste and/or “tribal” populations often lost control of land and local power due to Bengali refugee advent, but sometimes also mounted fierce resistance against the newcomers.¹⁰⁸

Partha Chatterjee offers another theoretical lens to interpret refugee settlement building, grounded in an ethnographic survey done in the early 1990s of Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate Number 1, a squatters’ colony of about 1,500 people in Calcutta. The colony originated in the late 1940s, when poor, mostly middle- and lower-caste, refugees began settling down on government land by a railway track. Subaltern action, with some support from the Communist Party, converted an “illegal” settlement into a democratic society through periodic political agitation against state-led eviction, as well as regular mutual aid. The colony association, Jana Kalyan Samiti or People’s Welfare Association, organised a medical centre, and acquired electricity, water, and toilet facilities for the residents. For Chatterjee, this is subaltern “political society,” which characterises popular politics and life in much of the non-Western world. It sharply differs from staid bourgeois civil society of the kind canonised by Hegel. Rather than operating through formal law and state institutions, preserves of Western-educated elites in much of the postcolonial world, popular politics creates political society from below through extra-legal agitation and mutual organisation. For Chatterjee, here lies a deep root of democratic politics in the post-colonial world.¹⁰⁹

Lower-Caste Refugee Political Thought: From Lockean Settlement to Marxist Critique

In *Two Treatises on Government*, Locke argued that “God, when he gave the World in common to all Mankind, commanded Man also to labour [. . .]. He that in Obedience to this Command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his *Property* [. . .].”¹¹⁰ Divinely-mandated labour thus created property and was the foundation of society. We find a similar Lockean logic among the lower-caste Namashudra refugees who settled in the Andaman Islands and were interviewed by Madhumita Mazumdar in 2010–11.¹¹¹

Most of these settlers belonged to the Matua sect which subscribed to an ideology of “haate kaam, mukhe naam.” Literally, “work in the hand, the (divine) name on the mouth,” this is an imperative to “chant the name of the Lord while working with one’s hands.”¹¹² Labour—especially in clearing forests and pioneering agriculture—thus became a divine act. “As Keshub Rai ruefully recounted the backbreaking work he had to put in to rake, beat and pulverize the clods of earth to prepare it for sowing, he asked who could have helped him during that time but the Lord?”¹¹³ Divine labour also supported property

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Banerjee, *Mortal God*, 307–12, 330–5; Madhumita Mazumdar, “Dwelling in Fluid Spaces: The Matuas of the Andaman Islands,” in *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscape, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal, 1790–2012*, ed. Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar, and Vishvajit Pandya (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 179–80, 183–4, 199–200; Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 150–4.

¹⁰⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), especially 27–78.

¹¹⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 291.

¹¹¹ Mazumdar, “Dwelling,” 170–200.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 189–90.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 189.

right, apart from any statist legal framework. Manmohan Mistry noted that “the soil they had tilled in the Andamans was theirs and the homes that they built therein were blessed by their Gurus.”¹¹⁴

Labour was a sacred and collective experience, the foundation of a new *samaj*: a polyvalent Bengali word that can be translated as “society” as well as “community.”¹¹⁵ Matua shrines, assemblies of discussion, and congregational singing constituted the nucleus of this *samaj*. The act of settlement and society building was linked to the teachings of the Matua sect founder Harichand Thakur. Bhavani Biswas observed: “Harichand Thakur’s commands tell us how to make homes and grow new roots in new lands by living a life of piety and by strengthening the bonds of community.”¹¹⁶ The new society was constructed almost as a utopian community in this cosmogony: in Harinath Mondol’s words, one that would “bloom like a garden even in the midst of the wildest jungles.”¹¹⁷

Outside the Andamans, lower-caste refugees (especially Namashudras) confronted greater difficulties than high-caste refugees in advancing Lockean claims on land. The Indian state project of settling lower-caste refugees in Dandakaranya in central India offers a notorious case in point. Placed in forest and scrub terrain, with little water supply, many refugees grew restive and sought to return to West Bengal. Against government directives, they tried to settle down in the Sundarbans mangrove forest region in West Bengal. The writer and journalist Jyotirmay Datta described them in 1978 as new Robinson Crusoes: invoking the classic early modern European settler model.¹¹⁸ Datta saw them as “new colonizers” (*natur aupanibeshik*).¹¹⁹

Lower-caste refugees at Marichjhapi island in the Sundarbans were subaltern iterations of the Lockean settler. “By their own efforts they established a viable fishing industry, salt pans, a health center, and schools.”¹²⁰ Tragically, the Left Front, at the helm of government in West Bengal since 1977, turned against them. The refugees invoked in vain Cold War geopolitics, when Indian, especially leftist, intellectual and political classes supported the Palestinian cause. “Many are saying, if the elites (*babura*) of this country can raise their voices about getting land for the settlement of Palestinian refugees, then why will the elites not do anything for us?”¹²¹

I would argue that the question ultimately became one of sovereignty. The late 1970s was not the late 1940s. The Left Front was not interested anymore in establishing liberated zones; it wanted to rule through the postcolonial state, rather than dismantling the state. The Marichjhapi project symbolised a counter-sovereignty: or, worse, the possibility of an anarchist society that rose from below and defied state sovereignty and ancillary rule of property.

Chief Minister Jyoti Basu announced in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in early 1979 that the refugees were trying to run a “parallel government” (*samantara sarkar*) and distributing land without authorisation from the state. They were not letting the state administration and police enter and function within their area of occupation. They were trying to create a government in a border region, in between the governments of West Bengal and Bangladesh. They were claiming to be “autonomous” (*atmanirbharshil*;

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹¹⁵ Swarupa Gupta, *Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, c. 1867–1905* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

¹¹⁶ Mazumdar, “Dwelling,” 191.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹⁸ Jyotirmay Datta, “Dash Hajar Robinson Crusoe Abikal Khulna Banachchen” [Ten thousand Robinson Crusoes are building exact Khulnas], in *Marichjhapi: Chhinna Desh, Chhinna Itihas* [Marichjhapi: Torn country, torn history], ed. Madhumay Pal (Calcutta: Gangchil, 2016), 64–9.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹²⁰ Ross Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58:1 (1999), 104–25, 107.

¹²¹ Pal, *Marichjhapi*, 44, reproducing an article from 1978.

literally, self-dependent). No state could tolerate such a “self-willed kingdom” (*svechchhachari rajatva*).¹²²

Basu wrote to the Prime Minister of India, Morarji Desai, that the refugees “have felled forest trees extensively, have started fisheries and are distributing lands. They have created a sort of free zone for themselves in Marichjhanpi and have expressed their determination to resist by force any attempt to repatriate them.”¹²³ The state responded with several episodes of violence, with a particularly comprehensive assault in May 1979. Hundreds, or even thousands, are estimated to have been killed by the police, and (relatedly) through hunger and disease.¹²⁴

Many radical Scheduled Caste—or, in activist parlance, Dalit (literally, oppressed)—thinkers in West Bengal today come from East Bengali peasant-refugee, especially Namashudra, backgrounds. Hence, in contemporary Bengali lower-caste/Dalit political thought, the refugee peasant has come to epitomise the proletariat: the expropriated, displaced, and relentlessly exploited labourer, alienated from the ruling order, who is also the standpoint for challenging the state, the propertied ruling classes, and even the conservative Left.

The Dalit writer Ranjit Kumar Sikdar, in a poem about the Marichjhapi massacre published in 1981, thus condemned the Left Front government for holding aloft the banner of the proletariat (in Bengali, *sarvahara*; literally, those who have lost all), while betraying their cause in practice. Here, the refugee epitomised the proletariat, indexed by the twined term “*sarvahara udbastu*.”¹²⁵ In the 2000s, as the Left Front government sought to expropriate peasant land for large-scale industries, memories of Marichjhapi returned with vengeance. In displacing peasants from their land at Singur and Nandigram, as well as in killing protestors, the government was seen as re-enacting in the twenty-first century the Marichjhapi tragedy.¹²⁶ Agrarian anger instigated the downfall of the regime in the 2011 elections.

Despite anger towards the official Left, Dalit thinkers are nourished by Marxist theory. Manohar Mouli Biswas—born in 1943 in a nonliterate Namashudra small peasant family of East Bengal—thus draws upon Hegel’s notion of the “negation of negation,” as reinterpreted by Friedrich Engels in *Anti-Dühring* (1877) and elaborated in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.¹²⁷ For Biswas, the caste system in India had been designed to negate the lower castes and deny them their just dues. The misery of lower-caste refugees is thus part of a millennial negation. Drawing upon Plato and Aristotle, Biswas urges for a unification of “poetics” and “politics” to “cancel/abolish” (*uchchhed*) this great negation.¹²⁸ The Bengali term *uchchhed*, like the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, encodes a sense of lifting up as well as abolishing (owing to the particle *ud/ut* present in the first part of the word, as

¹²² Jyoti Basu, “Vidhansabhyavivriti,” address at the Legislative Assembly, 9 February 1979, in Pal, *Marichjhapi*, 84–93.

¹²³ Letter from Jyoti Basu to Morarji Desai, 24 January 1979, in Pal, *Marichjhapi*, 94.

¹²⁴ Annu Jalais, “Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became ‘Citizens,’ Refugees ‘Tiger-Food,’” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40:17 (2005), 1757–62.

¹²⁵ Ranjit Kumar Sikdar, “Antarjatik Shishuvarshe Marichjhapi” [Marichjhapi in the International Year of the Child], in *Shatarvarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* [A century of Bengali Dalit literature], ed. Manohar Mouli Biswas, Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, and Asit Biswas (Calcutta: Bangla Dalit Sahitya Samstha, 2019), 113.

¹²⁶ Jhuma Sen, “Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives,” in *Partition: The Long Shadow*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (Delhi: Zubaan, 2015), 102–27.

¹²⁷ Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Amar Bhuvane Ami Bneche Thaki* [I remain alive in my world] (Calcutta: Chaturtha Duniya, 2013), 13, cites from the English translation of *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Negation+of+the+Negation%2C+Law+of+the>; see also Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, <http://bse.sci-lib.com/article085810.html>.

¹²⁸ Biswas, *Amar Bhuvane*, 12–4.

also in *udbastu: ud/ut* carries meanings of “up, upwards; upon, on; over, above,” in addition to “separation and disjunction”).¹²⁹

Biswas also speaks about slavery and the displacement of Africans into the New World. He sees this as part of broader processes of commodity (*panya*) exchange and extraction of unpaid labour (*bina paysay shramdan*). Biswas ultimately draws inspiration from Afro-American literature to forge Dalit poetics.¹³⁰ Against the elites and their culture of commodification and consumption (*panyayita upabhokta sanskriti*), Biswas posits the world-creating revolutionary culture of the “producing classes” (*utpadak shreni*).¹³¹ Similarly, Kapil Krishna Thakur—born in 1956 in a Namashudra peasant family of East Bengal—castigates the high-castes for robbing the lower castes of the profits generated by the latter’s labour (*shramer munapha*).¹³²

The Namashudra writer Manoranjan Byapari—born in 1951 in a nonliterate family of East Bengal—contrasts the relative prosperity of high-caste Bengali refugee colonies, which he compares with similar settlements in Israel, with the poverty and disease-stricken life of lower-caste refugees in government camps in India: a life he had experienced while growing up.¹³³ Byapari sees caste hierarchy, capitalism, and imperialism as conjoined structures of exploitation. Byapari was once involved with left-radical politics, including with Naxalite militant revolt against the Indian state and elites. He presents society as a “battlefield” (*ranakshetra*); resistance is “war” (*yuddha*) against “mastery/lordship” (*prabhutvavad*). Intellectual activity becomes part of a wider struggle against the “lording consciousness” (*prabhutvakari chintadhara*).¹³⁴ I see in this argument a vernacularised trace of the Hegelian lord-bondsman dialectic.

Arendt in Bengal: Intersecting European and Bengali Political Thought about Refugees

This section examines how Bengali thinkers today debate with European political theory about refugees. Hannah Arendt, the German-Jewish philosopher who fled Nazi Germany and ultimately settled in the United States, offers a significant point of departure in these intersections. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt connected the Partitions of India and Palestine, two almost coeval processes within the British Empire. Here, as in the essay “We Refugees” (1943), we find a searing indictment of majoritarian nationalism and nation-state sovereignty, from the perspective of the minority and the refugee deprived of their rights, dignity, and often lives, by the fiat of the state.¹³⁵

Contemporary European political theory has increasingly connected the long 1940s with recent refugee tragedies and immigration debates. Arendt has been resurrected here. For Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer* (1995), the long 1940s returned to memory in the context of genocides and other forms of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and in the territories of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and related refugee tragedies.¹³⁶ Agamben drew on

¹²⁹ Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 173, 183; Das, *Bangala Bhashar Abhidhan*, 228.

¹³⁰ Biswas, *Amar Bhuvane*, 9–11, 93–6.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 14–6.

¹³² Kapil Krishna Thakur, “Dalit Mukti Andolaner Dharay Ambedkar” [Ambedkar in the lineage of Dalit liberation struggle], *Gangchil Patrika* 8 (April 2019), 84–91, 86.

¹³³ Manoranjan Byapari, *Itivritte Chandal Jivan* [The Chandal life in narrative] (Calcutta: Dey Publications, 2016), reference to Israel at 42.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 373, 415.

¹³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962), 267–302; Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” in *The Jewish Writings: Hannah Arendt*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 264–74.

¹³⁶ Agamben, “Homo Sacer,” e.g., 101, 111, 144–5, 152.

insights from Arendt and the French philosopher Michel Foucault. To condemn the order of state sovereignty which made these atrocities possible, Agamben advanced the concept of “bare life,” a life that is always exposed and vulnerable to sovereign violence. “In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”¹³⁷ The bare life of the refugee was seen here as constitutive of nation-state sovereignty. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida similarly invoked Arendt in a famous address in 1996, shaped by debates on immigration in France in the 1990s, including protests against new restrictive immigration and citizenship laws. Derrida drew on Jewish and Christian traditions to put forth the idea of “*ville-refuge*” (city of refuge), which would be more hospitable than sovereign nation-states to refugees/immigrants.¹³⁸

Arendt—along with Agamben and Derrida—have entered Bengali discussions in the context of intensifying debates on citizenship and refugee rights across South Asia. The central BJP government’s facilitation of citizenship for non-Muslim refugees entering India from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—instantiated by the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019—has created great opposition in India. Juxtaposing this with the Indian state’s attempt to police citizenship through the National Register of Citizens (NRC), wide sections of public opinion have denounced the impact governmental policy will have in disempowering millions of people, especially Muslims. The Indian state has also been criticised for failing to offer adequate protection and refuge to Rohingya refugees, victims of ethnic cleansing by the Myanmar state. Finally, the refugee crises created by the Syrian Civil War and by the Islamic State, as well as the long-running Palestinian tragedy, continue to trouble Bengali thinkers.¹³⁹

In this context, the East Bengali-origin literary scholar Nandini Bhattacharya cites Arendt and Agamben, while theorising about the exclusionary and violent nature of state sovereignty in South Asia and beyond. Against discriminatory border regimes, she brings into consideration Derrida’s model of cities of refuge. But, ultimately, she declines this model, given the role of cities as nodes of capitalist-colonial exploitation in a mostly rural subcontinent. Drawing on Bengali literature and history, she presents an alternative ideal of *charer prajatantra*, “the republic of the alluvial island,” centred on islands of refuge. She invokes the Marichjhapi island experiment of building a refugee society, and the general role of river islands across Bengal and Assam in offering poor migrants a chance to build new lives and settlements.¹⁴⁰

The East Bengali-origin historian Udit Sen also references Arendt and Agamben, but, like Bhattacharya, emphasises refugee agency in creating new settlements. She proposes that the “constraints and possibilities of refugee life in South Asia have always exceeded Eurocentric formulations of refugees as stateless outsiders and abject victims.”¹⁴¹

The philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak invokes Arendt and Agamben while speaking about refugees/immigrants as challenges to the logic of ethnic-majoritarian nation-state sovereignty.¹⁴² She remembers her mother’s role in refugee relief and rehabilitation in Calcutta in the aftermath of the Partition.¹⁴³ In recent years, she has been vocal against

¹³⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* (Paris: Galilée, 1997).

¹³⁹ Special issue, “Sharanarathi” [Refugee], *Gangchil Patrika* 1 (July 2017); Special issue, “Na-Nagarik” [Not-citizen], *Gangchil Patrika* 7 (December 2018).

¹⁴⁰ Nandini Bhattacharya, “Ashrayer Nagari, Charer Prajatantra: Dakshin Asiar Rashtrahin Jati” [The city of refuge, the republic of the alluvial island: The stateless communities of South Asia], *Gangchil Patrika* 7 (December 2018), 17–28.

¹⁴¹ Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, 1, 4–5.

¹⁴² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 335–6, 570–1.

¹⁴³ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 278.

the atrocities and forced migration experienced by the Muslim Rohingya minorities of Myanmar at the hands of the Buddhist-majoritarian state.¹⁴⁴ But she stresses that it is not enough to critique the nation-state, as Arendt does in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. She advocates for “critical regionalism,” grounded in translocal solidarities forged among actors and societies of the Global South.¹⁴⁵ She connects “the plight of the Rohingya to global struggles,” to challenge “the social violence of unregulated capitalism.”¹⁴⁶ This perspective is impelled by the role that primitive accumulation and capitalist industrialisation plays in the dispossession of Rohingyas by the Myanmar state.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

This essay has examined the political thought of Hindu refugees—and occasionally of their children—who fled from East Bengal/Pakistan to India in the long aftermath of the Partition of 1947. Bengali refugee political thought was rooted in refugee self-organisation and mutual aid while forging new “political societies” (to reinvoke Partha Chatterjee’s term). Refugees occupied elite lands and formed civic settlements—frequently in defiance of the state and its rule of property—to carve out dignified lives and democratic existence. Lower-caste/Dalit refugees challenged, with uneven success, high-caste ruling classes. While Nandini Bhattacharya specifically idealises “the republic of the alluvial island,” places of shelter for subaltern refugees, this essay foregrounds how refugee settlements and confederal self-organisation in general gave birth to a distinctive “refugee republicanism.”

Though the Indian state carried out refugee rehabilitation largely within the nation-state framework, the refugees themselves drew on transnational references to articulate their politics. The European Jewish tragedy and the conjuncted history of Israel/Palestine were an abiding presence in Bengali refugee thought. European, Soviet, and Chinese Marxist theory—and latent Lockean assumptions—propelled the everyday politics of refugee land occupation. Marxism, sometimes with Hegelian inflection, nourished the East Bengali-origin founders of Subaltern Studies theory and Dalit thought. More recently, African-American perspectives have inspired Dalit refugee thinking. Arendt, Agamben, and Derrida occupy an increasingly prominent place in contemporary Bengali discussions. Refugee republicanism has nourished local politics with transnational horizons, and ultimately rewritten the script of democracy in postcolonial India.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Ilya Afanasyev, Alapan Bandyopadhyay, Krishnarup Chakravarti, Dirk Moses, Kerstin von Lingen, and Jelle Wouters for their comments and suggestions.

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¹⁴⁴ Victoria Moore, “Prof Urges Students to Consider Oppression of the Rohingya,” *The Cornell Daily Sun*, 31 October 2017, <https://cornellsun.com/2017/10/31/prof-urges-students-to-consider-oppression-of-the-rohingya/>; Rifat Islam Esha, “Spivak: No Excuse for Ignoring Genocidal Denial of Democratic Rights of Rohingyas,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/arts-culture/2018/02/10/spivak-no-excuse-for-ignoring-genocidal-denial-of-democratic-rights-of-rohingyas>.

¹⁴⁵ Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 70–2, 74–84, 90–4, 98, 100–1.

¹⁴⁶ Brad Evans and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “When Law Is Not Justice,” *The New York Times*, 13 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/opinion/when-law-is-not-justice.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Soe Lin Aung, “Three Theses on the Crisis in Rakhine,” in *Tea Circle: A Forum for New Perspectives on Burma/Myanmar*, 27 September 2017, <https://teacircleoxford.com/2017/09/27/three-theses-on-the-crisis-in-rakhine/>.