

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 13: South Asian Migration and Sunil Ganguly's East and West-I

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugee Migration and Diaspora. So today, we are going to discuss a new novel titled East West. East West is written by Sunil Ganguly, who was an Indian poet, novelist, short-story writer, historian, and critic in the Bengali language. Ganguly was originally from East Bengal, which is now called Bangladesh, and he witnessed major historical events in South Asia.

The Partition of India, which happened in 1947, as well as the Liberation War, or Mukti Yuddha, which happened in 1971. All these watershed events deeply affected and resonated in his writings. They deeply affected him and resonated in his writings. So, East-West or East and West by Sunil Ganguly centers on the theme of partition

and the immigration of Bengali refugees to West Bengal. Purba Paschim, its original name in Bengali, is considered a seminal novel that depicts the post-partition scenario and the post-partition crisis in Bengal among Bengalis. This novel is a record of the disturbed times in East Pakistan as well as in the Indian part of Bengal, known as West Bengal. Sunil Ganguly's Purva Paschim, or East-West, has been translated into English by Enakshi Chatterjee. This novel, with its two expansive parts,

Is a monumental study of displacement and relocation against the backdrop of the Great Divide or Partition. Based on the Partition as a crucial moment in South Asian history, East-West focuses on the conceptualization of refugee identity as well as deals with the problems of class conflict, diaspora, communal relations, and repatriation or resettlement. Sunil Ganguly was one of the foremost poets who experimented with new forms, themes, rhythms, and words in Bengali poetry during the 1950s and 1960s. He is best known for his novels Aranyer Din Ratri, Shei Shomoy,

Prothom Alo, and Purba Paschim. All these novels were originally written in the Bengali language. In 1985, he received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his historical fiction Shei Shomoy, which is translated into English as Those Days. East-West remains a highly acclaimed work of Bengali literature for its skillful depiction of the middle-class

Bengali's reaction, especially the migrant section's reaction to the watershed of Partition across time and boundaries. The novel brought Bengali literature to an unprecedented interface with history through its simple depiction of life

and elevated Bengali literature to remarkable heights in historical fiction. The novel *East-West* begins with a section titled *The Beginning*, which is almost reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's 'Begin at the Beginning and Go On Until You Come to the End', thereby drawing attention to the fact that it is a sequential narrative of events. In *East-West*, the concept of home becomes a predominant factor and is consistently foregrounded, especially through the trope of the refugees from East Bengal. The character of Pratap, who is also the protagonist and one of the central characters, sees his sister's house being taken over by a horde of refugees.

These refugees would commonly be called squatters who occupied empty houses and empty lands in the host land of West Bengal through the process of *Jabardakhal*, also known as forceful occupation in English. And so the squatters would squat on unclaimed lands, which would essentially belong to the government. Or sometimes they could also be wastelands. And then the squatter refugees would claim these lands, occupy them forcefully, and build their own homes on them. This process would be known as *Jabardakhal* or forceful occupation.

Pratap's own brother-in-law dies in the resulting scuffle and clash with the refugees. So, even after this event, Pratap is not able to bring himself to condemn the refugees. Later in the novel, he says, referring to his own family and himself, 'Are they not refugees themselves?' The landed gentry who migrated from East Bengal and must now lead impoverished lives in the host land of West Bengal.

So the themes of impoverishment, displacement, and dispossession all become central factors that propel the narrative forward. In *East-West*, Pratap's pride is constantly hurt by the economic sanctions and the economic cuts that his family is forced to make. He dislikes having to buy cheap fish. The fact that he cannot provide nutritious food for his growing children becomes a source of frustration for him. This section of Bengali refugees had led a very good, wholesome life back in East Bengal before the partition.

They experienced a very wholesome life before the partition. They were used to a very lavish lifestyle. And so, having to make these kinds of cuts, having to live with so many concessions, really hurts the protagonist. So, he is constantly—Pratap is constantly annoyed at having to cut corners in his living.

Another character, Vishwanath, in *East-West*, shuns money and materiality; we see that he shuns money and materiality at the beginning of the novel. He never likes to talk about money first thing in the morning. According to Vishwanath, one should worry about money only when one runs short. However, in the later part of the novel, this same Vishwanath is reduced to a man who is willing to do anything for mere day-to-day survival. In each of the characters, especially Pratap, who is the image of the perfect Bengali Bhadrak, there are traces of extreme class consciousness. For instance, when the character of Kanu wishes to begin a business for himself, Pratap attempts to stop him, prevent him because business is considered something pejorative.

Business was a term associated pejoratively in the middle-class Bengali mind, which is also a kind of narrowness that the author criticizes. The author questions this kind of narrow-mindedness akin to the Bengali Bhadrak, the middle-class sections of the Bengali populace. So, in these kinds of conceptualizations, one sees not only the inherent class consciousness of the East Bengali Bhadrak in this novel but also the consistent cultural differences and resultant clashes and conflicts between the East Bengali migrants and the native West Bengalis. So, although they are co-religionists—they are mostly all Hindus—and they speak the same language. We see that, while both the East Bengalis and the West Bengalis are co-religionists and they speak the same language, there is constantly and frequently a clash at the level of culture, at the level of one's sense of belonging to and attachment to a homeland, what one considers as a homeland.

So, the Bhadrak—East Bengali, mostly educated and well-heeled government job holders—comprised the service class population, and they had this contemptuous and stereotypical understanding of the business class. They would also frequently stay away from people from other provinces. So, Bengalis, right after the partition, had the tendency to avoid people from other provinces. In this, the author is criticizing not just the inherent class consciousness of the Bengali Bhadrak but also their parochial, narrow attitude. On the other hand, another character from the novel, named Umapati, who is presumably a native of West Bengal, says,

also has a very negative and stereotypical understanding of the refugees, of the East Bengali migrants. So, Umapati thinks that East Bengal is a muddy and marshy land with the smell of fish everywhere, where the people speak in an uncivilized tongue. So, the West Bengalis also have their own lens through which they see the migrants there. They feel that they are uncouth, they are rustic, and they don't speak a civilized tongue. Their accent is actually very rustic.

So, the novel deals with a number of paradoxes and clearly demarcates the East Bengalis from the West Bengalis in terms of the culture they possess, and yet the novel underlines the common Bengali sentiment reigning at that point in time after the partition of India. Some scholars note that at the time of partition, the state mechanisms were not prepared for the mass exodus, the mass migration, which resulted in 12 to 14 million people being uprooted and displaced. When we move away from the official responses to partition and migration, we begin to see the differential experiences of the refugees as well. So, the experiences of the refugees have never been uniform.

While the state directed some of the refugees, others made their own plans. So, for some refugees, the state—the nation-state—would take the decision, whereas for the elite sections, they could make their own plans. They were the choosers. So, utilizing personal networks, the refugees with better economic and sociocultural resources were able to migrate to places which had an element of familiarity,

in the form of family, friends, and business as well as professional links. So, the elite sections would even have their connections, their networks across the border, and so they could resettle in a more organized, smoother fashion. From being refugees to becoming citizens is, therefore, a journey marked by one's distance from the camp life. Camp life is something that the government is sponsoring. So, if one has to stay in government-sponsored camp life, it means that one is poor, one is not self-dependent.

It reflects one's impoverished status. So, there were essentially two types of government housing facilities. One was the self-supported, and the other was state-supported. It was an administrative filter to separate the resource-rich immigrants from the mass of impoverished refugees. The refugee, as a category, is essentially the able-bodied male.

Women, disabled people, juveniles, and infirm people were all on the fringes, on the peripheries of the rehabilitation process. As the latter, anyone who was not a young male would need state sponsorship, would need state incentives in order to establish themselves. So, the resettlement policies were largely tailored to meet the needs of the ideal refugee type, and this ideal refugee is a strong-bodied and able-bodied young male.

Consequently, the meaning of a potential ideal citizen hinged on the question of gender. It emerged that the male would be the actor, the male members would eventually be the actors in the nation-building project, and everyone else would remain on the fringes. Unattached widows and women who had their husbands, their male folks, dying during partition, during riots, during displacement. And then grown-up girls coming to India for

marriage or to join their husbands, orphans who had no guardians alive—all these people would comprise a populace that would be treated with a sense of paternalism and control by the governments. So, they were treated as helpless beneficiaries of a welfarist state.

The ideal refugee that represented the category of The category of refugee itself comprised government officers, traders, businessmen, and other white-collar job holders. So, these people, people from these sections of society who immigrated to India after the partition, were considered as assets. They were economically more secure, politically aware, and entrenched with social networking. Ravinder Kaur notes that the rich refugees' rhetoric of loss and fall of status accentuated the riches they owned.

Self-rehabilitation was not only a display of initiative and hard work for all refugees, but at the same time it was also an expression of one's wealth and status in the past and a way of commanding authority in the new host land. So, the refugee card was a dual symbol of helplessness, dependence as well as concessions and resources from the state. The significance of a refugee card was never the same for the Dalit grassroots section and the elite section. Some elites who had very easily and very quickly transcended their refugeness would render this card as defunct.

They would not even use that card for any quota, for any help from the government. For the elite section, the refugee card or the refugee slip only had a historical value. They were ashamed of showing it publicly to others. The refugee card was an uncomfortable reminder of an inglorious past. Its absence would signify a family's successful self-rehabilitation.

On the contrary, those who failed to successfully establish themselves in the host country and in the host land would still retain this card. For the less socio-economically established sections, therefore, the card, the refugee card would provide special benefits, including special quota for education and jobs. So, historian and scholar Haimanti Roy notes that although citizenship was the end goal for the government of India and the refugees, the refugees retained their refugee identity as a political choice in many cases. And this retention of the refugee identity provided a concrete platform to articulate and negotiate demands for socioeconomic integration.

And this is true mainly for the section that required, that depended on on government doles, on government support. So, we see that while one section wants to readily forget about its refugee past and move on, the struggling part of society, the struggling masses, the struggling class of people who comprised the refugee population really wanted to

retain this identity in order to negotiate certain demands from the nation-state. So, the term 'refugee' has been consistently seen as abominable,

implying that the migrants were strangers whose resettlement and access to resources and benefits mostly depended on the benevolence of the host land, the Indian people. So, there was an argument to use the word 'pravashi' instead of 'refugee.' So, 'pravashi' would be a relatively more positive term, which means 'exiled.' So, 'pravashi' means someone in exile because the partition had exiled a section of people who were originally part of undivided India.

In the case of Bengal, we see that post-1950, the displaced person had a fixed definition. So, 'displaced person' became a category which would be defined as follows: Someone who had arrived on account of communal disturbances post 1st October 1946 and before 31st December 1950.

So, there was a temporal boundary that had been set. After 1st October 1946 and before 31st December 1950, all the people who had immigrated to India would be considered displaced persons, who had immigrated to the Indian part of Bengal, West Bengal, would be considered displaced persons. Further, according to this definition of a displaced person, such an individual should have no land in West Bengal from before, and he or she should not intend to return to East Bengal.

It pointed to the fact that the displaced person should have political, not economic, incentive to migrate to West Bengal from East Pakistan. In 1956, the Indian government introduced the Migration Certificate to control refugees by regulating it as authorized migration. This decision was influenced by the fact that no relief or rehabilitation would be given to people infiltrating India after 31st March 1958. Post-1958, the Indian state adopted the policy of no longer recognizing a new immigrant as a refugee. A refugee's citizenship status was determined by proof of victimhood, which meant that all poor refugees who could not self-rehabilitate, who could not sponsor their own rehabilitation in the host land,

would need to produce genuine evidence of affliction in the homeland, in the past, to obtain financial support from the government. In Bengal, where physical violence was comparatively less than in Punjab, the migration of Bengali refugees who were not harmed but who anticipated harm and therefore fled, moved to West Bengal, were seen as potential economic abusers. So, these Bengalis would be seen as potential economic abusers because they did not migrate to India owing to some real, so-called real crisis.

From Refugee to Citizen

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They only anticipated harm and therefore traveled to India. To defend the rights of Bengali refugees, organizations such as the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) voiced the refugees' demands, arguing that the distinction between political and economic migrants should not be made. I would like to stop my lecture here today and continue our discussion on Sunil Ganguly's East-West in the next lecture. Thank you.