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Partition's Borderlands: Memory, Migration, and the Making of West Bengal

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Introduction

On paper, a line can be drawn in an instant. On the ground, that line becomes a river that shifts with the monsoon, a track-side platform crowded with bundles and silence, a village road that changes its name when it crosses a culvert. This book is about such a line—Partition's border in Bengal—and about the borderlands it created in West Bengal after 1947. It asks what it meant, in everyday life, for a political decision to refashion landscapes and identities, and how those changes continue to echo through memory, movement, and the most intimate registers of home.

The chapters that follow are anchored in microhistories and oral testimonies: small places and singular lives that disclose the workings of large structures. Rather than narrating Partition solely through diplomatic archives or the cadence of high politics, this book reconstructs refugee experiences, property disputes, and the reconfiguration of communities by listening closely to those who crossed and those who received them. Interviews conducted across districts and neighborhoods are read alongside land records, court files, newspaper reports, rehabilitation dossiers, and maps both official and hand-drawn. Together, these materials reveal how men and women, children and elders, navigated fear and fatigue, built houses out of tarpaulin and argument, and learned the languages of permits, pattas, and proofs of domicile.

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The border in Bengal is not simply a fence; it is riverine and rail-borne, cutting across paddy fields, bazaars, and tea gardens, and forming corridors that connect as much as they divide. This study moves from the southern mudflats and mangroves to the chars where sandbars become villages and then vanish, and further north to the enclaves that once stippled the frontier like pieces of a broken chessboard. It follows routes through stations and checkposts, ferry ghats and bus stands, tracing how the everyday circulations of labor, kinship, and devotion contended with official regimes of surveillance and certification. In these spaces, "border violence" often arrived not as spectacular events but as a slow abrasion—of livelihoods, of dignity, and of the possibility of staying still.

Refugees remade West Bengal just as West Bengal remade refugees. Squatter colonies on the edge of the city and in the rural heartland became laboratories of cooperative urbanism and new village politics. Property changed hands through legal decrees and informal bargains, triggering disputes that drew families into the thickets of tribunals and tehsils. Women bore distinctive burdens and cultivated unexpected authority—in relief queues, in neighborhood committees, and within households recalibrated by loss and precarious work. Caste, class, and faith refracted the terms of settlement and belonging, shaping who could claim land, obtain a ration card, or find a place in a mill or a market.

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Methodologically, the book is guided by an ethics of listening. Oral history here is not merely a supplement to the archive but an archive in its own right—one that preserves jokes and idioms, courtyards and cooking fires, memories of rumor and of sudden quiet. Testimony is a demanding source. It is produced in the encounter between interviewer and narrator, thick with emotion and with the knowledge of what can and cannot be said. The chapters strive to honor the cadence of these voices while situating them within the institutional histories that conditioned life at the border: rehabilitation schemes, land reforms, police practices, and welfare infrastructures. Material artifacts—a ration card softened by decades of folding, a key without a door, a passport photograph—are treated as texts that condense larger stories.

This book positions West Bengal's experience in conversation with wider scholarship on Partition and displacement. It argues that the aftershocks of 1947 in Bengal were not a single rupture concluded by a treaty or a fence, but a long emergency marked by successive waves of migration, administrative improvisations, and local reinventions of community. By tracking microhistories, we see how the state's categories—"refugee," "citizen," "encroacher," "beneficiary"—were accepted, contested, and redefined from below. We also see how institutions learned from these negotiations: how policies hardened or softened, how exceptions became precedents, and how the border itself was periodically rewritten by floods, elections, and war.

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The organization of the book reflects this layered terrain. Early chapters follow the drawing of the line and the first crossings, before turning to camps, colonies, and the gendered and caste-differentiated labors of resettlement. Subsequent chapters examine property and the law, the economies that took shape in shadow and sunlight along the frontier, and the bureaucratic grammars through which belonging was adjudicated. The narrative then widens to encompass later influxes and the re-bordering of Bengal, the lives lived in former enclaves, and the politics of work, relief, and unionization. The final chapters reflect on memory work—how families and communities curate their pasts—and on the bodily and ecological imprints of border-making in an era of climatic uncertainty.

Throughout, the emphasis is on how ordinary people negotiated extraordinary times. A claim filed in a subdivision office is read alongside a lullaby about a house left behind; a police diary note against a petty trader is paired with an account of a community kitchen that fed hundreds. The goal is not to romanticize endurance but to understand the infrastructures—formal and improvised—that made endurance possible. By tracing connections between a single disputed courtyard and the scaffolding of state policy, between a ferry crossing and a national debate about citizenship, the book invites readers to reconsider what counts as the archive of Partition and where we might find its most revealing traces.

Partition's borderlands persist not only on maps but in habits, horizons, and

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intimacies. To attend to them is to attend to questions that outlive the moment of division: Who belongs, and on what terms? What is owed to those who move when states are remade? How do communities imagine justice after dispossession, and how do they practice it when courts fall silent? The chapters that follow do not propose a single answer. Instead, they offer an empathetic, grounded account of how refugees and their neighbors transformed West Bengal, and how, in the process, they transformed the very meanings of home, citizenship, and the border itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: Cartographies of a Wounded Line: Drawing the Radcliffe Border

The year 1947 began, for many in Bengal, not with the stroke of midnight ushering in independence, but with an escalating tremor of uncertainty. The political landscape, already fissured by decades of communal tension and the looming promise of self-rule, was now confronted with the imminent and deeply unsettling prospect of Partition. While the grand narratives often focus on Delhi and the high-stakes negotiations between towering political figures, the reality on the ground in Bengal was a bewildering mix of rumor, anxiety, and a desperate scramble for information. How would a province, intimately woven together by rivers, railways, and a shared language, be torn asunder? The answer, famously, lay in the hands of a British barrister, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who arrived in India in early July 1947 with remarkably little knowledge of its geography, history, or social complexities. His task: to draw a line that would cleave a civilization.

Radcliffe was appointed chairman of two boundary commissions, one for Punjab and one for Bengal, with the formidable deadline of just five weeks to demarcate the new borders. He was given limited resources, relying heavily on census data, topographical maps, and memoranda submitted by various political parties and interest groups. The members of the Bengal Boundary Commission, drawn from the province’s High Court, quickly reached an impasse. The Muslim League and the Indian National Congress presented irreconcilable claims, each advocating for territories that would maximize their respective majorities and economic advantages. The British government's directive was to demarcate contiguous Muslim and non-Muslim majority areas, taking into account "other factors" – a vague instruction that left ample room for interpretation and, ultimately, contention.

The maps Radcliffe consulted were often outdated or lacked the granular detail necessary for such a delicate operation. They depicted administrative boundaries, rivers, roads, and railway lines, but rarely the intricate web of shared villages, agricultural fields, and community spaces that defined daily life. The very concept of "contiguous majority areas" proved problematic in Bengal, where populations were often heterogeneously distributed, creating a complex mosaic rather than neat blocs. Districts with Muslim majorities frequently contained substantial Hindu minorities, and vice-versa. The economic interdependence of regions further complicated the exercise; for instance, the jute mills around Calcutta relied on raw jute grown in areas destined for East Pakistan.

The initial proposals from both sides were audacious in their scope. The Muslim

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League sought to include Calcutta within East Pakistan, arguing for its economic necessity for the new state, as well as a significant portion of West Bengal. The Congress, conversely, laid claim to a large swathe of eastern Bengal, particularly areas with Hindu minorities or those deemed economically vital to West Bengal. These maximalist positions ensured that any compromise would be viewed with suspicion and dissatisfaction by both parties. Radcliffe, isolated from the political wrangling and facing immense pressure, largely worked alone in the final stages of his deliberations, a process shrouded in secrecy.

The "other factors" clause became a crucial, and often controversial, element in Radcliffe's decisions. These factors could include anything from railway lines and road networks to irrigation systems, economic viability, and even the existence of significant religious shrines. For example, the fate of Calcutta, with its predominantly Hindu population but its economic ties to a potential East Pakistan, was one of the most contentious issues. Radcliffe ultimately awarded Calcutta to India, a decision that deeply angered the Muslim League. Conversely, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, despite having a majority Buddhist tribal population, were given to East Pakistan, largely due to their contiguity with Muslim-majority areas and their economic links to Chittagong port.

Another complex case was the district of Murshidabad, which, despite a slight Muslim majority, was ultimately allocated to India. This decision was influenced by the need to provide West Bengal with a stronger connection to the Ganges river system and to maintain the integrity of a major railway line. Similarly, the Hindu-majority district of Khulna was assigned to East Pakistan, providing the new nation with a crucial port and access to the sea, thereby addressing some of the economic concerns raised by the Muslim League. These seemingly contradictory decisions highlighted the immense difficulty of Radcliffe's task and the impossibility of satisfying all claims.

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As the weeks ticked by, the anticipation on the ground intensified. Newspapers carried speculative maps and reports, often based on leaks or rumors, further fueling anxiety. People in villages and towns along the potential border nervously discussed their fate, wondering which side of the line their homes, their fields, and their livelihoods would fall. There were instances of communities attempting to influence the outcome by rapidly relocating populations or by presenting petitions to the commission, though the impact of such efforts on Radcliffe’s final decision remains debatable. The drawing of the border was, for all its bureaucratic abstraction, a deeply human drama unfolding across the length and breadth of Bengal.

The actual award, known as the Radcliffe Line, was signed on August 12, 1947, but kept secret until August 17, two days after India and Pakistan had already celebrated their independence. This delay was a deliberate decision by Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, to prevent widespread violence from erupting before the transfer of power. However, the secrecy only intensified the confusion and chaos that followed.

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When the line was finally announced, it was met with a mixture of shock, despair, and outrage on both sides. The precise details of the border were often poorly communicated, leading to widespread uncertainty in the immediate aftermath of Partition.

The Radcliffe Line, once revealed, dissected villages, bifurcated homes, and separated families with arbitrary precision. Rivers that had long served as arteries of trade and communication now became international frontiers. Railway lines were cut, disrupting established networks and forcing new routes. Farmers suddenly found their fields on one side of the border and their homes on the other. Markets that had served communities for centuries were now divided by an invisible, yet insurmountable, barrier. The abstract lines on a map had become a tangible, often violent, reality for millions.

One of the most enduring criticisms of the Radcliffe Line in Bengal was its failure to consider the long-standing economic and cultural integration of the region. The jute industry, for example, was severely impacted. Most of the jute mills were located in West Bengal, particularly around Calcutta, while the primary jute-growing areas were allocated to East Pakistan. This created an immediate crisis for both economies, forcing a painful reorientation of trade and production. Similarly, the allocation of specific districts impacted the availability of raw materials, markets, and labor, necessitating drastic adjustments for countless individuals and industries.

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The demarcation also created numerous exclaves and enclaves, small pockets of one country's territory entirely surrounded by the other. While the enclaves in Bengal were not as numerous or complex as those in Punjab, they nevertheless presented unique challenges for governance, security, and the daily lives of their inhabitants. These "chhitmahals," as they were known, became symbols of the arbitrary nature of the border, with residents often denied basic services and citizenship rights for decades. Their very existence highlighted the imperfections and logistical nightmares inherent in the Radcliffe Award.

The human cost of this hastily drawn line was immense. The immediate aftermath saw an explosion of communal violence, displacement, and migration on an unprecedented scale. People who had lived as neighbors for generations suddenly viewed each other with suspicion and fear. The psychological impact of being told that one's home was now in a foreign country, or that one's familiar landscape was irrevocably altered, was profound. The Radcliffe Line, intended to provide a clear division, instead created a deeply wounded geography, the scars of which would endure for generations.

The cartographies of the border were not just lines on a map; they were etched onto the land itself and into the collective memory of those who lived along its new contours. The rivers, such as the Padma and the Ichamati, which had always been

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integral to Bengal's identity, now became potent symbols of division. Bridges that once connected communities now became points of control and potential conflict. The very act of drawing a border transformed the meaning of geographical features, imbuing them with political significance they had never before possessed.

Even after the initial drawing, the border was not static. Its exact alignment remained a subject of dispute for decades, particularly in riverine areas where the course of rivers could shift, effectively altering the international boundary. This meant that the "wounded line" was not a fixed scar but a constantly irritated one, subject to redefinition by natural forces and ongoing diplomatic negotiations. The ambiguity of the line, especially in these dynamic landscapes, contributed to a persistent sense of insecurity and legal uncertainty for those living closest to it.

The drawing of the Radcliffe Line represented a pivotal moment, not just for Bengal, but for the entire subcontinent. It was an act of political expediency, carried out under immense pressure and with insufficient understanding of the local realities. While the British government sought to disentangle itself from the complexities of India, its method of division created a new set of enduring problems that would continue to shape the destiny of West Bengal and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) for decades to come. The line, though abstract in its conception, became a concrete agent of historical change, setting in motion migrations, conflicts, and the painful process of rebuilding lives in a fundamentally altered landscape.

The immediate impact of the Radcliffe Award was a mass exodus. Millions of people, fearing for their safety and future, began to move across the newly drawn border. Hindus predominantly moved westwards into India, while Muslims largely moved eastwards into East Pakistan. This forced migration, one of the largest in human history, was driven by a complex mix of fear, communal violence, and the perception of belonging to the "wrong" side of the line. The initial cartography, therefore, triggered a massive demographic shift, fundamentally altering the social fabric of both West Bengal and East Pakistan.

The drawing of the border also had significant psychological ramifications. It shattered the notion of a unified Bengali identity, replacing it with a bifurcated sense of self, one Indian and one Pakistani. The shared language, culture, and history that had bound Bengalis together for centuries were now forced into separate national molds. This schism, born from the cartographic act of division, would continue to reverberate through political discourse, cultural expression, and personal identities for generations, creating a lingering sense of loss and fragmentation.

The creation of a new international border also necessitated the establishment of new administrative and security infrastructures. Checkposts, customs offices, and border security forces rapidly emerged along the line. This transformation from an internal provincial boundary to an international frontier fundamentally changed the nature of

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governance and everyday life in the borderlands. The familiar flow of goods and people was now subjected to scrutiny, permits, and official procedures, introducing a new layer of bureaucracy and control that had not existed before.

In many ways, the Radcliffe Line was a cartographic declaration of a new reality, one that quickly became entrenched in the minds of the people and the institutions of the nascent states. It was more than just a line on a map; it was a blueprint for a new geopolitics, a new society, and a new set of challenges that would define the post-Partition era in Bengal. The process of its drawing, its ambiguities, and its immediate consequences lay the groundwork for the complex narratives of memory, migration, and the making of West Bengal that this book explores. The wounded line, in its very inception, began to dictate the stories that would follow.

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