

# Bengali settlers in the Andaman Islands

The 1947 Partition of India triggered one of the major flows of forced migration in the history of humanity. Dominant narratives on the history of Partition describe the exodus primarily as a wave of dispossessed Hindus migrating from Pakistan to India, and an opposite flow of Muslim migrants crossing the Indian border to reach Pakistan. After seventy years since Partition, the long echoes of loss and displacement are still impacting the lives of many, and several alternative histories of the open wounds of Partition are yet to be written. The story I present in this article concerns the policies of relocation of Bengali Hindu refugees. Although often discussed as a homogeneous community with a clear religious affiliation, numerous caste- and religion-based subcultures are clustered under the label 'Bengali Hindu' refugees. The Partition of Bengal resulted in a massive flow of migrants from East Bengal that continued in steady waves for several decades. West Bengal became the smallest and most overcrowded state of an independent India: an estimated number of six million refugees entered between 1947 and 1971.

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AMONG THE VARIOUS STRATEGIES of refugee crisis management, the one I refer to in this article concerns the improbable solution of sending about 4000 families of low-caste refugees into the middle of the Indian Ocean under the governmental 'Colonisation Schemes' [sic] to cultivate and domesticate jungle-covered parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. From 1949, government officials started to promote the option of relocating to the Andamans impoverished camp dwellers who often were living with bodies waiting for mass cremation. Enlisted families were carefully selected to ensure that they had a sufficient number of able-bodied working males: calluses had to be touched and approved by officials as proof of hard-working labourers' hands. Resettling on the Andamans was for many the only real option available with threats of the camp closing down, cash doles being stopped, and possibly being relocated to other hostile and distant regions, such as Dandakaranya, "where tigers would come to catch the children".<sup>1</sup>

Despite the initial hardships and unfavourable living conditions, the Bengali settlers transformed with time an unknown wild space into a familiar home space. Thousands of families of East Bengal origin resettled on the Islands, both as free migrants as well as beneficiaries of governmental schemes; while in 1951 the Bengali-speaking population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was only 2363, by 1991 the number had grown to 64,706 according to the Census of India. Today Bengalis make up the majority community in the complex and variegated society inhabiting the Islands, with Bengali as their mother-tongue. Despite these numbers, the journeys and lives of Bengali people on the Andamans are mostly an unwritten history.<sup>2</sup> Exiled and confined to their new home space at the margins of the subcontinent, the settlers heavily relied upon cultural traditions, religious festivals and music performances to deal with their physical and cultural isolation.

## From East Pakistan to tropical islands: a new milieu for a different Bengalianness

The Bengali settlers, and their descendants, may represent an estimated 98% of the entire Bengali community living on the Andamans.<sup>3</sup> Since the colonial era, the islands became home to people of different caste, language, religion and ethnicity: political prisoners from the subcontinent, deported communities of rebels, Burmese minorities, Sri Lankan Tamils, tribal labourers recruited from Ranchi, and decimated indigenous inhabitants of the forests. Even though the variegated multi-ethnic society of the Islands is often described as a 'Mini India' and as the epitome of 'unity in diversity',<sup>4</sup> tensions and more or less implicit conflicts are nevertheless at play between the different communities. Within this diversified social spectrum, the old Bengali settlers perceive themselves as a marginalized majority. In 2005, they were given the status of Other Backward Caste (OBC) in the reservation policies of the Union Territory;<sup>5</sup> the same category also applies for the Local Born, Bhandu, Moplah and Karen communities. This was interpreted as a disadvantage for the mostly rural Bengali community, since they have to share the reserved 38% seats for governmental jobs and higher education with four more groups, mostly settled around Port Blair, with accessible facilities for good quality education in Hindi and English, the official languages of the local administration.

In the social mosaic of the Andaman Islands, tracing the construction of a cohesive Bengali identity is a difficult task and it reflects how diasporas are privileged platforms from where to observe how identities are always work-in-progress projections of constructed authenticities (if I may so paraphrase Avtar Brah).<sup>6</sup> This context offers us a prism with which to unmask Bengalianness as a process, and a continuous exercise of 'othering' in order to build a shared sense of identity. What is perceived

as Bengalianness on the Andaman Islands, where the younger generations are more comfortable speaking 'Andamani Hindi' than their grand-parents' Bengali dialect?

The quintessential Bengalianness that is often associated with the songs of Rabindranath Tagore is related to a high Hindu *bhadralok* culture that is widely absent from the Andamanese context. The vast majority of Andamani Bengali are people of Namashudra (*namaṣṣūdra*) origin. At the time of their forced migration, many of them did not even know about the existence of such a thing as 'being Hindu', and even now many active members of the community are keen to identify their religion as a philo-Buddhist, Dalit, anti-Brahmanical movement, rather than anything 'Hindu'. In my research, I focus ethnographic attention on the members of the Bengali community that define themselves as *Matuyā panthī*, or followers of the Matua religious movement (from *matuyā*, meaning drunken, intoxicated in devotional love). This group emerged in the first half of the 19th century in the area of Faridpur, in East Bengal. While adopting theories and doctrines from an earlier Tantric Vaishnava religiosity, the sect gives particular emphasis to social equality. Its followers were mainly marginalised Cāṇḍāla, or untouchables, of the Namashudra group. The movement started as a protest against caste-based discrimination perpetrated by Brahmanical hegemony, and it has much in common in terms of beliefs and practices with lineages named Bāul, Fakir and *bartamān panthī*.<sup>7</sup> The Namashudra people of East Bengal were severely harmed by Partition, and the creation of East Pakistan displaced the majority of the Matua community. Here I discuss the role of music and oral literature in strengthening a sense of cohesive collectivity among Matuas, and the importance of singing sessions (*gāner āsar*) as sites of identity-making.

## Songs, dance, and the making of familiar soundscapes

Cultural history and social studies in the area of Bengal have produced abundant academic reporting on folk literature and folk songs. Similarly, there is a wide scholarly literature on the dynamics and political histories of Partition. But there is hardly any study on the relationship between these two, that is, on the ways in which Partition affected Bengali folk genres. My work aims at partially filling this particular gap in scholarly

literature, a gap that reproduces in the field of knowledge the social and political indifference towards the unheard voices of subaltern and uprooted communities of composers, singers and practitioners.

After a very short preliminary fieldwork in 2012, I decided to plan my following visit to the Andaman Islands during the winter of 2017, intending to spend most of my time in North Andaman in the district of Diglipur. This was one of the most isolated and forested areas of the Andamans when the first settlers arrived in 1956. The Bengali agriculturist community of North Andaman has been relatively homogeneous for several decades, providing fresh vegetables for the bazars of the archipelago without much interaction with other communities of settlers. Between January and February 2017, every night within the Diglipur district there was at least one congregational music session (*kirtan*, in Bengali *kīrtan*), often sponsored by a single household of Matua practitioners. Such events can cost up to 80,000-100,000 Rupees (equivalent to 1,100 to 1,400 Euros) and can feed several hundreds of people. They generally start on a Tuesday - the opening day of a *kirtan*, known as *adhibās* - and terminate on Thursday afternoon, with the gathering known as *mil mahotsab*. In *kirtan* events sponsored by Matua households, the festival takes place at a private *Hari Mandir*: the household shrine dedicated to Haricand Thakur (1812-1878), the founding figure of the Matua movement. The main events, after the reception of the guests and the ritual offerings to the gurus' images on the shrine, are *mātām* and *baiṭhak kīrtan*. The first is a performance of instrumental music led by percussion and accompanied by frenetic dance; as the name *mātām* suggests, the dance is maddening, overwhelmingly intense, bringing a different state of bodily and mental awakening. It is performed through two indispensable instruments: the *ḍānkā* - a big two-sided drum played with two wooden sticks - and the *kāś* - a metal gong hit rhythmically with a stick - strongly linked to the practitioner's Dalit identity. As opposed to other percussion instruments, the *ḍānkā* and *kāś* are played by both men and women. Music instruments have a sacred status among Matua practitioners and during festivals they are blessed with an offering of sandal paste; later the same offering is also given to the books of Matua songs and applied to the foreheads of the devotees.

Below: A daytime session of Matua songs in Subhas Gram, North Andaman. Photo by author.



# The performance of homeland



*Baiṭhak kīrtan* is a gathering during which singers and supporting musicians (*dohār*) alternate in performing various categories of songs, starting from the hymn to the guru. The songs are selected from the wide corpus of Matua literature and their themes include the components of the yogic body (*dehatattva* songs), the teachings for women in conjugal life (*nārītattva* songs), the deeds and qualities of the founder gurus Haricand and Gurucand Thakur (1847-1937), and much more.<sup>8</sup> The performers sing in an ecstatic tone; their melodic voices at times turn into screaming, crying and sobbing. It is expected that the performers' facial expressions are transported by strong emotions, their grimaces and tears helping to create a deep devotional feeling among the listeners, often culminating into a trance and other displays of absorption. At particular peaks of intensity the listeners hug each other in tears, reverentially touching each other's feet. The singing session is highly participatory, with little divide between performer and audience; the listeners, mainly Matua disciples, wear typical coconut necklaces, and are supposed to sing along and repeat the verse sung by the main singer, completely engaged in the performance.

The Andamans' society is often described as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious 'casteless society' in which people from different faiths take part in each other's religious festivals. But in the kirtans where enthusiastic and entranced performers sing for entire nights, only low-caste Bengali participate. Among the participants, there are old settlers from East Bengal as well as later migrants born in camps and refugee colonies in West Bengal. There are also the new generations of Bengalis born and brought up on the Islands, who have often never visited the mainland or the ancestors' district of origin. To each of these groups, 'homeland' has a different significance and coincides with a different place. Here I interpret the idea of 'homeland' as an imagined place that, without corresponding to any specific geographic location or nation-state, is incarnated where the music session takes place: the *gāner āsar*, literally the seat or the place of songs. This sense of homeland is not tied to Bangladesh, to undivided Bengal or independent India, but rather exists through a constant process of reconstruction through performances that provide a shared sense of utopian, historical and territorial origins. Similar to the recreation of temples and shrines in diasporic contexts, interpreted as a process of making new landscapes familiar,<sup>9</sup> the recreation of performative occasions can be seen as a cultural endeavour to make a familiar soundscape and to celebrate the separation between utopian home and inhabited space. Singing traditional songs in a temporarily sacralised space can be envisioned as a performance of homeland in which past and present, near and distant, own and stranger can be mediated and reconciled.

When asking about the Bengali settlers' idea of the homeland, Madhumita Mazumdar<sup>10</sup> reports that her informants in South and Middle Andaman replied with the help of songs' lyrics. One of her interlocutors recited from his book of Matua songs: "Whoever thinks of *desh* [homeland] or *kul* [lineage, family]? / All that matters is the presence of Hari! / All that matters is his name!", and also "Who needs to go to Nabadwip or Nodia? [...] Our pilgrim souls are blessed at the feet of Haricand!" Besides helping us to understand the crucial role of songs in relation to a sense of belonging that transcends the idea of a geo-political 'homeland', these verses are the expression of a diasporic religious community for which the safe and intimate *desh* is wherever "the feet of Haricand" are. This metaphorical place of devotion is mobile; it can be embodied wherever the devotees successfully move and establish, through their community-making effort, the 'transportable' feet of their guru. In another song of the Matua corpus I heard: "If you cannot come to Nodia, oh Gour, make Nodia my body!"<sup>11</sup> Disregarding the importance of geographic pilgrimage (*tirtha*), Matua ethics and

Above: Songs are offered to the gurus' images in the household shrine before the consecrated food is shared by all participants. Photo by author.

doctrines suggest the idea of locating the holy place within and around oneself. For this and several other reasons, the Matua doctrine is particularly successful among displaced Bengalis who cannot afford, or are not allowed, to visit the main temples and the ancestral homes of their prophets and saints.

## Congregation, enlightenment and exclusion: the politics of performance

That the performance of acts is crucial in the construction of social and gender identities is a leading concept in the work of Judith Butler,<sup>12</sup> who draws from the linguistic theories of John Austin. Applying this concept in a diasporic context, Patrick Eisenlohr<sup>13</sup> shows how social identities in rural Hindu Mauritius are created through linguistic performance and how a sense of Hindu authenticity is constructed through collective religious performances in Hindi. In ethnomusicology the performance of traditional songs is often described as crucial in re-making, re-interpreting and re-enacting cultural identity in diasporic contexts. A number of studies on the transmission and performance of Sikh kirtan in the UK, USA and Canada have demonstrated that devotional songs are of paramount importance in transnational Sikhism, in 'being Sikh' and in learning to be Sikh abroad.<sup>14</sup> Performing *bhaṅgrā* for the Punjabi diaspora has been described as 'practising identity' in contexts of displacement where both globalization and the passing of time are increasing the distance between motherland, mother-language and new home spaces.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the Bengali community in the Andaman Islands, practising traditional music and sacred songs serves another significant purpose: it brings liberation. In the oral exegesis offered by gurus and elder members of the community, dance represents a condensed form and a short-cut for yogic enlightenment. Jumping up and down through the *mātām* dance provokes a mechanic awakening of the *kuṇḍalīnī* energy, which through bouncing, jumping and falling, gets pushed from the bottommost *cakra* all the way up to the *ājñā cakra* in between the eyebrows "like a football". Swinging the elbows alternatively is said to balance the subtle nervous channels (*īrā* and *piṅgalā*), while dancing with both arms raised up high in the air liberates the devotees from the downward pull of *kāma*, the selfish desire for sensual and material pleasure. The enlightening techniques of Matua music and dance are believed to be both traditional and modern. They bring the same results of the yogic *sādhana* practised in the ancient times by the great sages, who obtained enlightenment after twelve years of austerities, but they do so in a simple and fast way, accessible to all; *mātām* dance brings enlightenment in twenty-four minutes, according to the Matua gurus.<sup>16</sup>

The main scholar on the history of the Namashudra movement, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, rightly pointed out that the ecstatic joy derived from devotional music is understood as salvific. He described kirtan as an essential feature of the Matua movement; sung collectively, the congregational character of kirtan gave the disciples a sense of homogeneity and dignity through a shared experience of devotion.<sup>17</sup> Madhumita Mazumdar described the Matuas' weekly gatherings for singing sessions as "the soul of the community life" offering "the experience of an intense feeling of community and a kind of immersive solidarity in times when the life conditions of physical hardship and isolation became unbearably oppressive".<sup>18</sup> However, Matua music and festive celebrations not only reinforce unity and homogenize an idealized Turnerian *communitas*: they equally highlight social differences, exclusions and separations. Pointing at their otherness, middle and upper middle-class Bengalis would often disdain the Matua practitioners referring to the characteristics of their music and dance: "They do nothing but bouncing around!", "Let's not invite them: they are

Matua! They'll start jumping and behaving like crazy!", stated some of my interlocutors. More orthodox Vaishnava practitioners frequently participate in kirtan events organized by Matuas, but they treat their practices with contempt because they offer non-vegetarian food in the last and most sacred meal (*mil mahotsab*) and because they set up a single kitchen for everybody; a fact Matua devotees are particularly proud of, in view of their strong emphasis on equality and anti-untouchability, while Vaishnava kirtans would always have two separate (rigorously vegetarian) kitchens, one for initiate disciples and one for the common people.

Focusing with a performance-based lens on the Bengali society in the Andaman Islands unravels the politics of exclusion inherent to every process of identity formation. Such hierarchical barriers are often overlooked in the rhetoric description of the multicultural Andamanese mosaic as the casteless miniature of India. My study also aims to rethink the broad narrative about the migration of 'Bengali Hindu refugees', since many subcultures and marginalized religious identities have been subsumed under the hegemonic and often taken for granted 'Bengali Hindu' label. Looking at the performance of travelling archives and migrating repertoires of Matua songs, I attempt to uncover the complex entanglements between the displacement of post-Partition refugees, and the issues of class, caste, gender and ethnicity that regulate the performance of home away from home.

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## References

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- 3 See Chaudhury, J.R. 2004. *Āndāmāne Bāñālī: Saṃskṛti Binimay*. Kolkata: Sahitya Prakash, p.95.
- 4 The myth has been partially demystified in Zehmisch, P. 2012. 'A Xerox of India? Policies and Politics of Migration in an Overseas Colony', *Studien aus dem Münchner Institut für Ethnologie – Working papers in social and cultural anthropology* 2:1-27.
- 5 Ibid., pp.16-18. See also Biswas, S. 2009. *Colonization and Rehabilitations in Andaman and Nicobar Islands*. New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications.
- 6 Brah, A. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.
- 7 For historical studies on the Matua community see, Bandyopadhyay, S. 1997. *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: the Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*. Richmond: Curzon; On Baul, Fakir and *bartamān panthī* see, Openshaw, J. 2004. *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (2nd ed.). New Delhi: Cambridge University Press; and Lorea, C.E. 2016. *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman: a Journey Between Performance and the Politics of Cultural Representation*. Leiden: Brill.
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- 11 Nodia is the area of West Bengal where the Vaishnava saint Caitanya, popularly known as Gour, was born. Caitanya is believed to be the previous incarnation of the Matua founder Harichand Thakur.
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- 13 Eisenlohr, P. 2006. *Little India: Diaspora, Time and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 14 See Lallie, H.S. & N.K. Purewal. 2013. 'Sikh Kirtan in the Diaspora: Identity, Innovation and Revivalism', in M. Hawley (ed.) *Sikh Diaspora: Theory, Agency, and Experience*, pp.381-403. Leiden: Brill; see also Townsend, C. 2014. "Keeping the Faith Alive": Teaching Sikh Kirtan in America', *Sikh Formations* 10(3):335-354.
- 15 See Poole, A. 2004. 'South Asian Music Education in Essex – an Ethnography of Bhangra', *British Journal of Music Education* 21(1):7-24; See also Mooney, N. 2008. 'Aaja Nach Lai: Performing and Practicing Identity among Punjabis in Canada', *Danse au Canada* 30(1):103-124.
- 16 B. Amari, interview in Krishnapur, 08/02/2017; Manik Gosain, interview in Radhanagar, 11/02/2017.
- 17 Ibid., (note 7) Bandyopadhyay, p.39.
- 18 Ibid., (note 10) Mazumdar, pp.190-191.