



Centre for Language, Translation and Cultural Studies

School of Humanities

NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY

Established By Act (W.B. Act (XIX) of 1997 and Recognised by U.G.C.)

Head Office: DD-26, Sector-I, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700064; Phone: 033 40663214

9th BPR Workshop: A Report

The Centre for Language, Translation, and Cultural Studies at Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU), Kolkata, successfully conducted the 9th workshop under the Bengal Partition Repository (BPR) project on 3rd May 2025. The workshop convened twelve selected participants alongside BPR researchers, independent scholars, and invited guests. The one-day event focused on intensive academic exchange, fieldwork methodology, and interdisciplinary engagement with Partition Studies.

1. Inaugural Session

The workshop was formally inaugurated by Prof. Dr Manan Kumar Mandal, who articulated the vision and objectives of the BPR initiative. In his remarks, Dr Mandal emphasized the importance of collecting personal narratives related to the Bengal Partition through ethical, empathetic, and methodologically sound oral history practices. He highlighted the project's focus on micro-level experiences and underlined the need to approach these narratives sensitively. As the Partition cannot be undone, he underscored how survivors view the past and what was left behind. In this regard, Dr Mandal also pointed out that recalling the past can vary according to class, caste, gender, sex, race, and religion. He opined that the Partition and the imagery of leaving the motherland should be examined beyond the middle-class Hindu-Bengali narrative. For this, he advocated searching beyond urban areas and Kolkata to find micro-narratives in rural and distant places and to analyse how people in these rural areas remember the past in their present lives. Dr Mandal also mentioned why the interviews are referred to as "story collections." Furthermore, he outlined the project's thrust areas and shared valuable insights on the ethical and methodological considerations essential to oral history documentation, especially in the context of the Bengal Partition.

2. Key Themes and Discussions

2.1 Methodological Focus on Oral Narratives

The central theme of the workshop was the methodology of oral history, particularly the process of "story listening" as a qualitative tool. Discussions revolved around gathering narratives that reflect childhood memories and lifestyle transformations resulting from the Bengal Partition. Discussions



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were held on the approaches within oral history that value personal memory as a significant historical source. The discussions also explored how displaced individuals navigated their transition from refugees to citizen-workers and how these transitions shaped evolving socio-economic roles, new labour forces, and cultural identities across Bengal and beyond.

2.2 Micro-History and Individual Narratives

The workshop underscored the importance of viewing the impact of Partition not merely through large-scale political or demographic shifts but through individual stories that reveal nuanced social and cultural changes. These individual stories reveal the nuanced effects of displacement, often lost in official histories. These micro-histories offer insights into how class, caste, religion, gender, and regional identities shaped the recollection and recording of partition trauma. Emphasis was placed on challenging the notion of a monolithic partition experience. This micro-level approach is central to understanding the long-term consequences of the Bengal Partition on both personal lives and broader societal structures.

2.3 Timeframe: 1947–1971

The choice of the 1947–1971 timeline was explained as a period marked by recurring waves of violence and migration. Discussions explored how this extended timeframe enables a more comprehensive study of trauma, identity reconstruction, and the evolution of social and political landscapes in Bengal. The recurring nature of violence during this period underscores the need to explore how forced displacement and trauma continued to manifest long after 1947. This perspective opened a critical avenue of inquiry into the relationship between violence and migration, urging researchers to go beyond singular events and examine the continuum of lived experiences.

2.4 Challenges in Translation and Representation

The discussions also emphasized the plurality of memory and how recollections of a once-unified Bengal vary across lines of class, caste, religion, gender, and sex. Again, the central question emerged: Was the experience of Partition monolithic, or did it differ significantly across communities and geographies? Unlike the Punjab Partition, which has received considerable scholarly attention and documentation, the Bengal experience remains underrepresented in mainstream narratives. Therefore,



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another critical area of discussion was the relative invisibility of Bengal Partition narratives in mainstream historiography, partly due to the scarcity of translated texts. The challenges in translating Bengal Partition texts into English have led to their marginalization in national and global academic discourse. This gap prompted participants to interrogate the reasons behind such exclusions and reassert the importance of addressing overlooked trauma by amplifying marginalized voices. In this regard, Dr Mandal commented, “Every partition text does not tell the ‘true’ history, but it also does not tell the wrong one.” He asserted that in this project, the aim is not to justify the truth of memory but to acknowledge that a shift in time and space can alter the entire narrative structure.

3. Expert Contributions

Dr Arpita Bhattacharya

Dr Arpita Bhattacharya briefed the participants on actions taken in accordance with the MoU between Lady Brabourne College and NSOU. She explained how some students of her college are contributing to this project by collecting stories. She emphasized the existential inquiry – who am I and where is my country? She also informed the participants about the Partition seminar held at Lady Brabourne College in November 2024, the proceedings of which will be published as a book by December 2025.

Dr Pratim Das

Dr Pratim Das provided detailed guidance on interview procedures, sharing insights from his fieldwork. He outlined the ethical, technical, and practical aspects of oral story collection under the BPR framework. He explained why this project is called a people’s initiative and a people’s project. He also discussed the importance of ‘empathetic listening’ and the significance of the BPR questionnaire. He elucidated the three-step process of the interviews, along with every minute detail of how to digitally archive the interviews in different files in the database. Dr Das also encouraged participants to think beyond Hindu perspectives of Partition. Furthermore, he highlighted the necessity of establishing individual connections for interviews and emphasized the importance of building trust in these endeavours.



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Miss Dyuti Tansuva Rifat

Miss Dyuti Tansuva Rifat explained to the participants the challenges they might face while collecting oral histories and why it is important to set aside personal beliefs during interviews. She emphasized conducting interviews as “story collection” rather than mere data collection. Like Dr Pratim Das, she also emphasized trust-building and its significance. Sharing several field experiences, she elaborated on the process of oral history collection and how to prepare and educate oneself for conducting interviews—in this project, referred to as story listening. Additionally, she specifically explained how to collect stories from marginalized communities.

Dr Uttam Kumar Biswas

Dr Uttam Kumar Biswas reiterated why the interviews are described not simply as interviews but as listening to stories. Sharing his field experiences, he made participants aware of potential obstacles in the field. To overcome these, Dr Biswas explained how to listen to marginalized voices. He provided an example of how some groups of displaced people from East Bengal came to India and consolidated themselves through their occupations. Dr Biswas illustrated micro-level changes in the lives of the Namasudra community, displaced from East Bengal, and how they settled in a place called Malipota—once exploited, now emerging as key players in an alternative local economy. Moreover, he delivered an insightful talk on the cultural transformations experienced by the Matua community, who migrated from East Bengal during and after the Partition. He highlighted the community’s rituals, cultural practices, belief systems, and the central role of the devotional songs dedicated to Harichand Thakur in preserving identity amidst displacement. He also noted how these songs were preserved and reinterpreted in new environments. These practices reflected a fusion with the Vaishnava tradition and provided insight into cultural adaptation following displacement.

Mr Tarpan Sarkar

Independent researcher Mr Tarpan Sarkar presented a case study on the migration of weavers from Tangail to Shantipur and eventually to Phulia. Using an excellent PowerPoint presentation, he discussed how the refugee weavers from Tangail, Bangladesh, settled in Phulia, India, and sustained their lives with dignity and hard work. He contextualized this movement within socio-economic conflicts and documented the formation of a refugee artisan community. His presentation not only



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traced the socio-economic displacement of these artisan communities but also explored internal conflicts and eventual settlement patterns that shaped the region's textile economy. The narrative he offered demonstrated how migration also entails the reorganization of local industries and inter-community dynamics.

4. Participant Engagement and Questionnaire Development

Individual interactions were conducted with all twelve selected participants: Milon Bala, Amlan Datta, Sanjay Das, Dr. Sujata Mitra, Tathagata De, Trisha Mandal, Bishnu Sarkar, Sourav Das, Soumee Roy Chowdhury, Purnendu Banerjee, Paritosh Mondal, and Nabina Kansabanik. These sessions focused on clarifying each participant's role and potential contributions. Detailed instructions were provided to guide their research processes and ensure productive engagement. The project coordinator, Dr Mandal, along with Dr Biswas and other core researchers, led focused discussions on questionnaire design. Participants were asked to propose questions relevant to their research themes and justify their inclusion. Through this collaborative process and brainstorming, a revised and refined questionnaire was developed to guide future interviews.

5. Resource Building and Book Review Strategy

A curated reading list was developed in consultation with participants to aid their research. The workshop included a briefing on how to critically review literary texts (especially published outside of urban places) related to the Bengal Partition and integrate insights into fieldwork narratives.

6. Invited Lecture by Swapnomoy Chakraborty

Author and novelist Swapnomoy Chakraborty delivered the concluding lecture, in which he narrated lesser-known stories of East Bengal. Through a series of anecdotal narratives, he highlighted the extinction and transformation of specific vocabulary within the Bangal dialect, demonstrating how linguistic shifts are tied to the dislocation of people and traditions. Chakraborty's reflections underscored the deep interconnection between language, identity, and the trauma of migration. He highlighted the evolution of several words in the Bengali (Bangal dialect) vocabulary and traced how Partition and migration influenced language, identity, and memory. His talk offered a literary



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perspective on the linguistic and emotional legacy of Partition.

7. Future Directions

Overall, the workshop marked a significant step forward in advancing the mission of the Bengal Partition Repository. Discussions focused on refining research methodologies, developing networks for locating narrative samples, and formulating actionable strategies for interview-based fieldwork, which we refer to as “story collection.” It provided fertile ground for methodological reflection, intellectual collaboration, and critical questioning. The momentum generated by the workshop is expected to inform and guide the next phase of the project, ensuring both academic rigour and community engagement in uncovering the layered histories of the Bengal Partition.

Ritesh Basu

Intern at BPR Project

Under the Guidance and Supervision of Dr Manan Kumar Mandal

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