Ties that Bind: Women's Sociality in Bengal, 1920-1965

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(History)
in the University of Michigan
2021

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Dedication

To all the women who taught me about the complexity of lived friendships.

Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I received a great deal of support from many people. There are far too many people to thank for their help, and I apologize in advance for forgetting many.

My greatest debt is to my dissertation committee. I would like to thank my chairs, Mrinalini Sinha and Farina Mir for their support throughout my graduate school career. Their insightful feedback and encouragement pushed me to sharpen my thinking. I could not have done this without their engagement and patience with this project through its many iterations. I am grateful to Deirdre de la Cruz, Sidonie Smith, and Geraldine Forbes for their feedback and helping me to broaden my thinking. Gerry has gone above and beyond her duties and has been an inspiring mentor whose example I hope to emulate.

I would like to thank the University of Michigan's History Department, the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies, the International Institute, Rackham Graduate School, especially the Rackham Merit Fellowship program, and the Sweetland Dissertation Writing Institute for their financial support. The History Department staff has been unfailingly supportive every step of the way, and I am especially grateful to Kathleen King, Sue Douglas, Diana Denny, and Kat Wiles. I would also like to thank the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship program for all their support throughout the years. I wish to thank the Fulbright-Nehru Foundation, the Critical Language Scholarship program, Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) program, the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), and the Center for Social Science, Calcutta for their support.

In India and Bangladesh, I am indebted to far too many people to recount here. At CSSSC, I want to thank Trina Nileena Banerjee and Rajarshi Ghose for their help. AIIS-Kolkata was my first home in India from when I was an undergraduate. Protima Dutt, Prasenjit Dey, and Subir Sarkar have been invaluable as Bengali teachers and mentors. I am indebted to Uttara Chakraborty whose friendship and mentorship allowed me to access Bethune College's archives, as well as introduced me to sources that became crucial to this work. I will always regret not being able to share this with Uttara-di before her untimely death. In Bangladesh, I would have never been privy to the networks of women that formed the bulk of my oral histories without the help of Sara Hossain and Maleka Begum. I am grateful to Maleka-apa for deciding that she wanted to be my friend and for taking me to meet all her friends. I also want to thank all the scholars, activists, and friends in Dhaka who opened up their personal libraries to me.

A dissertation on friendship would be wholly incomplete without mentioning the friends in my life whose support and encouragement made it possible. My life in Ann Arbor was enriched by many friendships, namely that of Maja Babic, Sairah Hussain, Nishita Trisal, Hoda Bandeh Ahmadi, Muzna Alvi, Maryam Ashraf, Samina Hossain, Anna MacCourt, Vincent Chan, Stephanie Fajardo, Jamie Andreson, Angie Baecker, Essie Ladkau, Meenu Deswal, Sangita Saha, Anisha Padma, and Pragya Kaul. Tapsi Mathur and Hafsa Kanjwal have been generous friends who provided timely perspectives at crucial junctures. I want to acknowledge the role of the Ann Arbor Acro community for providing me with a much needed space to fly and get topsy-turvy away from my dissertation.

My time in Dhaka would have been impoverished without the friendship of Farah Zaki, Mariam Akhi, Tara Lee, Mir Shafi, and Rosa Borrajo. In India and beyond, Saumyashree Ghosh, Sarah Carson, Olivia Mondol, Calynn Dowler, Emma Kalb, and Libby Baker have provided companionship and support. Meha Takore has been my most inseparable connection since she first

came up to me at CSSSC, and I am grateful that she continues to be a source of laughter and love in my life.

I owe a great debt of friendship to my Barnard crew Narine Bournoutian, Victoria Lowe, and Tracy Thai for their unconditional love, and for reminding me of a life outside. Our weekly conversations and annual trips have kept me sane over the years. Narine is my favorite grump who is always the first to be roped into reading all things I want feedback on, while also providing me with my daily dose of dark humor.

Writing a dissertation is difficult in the best of times, and it has been nothing short of a struggle during a global pandemic. I mostly it made it through this last year because of my virtual yoga and work buddies, and the best of friends. Gabrielle Sarpy has been in my life since our undergraduate years as MMUF Fellows at Barnard College, and was my constant support as my housemate our first three years in Ann Arbor. Our pandemic work sessions at Rackham during the last few months have been a saving grace after working at home for over a year. Timnet Gedar is my sistorian whose encouragement and energy has kept me going even when I felt like giving up. Seema Singh was one of my first friends when I arrived in Ann Arbor, and even though she left two years later, I cannot imagine how I would have gotten through this pandemic without our frequent conversations after yoga. Emma Nolan-Thomas and Cyrus O'Brien are the best cheerleaders I could have asked for, who have fundamentally shaped how I celebrate Friendsgiving, choose food buddies, and are my go-to friends for academic and life advice. They have been a constant source of support during the best and worst of times. I may not have known Adrianne Spunaugle for as long as the others, but without her fierce friendship the last two years, I would have been so lost. Zeinab Azarbadgan and I never seem to be in the same city or country for long, but her presence in my life has been invaluable as a fellow historian and accountability buddy. Sarita Mizin is my hype person, best yoga buddy, horoscope analyst, and fellow Rokeya fan who was my virtual work buddy before

the pandemic. I am confident I only made progress in my writing this year because of our daily yoga and work sessions. My cat Sultana has been my constant companion during the pandemic, allowing me to physically interact with at least one living being everyday, and providing ample opportunities for me to take study breaks.

Last, but not least, my family has been quietly supportive and loving throughout this whole process, and I cannot thank them enough for their love and faith in me.

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that women's sociality offers critical insights for the history of women and of twentieth-century Bengal. Women's everyday connections, as reconstructed from their writings, provide an alternative history to nationalist and male dominated historiography. Recovering and highlighting the voices of Bengali women through their autobiographies and oral history interviews reveals a history of the everyday that is obscured in histories of big events and moments.

The first three chapters each focus on a particular site—educational institutions, neighborhoods, and occupational settings—to examine how sociality is fostered and negotiated there. The chapter on educational settings points to the significance of women's interactions as influenced by school policies as well as student-led initiatives. Schools were sites where women created makeshift family relations with people of the same class. Here women formed friendships with women from different religions, linguistic backgrounds, and even with those who held different political ideologies. The chapter on neighborhoods reads "friendship rituals" through a theory of the "ordinary" and everyday life to argue that the neighborhood acts as a site of sociality between the public and the private. The neighborhood provided opportunities for girls' and women's pleasure and desire, the broadening of their social networks beyond the home and the family, and access to professional and civic opportunities. The third chapter explores how women's class backgrounds allowed them to flourish in two arenas of work—social service and the performing arts. This chapter emphasizes that class was one identity marker that social ties could not always cut across, especially when it came to certain professions. These three chapters interrogate the significance of peer

friendships in shaping women's lives, as well as the cross-generational connections that provided support to women throughout their lives. The influence and role of friends in women's lives impacted everything from women's political activism, hobbies, opportunities for pleasure, to their careers. These sites of women's sociality are critical to my argument that social bonds can cut across boundaries of family, community, and the state. Hindu-Muslim relations and friendships among women were shaped by the sites in which women interacted. Even though the sites themselves changed over time, the ties that they had fostered remained intact. A final chapter analyzes women's mentorship networks through the social memoir of Bangladeshi poet and activist Sufia Kamal. It reads Kamal's autobiographical writing as an example of an alternative women centered history of Bengal's past that foregrounds women's sociality.

Throughout, this dissertation demonstrates the significance of women's sociality in providing a space that cuts across the boundaries of family, religion, and the nation-state in twentieth century Bengal. This is illustrated through women's writings that point to this neglected history of women in twentieth-century Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

In her 1924 novel, *Padmarag,* the Bengali feminist and education activist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote of Tarini Bhavan, a place that was a utopic home for women from various backgrounds who co-existed and lived together harmoniously.[1] Written in the 1920s during a period of communal tensions in Bengal, Rokeya's vision of a women-centered space of sociality and interactions foregrounded the experiences that were becoming a part of women's everyday lives as more and more women were traversing spaces outside of the home. While the women in Rokeya's fictional world included women of various ethnic, racial, and religious identifications living together, Bengali women in the twentieth century were also discovering opportunities to form social ties and intimate bonds with women outside of their communities. Connections among women provide an alternative history of Bengal during the twentieth century. Women's autobiographical texts, where they highlighted various modes sociality among women, are constructions of histories that center their everyday experiences. Women utilized opportunities for socializing in sites newly accessible to middle-class women, creating a space for women to come together despite differences in identities and backgrounds. This dissertation examines Bengali women's everyday social interactions in the twentieth century, focusing on the period from 1920 to 1965.

[1] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, translated by Barnita Bagchi. *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005).

Contextualizing Bengal

Throughout the twentieth century, the idea and physical boundaries of "Bengal" have changed numerous times. Until 1912, the Bengal Presidency under the British Empire consisted of what are today the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, and modern-day Bangladesh, encompassing a multi-lingual region. In 1912, as the seat of the Government of India shifted from the city of Calcutta in Bengal to Delhi, the boundaries of Bengal changed and only included the regions that make up West Bengal and Bangladesh (also referred to as East Bengal). In 1947, the Partition of British India divided the region, with West Bengal becoming a part of India and East Bengal becoming a part of Pakistan. Given my focus on twentieth century Bengal, this dissertation will use the term Bengal to refer to the region after its 1912 designation.

The twentieth century in South Asia has been characterized by immense changes in many spheres of life. On the national front, it encompassed the height of anti-colonial nationalism, call for independence, the end of colonial rule, and the creation of independent India and Pakistan after the 1947 Partition. Pakistan was eventually partitioned again when East Bengal, by then also known as East Pakistan, gained independence as Bangladesh in 1971. As the region was undergoing multiple shifts in local and national identities, there were also numerous changes in women's lives. In this dissertation, much of the focus is on late-colonial Bengal and the early years of independent India and East Pakistan/East Bengal.

Bengal has enjoyed a privileged position in Indian historiography, whereby the history of the region of Bengal has often stood in as the history of India. It has specifically occupied this position in national and political histories tracing the beginning of colonial rule in the subcontinent until the early twentieth century. Up until recently, much of that history has favored key male figures and important political events, with Bengal posited as a unified whole. The ideal of a unified Bengal was shattered with the first partition of Bengal in 1905 when the British divided the region into two

parts, which was eventually revoked, but nevertheless served to amplify the differences between East and West Bengal. In 1947, after approximately two centuries of colonial rule, the Indian subcontinent was divided into the independent nations of India and Pakistan along religious lines. Bengal, the first region officially brought under British rule, was once again partitioned in two and each side now became a part of a different nation. Despite the official "border" and different majority religious identities, the people of the two sides of Bengal continued to take pride in an identity based on a common Bengali culture, visible in shared dress, language, and food. Bengal's coherence as a region culturally shows the arbitrariness of Partition, the logic of which maintained that families and friends should be separated based on religious differences. Historians have long argued against the logic of Partition, producing a rich history that extends from holding accountable either the colonial state or Indian male elites for the decision while showing that Partition was not inevitable.[2]

Such histories, while drawing attention to individuals who imagined a different outcome of plurality, generally continue to highlight male-dominated perspectives of political unity. Moving away from a focus on elite men, I consider how a history of Bengal might be re-imagined if we disregard the colonial and post-colonial divide, mediated through the Partition, and instead think of social relations among women in the twentieth century over a longer period and focus on the day-to-day, ordinary experiences rather than big events of history. What would a history focused on connections, as constructed by women themselves, look like? While the extensive scholarship on

[2] For a small selection of the literature on Partition see Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, The Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Venkat Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); David Gilmartin, "Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57 no. 4 (November 1998): 1068-1095; Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Neeti Nair, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). For Bengal in particular, see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

women in Bengal has examined the roles played by women in various aspects of society, there has been little focusing on the everyday life of women's interactions.

Women As Subjects

This dissertation utilizes women's sociality as an analytic to rethink the historiography on women and gender. The scholarship on women in South Asia, and histories of women broadly has followed two modes of analyses. The first has tried to recuperate women into the scholarship by adding women back into history. This historiography on women comes out of feminist historiography that seeks to give women agency and has tried to reclaim the roles and significance of women in various fields and arenas. It is due to such works that we know about female doctors, educators, lawyers, and prominent women in the nationalist movements. Scholars have located women's entrance into the public sphere through the debates on social reform and education, as well as nationalist organizations.[3] In Bengal, historians have linked the women's movement to their involvement in political and social causes such as education and suffrage.[4] They have shown that the trajectory of discourses on Indian women were dominated by men until the twentieth century, after which women began taking the lead in advocating for social reform and women's education. This scholarship shows social reform was a modernizing force and a space to debate what constituted the ideal Indian woman, as well as a movement to examine the notion of women's agency. Historians have shown that education changed Indian women's lives and enabled many of them to take an active part in public life for the first time.[5] Forbes's scholarship has been crucial in documenting

[3] See Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[4] See Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Barbara Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Rights, Education, and Social Reform Legislation, 1921-1936* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), for specific arguments about progress in the realm of women's education.
[5] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*; Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Rights, Education, and Social Reform Legislation, 1921-1936*.

how the robust associational politics that flourished in the interwar period allowed for changes in women's education and other social reform efforts.[6] Such scholarship has challenged the binary of women in public versus private spheres by showing how many women entered the public by focusing on work and service associated with women. Much of this scholarship has also examined women's involvement in associations and organizations, emphasizing the nature of women-run organizations geared towards issues affecting women. Women's organizations, especially as they are examined through a focus on women's work, serve as critical arenas to reconsider the notion of women's agency regarding how they conducted their lives outside of the home. Many of these social and political organizations were advertised to middle-class women as duties of Indian women rather than jobs, and, as I show in chapter three, sociality as an analytic points to how women positioned themselves in relation to their service in these associations.

In addition to focusing more on the roles of women, numerous scholars have also centered gender as a crucial category of analysis within South Asian history.[7] Many scholars have shown how gender as a category has affected various 'big' concepts of Indian historiography, especially in reconceptualizing nationalism and colonial modernity.[8] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's edited collection *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (1989), for example, explores how patriarchal ideologies were reconstituted in the colonial period. Authors in that volume also argue that previous scholarship on women and gender, especially that focused on social reform movements, have implicitly reinscribed the division of the public and private spheres constructed in the colonial period. In questioning the very structures of how feminist historiography has been written, the

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[6] Forbes, *Women in Modern India.*
[7] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: a useful category of historical analysis," *The American historical review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.
[8] See Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, nationalism, and colonialized women: The contest in India." *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 622-633; and *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: the debate on sati in colonial India* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

essays in this volume provide arguments on how middle-class and *bhadralok* society has been constituted in relation to gender, caste, and especially class differentiation, during the colonial period.[9] At the center of this volume are the patriarchal ideologies and the colonial state policies that ultimately constructed middle-class gender roles and norms that "recast" women in certain ways. This collection has shifted the conversation on how women have been written about to rethink the role of feminist historiography. Feminist scholars have questioned the modernization framework that pervades nationalism and social reform historiography.[10] While focused on women, or rather how women became "sites" as in Lata Mani's monograph, this scholarship has documented the role of Indian women in the development of modernist nationalist and colonial discourses.[11] Indian nationalists used women's bodies as the sites of the debates over modernity, without much attention to the agency and materiality of the women themselves. This scholarship emphasizes the nature of the relationship between the colonial state and Indians, and how women's bodies determined the extent to which India could be modern. While women's roles in social movements and reform are mentioned, the focus remains on the impact of colonialism and Indians' relationship to colonial conditions of rule. Central to the theme of the modernizing impulse is an emphasis on how Indians resisted and challenged colonial expectations and imperial rule, especially when Indian nationalism came to be seen as a modernizing force.[12] Most of this scholarship has continued to write about women by utilizing colonial, national, and official archives. By emphasizing women's interactions with other women, this dissertation seeks to add to this current scholarship to shift the focus on women's internal relationships among themselves, as described in their own writings, rather than

[9] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).
[10] See Mani*, Contentious Traditions: the debate on sati in colonial India*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*; Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) as examples that convincingly make this argument.
[11] Mani, *Contentious Traditions.*
[12] Sinha, *Specters of Mother India.*

how they sought to interact with the colonial state from sources that de-center women's voices. While women's lives were impacted by imperial rule, their relationships with other Indian women were significant markers of how women created complex and alternative arenas of their own.

My research does not neatly fit into either of these two modes of analyses of historiography. A focus on gender has turned women invisible in certain areas, as their relationality to various concepts, such as nationalism, modernity, or even men, have taken precedence. Taking a cue from Mrinalini Sinha's provocation of thinking alongside the trajectory of "women to gender and back again," this dissertation goes back to the question of women.[13] Sinha has shown that South Asian historiography has expertly incorporated gender as an analytic in studies of nationalism, leading to arguments of how there was a "domestication" of the public sphere and how the "politicized" private sphere has been conceptualized in how women have been studied in nationalist studies.[14] Yet, despite the wide ranging and field-defining impact this scholarship has had, Sinha contends that women have continued to be studied as objects rather than subjects in this scholarship, leading her to ask for a "re-animation" of the category "women" in the field of women and gender.[15] Within the broader scholarship of colonial India, a focus on women has proved to be difficult to sustain due to their entanglement with discourses on the community.

The scholarship on women in South Asia has been unable to productively separate women from their community, whether they have come to be symbols or be seen as serving the interests of the community over feminist interests. Moreover, to the extent that women's relationships have been studied, such studies have limited their scope to women's relationships within their religious community. Even the scholarship on social reform which centers women, posits that reform could

[13] Mrinalini Sinha, "Gendered Nationalism: From women to gender and back again?" in *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia,* Leela Fernandes, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2014) 13-27.
[14] Sinha, "Gendered Nationalism: From women to gender and back again?," 21.
[15] Ibid., 24.

happen only in (religious) communities.[16] The nexus of women, the community, and the colonial state has been convincingly shown by numerous scholars in both the political and social spheres.[17] Rachel Sturman argues that this nexus has roots in the very structure of how the British governed colonial India through a dual legal system, where even debates on women's rights functioned to reinscribe women as "belonging" to the religious community.[18] Under colonial rule, the British divided the legal system in two: the sphere of civil and criminal law on the one hand, and on the other, the sphere of "personal law" which was the purview of communities. That sphere allocated to the communities was deemed to be the realm of the social, which was seen to be different than the political sphere of the colonial state. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, the division of the inner/the social and the outer/political domains meant that issues relating to Indian women were taken to be the purview of the community, mediated through Indian men.[19] While the colonial state could impose rules and regulations affecting the political sphere, issues regarding women, the family, marriage and other "personal" matters came to be seen to be where Indian men could prove their modernity vis a vis "other" communities. For Chatterjee, the issue of the "women's question" was resolved by the twentieth century in the sphere of the social, an argument that has been challenged by feminist scholars as foreclosing women's agency and negotiations outside of the dichotomy of the two spheres. In *Specters of Mother India*, Sinha challenges the dominant conception of the social and the political as distinct spheres by showing how the controversy involving Katherine Mayo's text *Mother India* (1927), which focused on India's social "backwardness," revealed the

[16] Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
[17] See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Women between community and state: Some implications of the uniform civil code debates in India." *Social Text* 18, no. 4 (2000): 55-82; Rachel Sturman, *The Government of Social Life in Colonial India: Liberalism, Religious Law, and Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sarkar and S Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*; Mani*, Contentious Traditions*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*; Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*, among others.
[18] Sturman, *The Government of Social Life in Colonial India: Liberalism, Religious Law, and Women's Rights*
[19] Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," In *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, 233-253 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

interconnectedness of the two spheres. While Mayo's text sought to show that India's social backwardness disqualified Indians from political advancement, and hence justified a necessity for colonial rule, Sinha has argued that critics of Mayo showed that India's social backwardness was due to colonial rule, thus linking the two spheres.[20] Since the social ills of Indian society were attributed to women's "backwardness," the "women's question" became a site of debate. Women's relationship to the state was once again mediated through the collective interests of the community, but the moment also opened a space for women to renegotiate their relationship to both the state and the community. Sinha argues that for women to be considered as women outside of their community identity, they had to carve out a space in the realm of the political sphere of rights. Women from both Hindu and Muslim communities were able to do this in their organizing for the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, because the law was framed as a penal measure, that would be uniform, and bypass personal laws of religious communities.[21] By bringing a social issue—marriage— into the political sphere, women were able to extract themselves from the purview of the community, or the social sphere. Sinha argues that this moment allowed for the "construction of women as both the subjects and the objects of social reform in India."[22] The debates for the age of consent and for marriage to be raised allowed women to be agents beyond their communities, and Hindu and Muslim women both supported the Act as a unified community of women. South Asian historiography shows that there were few moments when Indian women could come together in political solidarity, outside of community interests, but the debates for the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 was a significant rupture.[23] However, that moment is fleeting, and once the Act is

[20] Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006
[21] Ibid 9.
[22] Ibid 153.
[23] Sinha makes the argument that women are seen as individual, rights-bearing subjects of a nascent nation state in *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* and "Gendered Nationalism: From women to gender and back again?."

enacted, women are again aligned with communal interests, even as women's organizations resisted women becoming linked to communities.

This dissertation rethinks the moments and nature of women's solidarity and asks that we consider how the social sphere opens up sites that posits women as subjects beyond their communal identities. While Sinha's argument focuses on the question of nationalism and 'big events' of history, my emphasis on women's everyday sociality allows me to write a different, alternative history of women where the social sphere is where women across communities come together without needing an 'event' or 'big' political moment. While Sinha exposed the opportunity for a women's collective outside of the community or the 'social' during the debates on the Child Marriage Restraint Act, I ask how the nexus of women, community, and the state shifts if we think of women's interactions in their everyday life. The interaction of women as individuals or a collective outside of their role as members of a community in the emerging political spheres shows that women found other spheres and spaces to interact as individual women. An emphasis on women's everyday allows me to write a history of the region that is not marked by canonical events, but by women's lived experiences as understood by women themselves in their writings, which shaped the larger contours of history. There is little in the current scholarship that seeks to foreground the specific affective nature of women's interactions with other women. Leela Gandhi's argument that one mode of sociality, such as friendship, allows people to seek expression outside of and against "possessive communities of belonging" ruptures the focus on women as embedded within communities.[24] While Gandhi examines male friendships that crossed the colony and metropole divide, I draw upon her conceptualization to ask how these crossings of communities of belonging impacted women's social ties, especially in partially sex-segregated spaces that allowed women to be in both the public and

[24] Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

private spheres. Sociality extends beyond the sphere of formal and nationalist politics and enacts a form of informal politics that is reliant on affective ties, creating communities that are not necessarily bound by community or political motivations. Rather than focusing on the contributions of individual women to national or political histories, or the symbolic role of "women" in the formulation or reformulation of communities, I am choosing to look at the relationships between women as a unit of analysis. This allows for a reconfiguration of women's relationship to the social sphere, as one where women are the subjects of their everyday relations, where they are constantly negotiating how to interact with women from other communities, as well as choosing forms of solidarity on an intimate, affective scale not easily recovered in political solidarities. In other words, Bengali women were already thinking and acting collectively as women in these relationships, rather than solely highlighting their communitarian identities.

This dissertation takes as its subjects the heterogenous category of "middle-class Bengali women." Although women in Bengal often spoke and wrote in multiple languages, I focus on the *bhadramahila*, educated women from the middle-class, who primarily wrote or spoke in Bengali. Within the historiography, the experiences of Bengali women have been lopsided. Scholarship which claims Bengali women as its subject tends to assume a Hindu or Brahmo identity, thereby erasing the presence of Bengali Muslim women within the broader category of "Bengali woman."[25] On the other hand, scholars who have attended to histories of Muslim women have written specifically about "Muslim Bengal."[26] Sonia Amin and Mahua Sarkar's scholarship explicitly engage with the

[25] For just a few examples, see Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah?: Women in Bengal 1890-1939* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), Tanika Sarkar, "Politics and women in Bengal –the conditions and meaning of participation," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 21, no. 1 (1984): 91-101, and Barbara Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995). See also Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849–*1905 (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University, 1983) who was one of the first to put Hindu and Muslim bhadramahila in the same frame of modernization.

[26] See Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and Mahua Sarkar, *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

question of what a history of Bengal's women might look like by addressing a historiographical absence: the place of Bengali Muslim women in South Asian historiography. Amin's work aligns itself against the corpus of scholarship on women in colonial Bengal that largely ignores Muslim women. She recovers the histories of Muslim women forgotten in the historiography while challenging the idea of Muslim backwardness that laced earlier works on women in Bengal. By focusing on three prominent arenas – family, education, and literature—Amin shows how Muslim women "modernized" and became "bhadramahila," a term that until then has been used to categorize educated and elite Hindu women. While Amin's monograph highlights progressive and exceptional Muslim women to make an argument for Muslim modernization, Sarkar's work focuses on an analysis of how Muslim women's invisibility was created in historiographical discourses. Unlike Amin's project, Sarkar was not interested in recovering Muslim women but rather in examining the structures and contexts through which they have been victimized and erased from histories. Works like Amin's has disproven the theory of Muslim women's backwardness, but Sarkar asks how that idea of Muslim women's backwardness took root in the first place. By positing that "Hindu" women could only be seen as "modern" and "progressive" if "Muslim" women were seen as "backward," Sarkar emphasizes the Orientalizing of Bengali Muslim women within the scholarship on Bengali women. Sarkar has shown how the literature on women in Bengal presupposed an ideal Hindu, upper-caste woman as the ideal Bengali woman, constructing the Muslim Bengali woman as the invisible "other" in the historiography.[27] Read together, these authors show how representation of Bengali Muslim women, not just historically, but also historiographically, had shaped modern scholarship on Bengal.

Women are studied as part of pan-Indian or pan-Indian Muslim communities, but very few studies have focused on Bengali women of all backgrounds without limiting the focus to either

[27] Sarkar, *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women.*

Hindu or Muslim women. The women who are the subjects of my dissertation are primarily well-educated and socially part of the middle class, as those are the women who wrote and shared their life histories. The Muslim women are mostly from *ashraf* [aristocratic or elite] families while the Hindu women are from the upper castes. Both the Muslim and Hindu women are primarily women who might fit under the "bhadramahila" category. There are a few women who do not fit into any of these categories, and class seems to be the linchpin for why such women do not become significant in middle-class women's writings. The women who do not fit into these categories were often from lower classes and castes, and learned to read or write by accident, or through support from wealthier and more educated benefactors. The women whose life histories are presented here foreground the importance of Bengali women's intimate world of social networks to reconsider and take seriously the contention that women from diverse backgrounds were instrumental in shaping the identity of the region and of the subcontinent. By focusing on Bengali women's sociality as expressed in their own writings, I show that women's everyday lives should be central to how histories are written.

Sociality as an Analytic

Women's sociality can be used as a framework to understand women and women's history. In South Asia, women's relationships to other women outside of the family have been marginal to history-writing, but my dissertation shows that they are central to women's lives, and in fact, are relationships that extend beyond the boundaries through which women have been understood. Sociality can be defined as a relationship that is not bound due to sameness, but rather a shared choice to be connected. As Leela Gandhi has artfully argued, one mode of sociality, such as friendship, exists where friends recognize and accept the otherness of their friends.[28] In Gandhi's

[28] Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship.*

monograph on affective friendships, she shows how the "politics of friendships" allowed for anti-imperial westerners to connect and form affinities with anti-colonial Indians. While her work has been read as an alternative history to imperialism, which often posited colonizer against colonized, her notion of friendship can be extended to allow for an alternative history of women's social ties beyond family and religious community in South Asian historiography. While friendship is one mode of sociality, other everyday relationships like mentorship, rivalry, and neighborliness also widened the category of women's social interactions. Women's sociality in its various forms and in multiple sites were written about in a variety of ways. Some women wrote of their social connections by using both Bengali and English words meaning "friend" or "colleague" or "comrade" while others just wrote about other women by name and related the intimate relationships they shared in everyday actions and spaces. In his study of women's popular culture, Sumanta Banerjee shows that women's diverse range of sociality, which often crossed boundaries of class, was constrained by the end of nineteenth century as middle-class norms dictated that 'respectable' women do not intermingle with poor women.[29] My dissertation shows that middle class women, who were cut off from this sphere of exchange among women, sought other ways of fostering sociality amongst themselves. This dissertation is a departure from how histories of women have been written in South Asia. Scholars have shown that women's writings tend to focus on the domestic over a public persona, which rings true in many aspects, but women also write about the public in a manner that does not separate the public and private, especially when writing of their relationships to others. Women's writings about their social ties, therefore, significantly highlight a history that allows room for negotiations and opens up new ways of thinking about women's experiences and interactions in the twentieth century.

[29] Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989).

I aim to use "women's sociality" to conceptualize a women-centered history of Bengal. Scholars writing about women's sociality have emphasized intimate sexual relations or women's navigation of friendships in literature, rather than the role women's interactions have played in shaping women's social worlds.[30] I use sociality as an analytic to understand Bengali women's lives over a long period of time, tracing the ebbs and flows of these connections as women's roles in society were rapidly changing, especially as Bengal transitioned from being a region in a colonial state to becoming a part of two different nation-states. I examine how various modes of sociality, such as friendship, mentorship, rivalry, and more, permeate aspects of women's lives as they grapple with shifts in regional and national identities. At the same time, women formed connections with other women in various spaces, and some of these bonds were crucial to how they navigated their worlds, beyond their relationships to family, the community, and the shifting nation-state.

The family, community, and the state have been intricately linked in how women and womanhood have been written about. In determining the ideals for a community in debates on modernity and community progress, the family became a critical site of social reform. The recent focus on the family as a critical historical institution point to the intrusive nature of social reform efforts in changing women's roles and everyday life in intimate spaces, even as the discourses continued to be of religious communities. Tanika and Sumit Sarkar have shown the concurrent shifts in gendered systems of social regulation expressed through religious and revivalist movements and the rise of women's participation and engagement with the state particularly through law.[31] While women were involved as writers or social critics, they were also represented as symbols key to

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[30] Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women who loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Penelope Anderson, *Friendship's Shadow: Women's Friendship and the Politics of Betrayal in England, 1640-1705* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). Queer undertones in female friendships are especially fascinating in this scholarship, but due to the specific sources of my project, I focus on friendships and other platonic sociality in general, unless the sources allude to same-sex relations.

[31] Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar, "Introduction" in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 8.

definitions of colonialism and modernity being contested in the public sphere. Drawing upon the rich literature on social reform, I seek to look inward into the everyday mechanisms of women's lives that shaped how they presented themselves as "ideal" women through their roles as friends. Outside of the space of a religious community and the family, how might women interact and perform gendered roles? Within this strand of scholarship, the need to understand communitarian identities takes precedence, but sociality across communitarian boundaries can illustrate how these boundaries are enforced or challenged. Rather than understanding women's lives and identities as overdetermined by religion and family, this allows for an exploration of other aspects of their identities or capacities critical to taking women seriously as subjects of history. I am by no means ignoring the significance of family and community ties in their lives but instead claiming that a focus on sociality helps us see women's relationship with their family and community identities in a different light. By stressing women's ties, I seek to understand how women navigated family and community expectations in their intimate relationships with other, non-family women.

This dissertation shows that using sociality as an analytic allows us to think beyond Hindu-Muslim communities. Focusing on women and their everyday interactions allows for a thinking beyond religious community. Hindu-Muslim relationships in Bengal have been seen through two frames: the moment of United Bengal, where Bengaliness trumps other intersectional identities, or one where communal tensions were central and religious identities take precedence over everything else. The analytic of sociality pushes against these framings to center Hindu-Muslim friendships among women, which often challenged parameters of the community.

The socializing of Hindu-Muslim communities in Bengal is not novel in Bengal's historiography, yet the excessive focus on moments of tensions have overshadowed the much more common everyday experiences of communal equilibrium. The scholarship on Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal has predominately focused on the moments of tensions, riots, and violence in the

public sphere to underline factors that caused such interactions, rather than the assumption of ingrained differences due to religion. Sumit Sarkar's history of the Swadeshi movement shows how economic factors shaped the conflicts between the urban and rural population of Bengal, where boycott was not easily feasible for the peasants, an issue that was similarly expressed in the literature of Rabindranath Tagore.[32] Sarkar locates the failure of the movement in its inability to bring in the agrarian base and work out Hindu-Muslim tensions. Sarkar points to the economic factors being read along religious lines, where the seed of modern Hindu-Muslim communalism in Bengal is rooted. Pradip Kumar Datta has shown how fears of the "other" and demographics shifts structured the communal riots and violence of the 1920s.[33] These fears came to the forefront in the public debates on Bengali women's abductions by the other community. Datta shows how in each case of women's abduction, the idea of threat from the 'other' community was much more important than the real threats those communities posed (due to actual numbers of the population). By showing the different issues that created separate communal politics, he also emphasizes the similarities that resulted in riots in the 1920s and 1940s that allowed for antagonistic relations between Hindus and Muslims. Similarly, in looking at Bengal after Partition, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has pointed to the relative absence of communal violence in Calcutta after the 1947 Partition until 1950 when huge riots broke out on both sides of partitioned Bengal.[34] He has argued that these riots emerged due to fears of refugees coming into both India and Pakistan and took the shape of retaliations based upon news of what was happening on the other side. These scholars recognized that Hindu-Muslim violence and tensions were not the norm of Bengal and sought to point to the specific causes of

[32] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973). The Swadeshi Movement was an anticolonial movement that began as a response to the Bengal Partition of 1905 and became a wider protest against British rule. Indians were urged to boycott British goods and support *swadeshi* [local] products.
[33] Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[34] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "The Minorities in Post-Partition West Bengal: The Riots of 1950," in *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal*, edited by Abhijit Dasgupta, Masahiko Togawa, Abul Barkat (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2011), 3-17.

relations souring in these cases. Histories such as these that have focused on Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal have emphasized these communities' associations in the public sphere, with the assumption that relations souring in the political public realm was the cause for animosity among the two groups, and eventual cause of Partition.

The focus on communal relationships and tensions in the public political sphere overlooks the significance of these relationships in the private social sphere. This dissertation argues that the sphere of the social was critical for both fostering and changing relations among women, but this sphere was also a site of inter-communal interactions. In his monograph on significant moments in Bengal's history, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya argues that the battle for Hindu-Muslim unity in Bengal was lost in the private social sphere before it manifested in the political sphere.[35] Bhattacharya locates the tensions in the social sphere as being caused by differences in social and religious practices between Hindus and Muslims, as well as among different castes of Hindus. He ultimately argues the root of communalism "lay in the social and cultural spheres of life in Bengal."[36] Studies focusing on the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bengal often point to the struggle for such unity in the 1920s through a focus on debates on political representation and electoral seats. Bhattacharya instead moves away from a focus on the public political sphere and contends that the "social transactions" and "remembered" history over what is written and recorded is equally significant in writing a history of communalism.[37] He further elaborates upon the writing of such histories, stating that "historians have neglected the fact that interactions in the private space mattered as much if not more than the attitudes and policies adopted by the communities in the public sphere."[38] While examining women's sociality, my dissertation also focuses on the issue of

[35] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[36] Ibid., 268.
[37] Ibid., 109.
[38] Ibid, 301.

communalism and social interactions in general, in order to recover aspects of Bengal's colonial and post-colonial history that have hitherto remained unexamined. Women's sociality is not limited to the private sphere alone, yet social interactions—often relegated to the sphere of the private in common parlance and scholarship –have much more to tell us about why certain issues became critical in the public discourses. Women's understanding and writing of their sociality with other women were ways in which they often made sense of the larger events and debates of the time. Mohammed Quayum has looked at Hindu-Muslim relations in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to show how despite their differences in upbringing and access to resources, their works and personal lives reveal similar arguments for religious tolerance and visions of Hindu-Muslim unity.[39] Yet, while he hints at peaceful social relations between Bengalis of different religions, the analysis is limited to literary works, and not how people experienced these relations in their everyday lives. This dissertation takes the scholarship on Hindu-Muslim interrelations forward by insisting on the need to pay attention to the construction of these social histories shared by women of various communities. In other words, I focus on the norms and lived experiences of Bengal rather than specific events tied to the dominant narrative of communal violence and the teleology of Partition.

The scholarship on conflict and separatism among Hindus and Muslims in South Asia has been a strong presence in Indian historiography. The labeling of Indian Muslims as separatist and responsible for Partition has been largely discredited.[40] Nevertheless, in writings on Indian women, much of the literature has claimed that Muslim women, even those who took part in the women's

[39] Mohammed A. Quayum, "Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Work of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," in *South Asia Research*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (July 2015): 177-194.
[40] Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India 1885-1930* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991); Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*.

movement, remained highly sectarian in their outlook.[41] While "sisterhood" as a goal was easily applicable to many of the national groups, "separatist" was a term reserved particularly for Muslim women's organizations. Although a few scholars have pointed to women working together regardless of religious identities and challenged this idea of separatist Muslim women, the framework of the ideal Indian as Hindu by various groups historically, and in some historiography, has been a contentious issue for Muslim women. The fact that women's groups struggled to be truly inclusive does not automatically mean that all women were separatists or that the failure to be a coherent part of the movement was due to religious differences. At the same time, it would be remiss to accept the other historiographical trend of forgetting the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in favor of the ideal of Bengali amity. Mahua Sarkar has strongly critiqued the "liberal notion of inter-communal togetherness" which we might read as an erasure of women's experiences of religiously inflected discomfort.[42] For instance, Muslims in West Bengal describe a nostalgic time of perfect harmony with Hindus while the Hindus of Bangladesh do the same for Muslims. Yet, when the religious identity is reversed within contemporary nation-states, discomfort and tensions are expressed much more readily. Sarkar's notion is helpful in grounding my project as one that seeks to find accord and friendships, but not necessarily as one that assumes sociality meant inter-communal relations and interactions were conflict-free. These varying perspectives that Sarkar points to is marked by women's relationship to the nation-state, particularly the post-colonial nation states in the aftermath of Partition. Sarkar herself goes on to show that women still spoke of their cross-religious friendships and other forms of sociality that existed across the Bengal border. Thinking through

[41] See Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, "Fostering Sisterhood: Muslim Women and the All-India Ladies' Association. *Journal of Women's History*, 16, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 40-65) and Gail Minault's "Sisterhood or Separation? The All- India Muslim Ladies' Conference and the Nationalist Movement" in *The Extended Family: Women and Political participation in India and Pakistan* (Delhi: South Asia Books, 1981), 83-108.

[42] Mahua Sarkar, "Changing Together, Changing Apart: Urban Muslim and Hindu Women in Pre-Partition Bengal" in *History & Memory,* 27, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2015): 5-42.

sociality asks scholars of South Asia to reconsider the dominant historiography of conflict and violence in the years leading to and after Partition, mediated as it is through a discourse of religious difference. Whereas communalism stresses political alignment with one's own religious group, a focus on sociality makes it possible to look beyond categories of religious identity. This dissertation asks how women's sociality might be conceptualized as a distinct sphere, one where lived experiences more than social-political identities take precedence.

Women's lived experiences of sociality, as constructed in their autobiographies, allow for a reframing of their relationship to the community. Pradip Kumar Datta's monograph shows that even in moments of polarization between Hindu and Muslim communities, such as during the 1920s when there were spirited debates on women who have been 'abducted' by rival communities, both Hindu and Muslim women were aligned in opposition to community rhetoric.[43] In the 1920s, the figure of the 'abducted woman' introduced a candid antagonism between Hindus and Muslims.[44] Women's organizations, and figures like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain were unified in their views on these abductions. In her writings of abductions, Rokeya did not refer to communalization, but what the outcry about abductions said about social definitions of womanhood.[45] Hindu and Muslim women's organizations argued that women were being used as symbols, and neither of the communities were listening to women's voices. The debates on "abductions" ignored the fact that many women left their family and community on their own, rather than being abducted by men from the other community. Instead of supporting the communal rhetoric of men, Bengali women led an indictment of inequities that communalism perpetrated. Hindu and Muslim women were working together at that very moment when they were polarized by the larger community. Rokeya's

[43] Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[44] Ibid., 188.
[45] Ibid., 217.

aforementioned *Padmarag*, which was in circulation around this time, put forward a similar criticism of both Hindu and Muslim patriarchy as failing women in general.[46] Examples such as this show that reframing women's experiences through an analytic of sociality also opens a space for women out of their community. Women can be both outside of their religious community as a woman and be a part of the community as Hindu or a Muslim woman. Examining women's sociality transcends the common framing of women within their community to show that women's interactions revealed connections beyond those ties. It allows women's relationships to be conceptualized as constituting a distinct sphere of sociality, rather than in relation to family, community, or the nation-state. Sociality cannot be easily contained within any of these analytics, since it shows a history that is beyond these parameters. This is a history that is a part of the colonial and post-colonial histories that is obscured when seen through the lens of community.

While focusing on social interactions allows for a reframing of Hindu-Muslim interactions, it also highlights how certain boundaries, such as class, are not easily transgressed for all modes of sociality. Cross-class friendships, for example, were not easily accessible by some women in the sites and sources I explore. Even as upper and middle-class class women interacted and collaborated with lower-class women, as I examine in chapter three, we get a sense of how these middle-class women were providing labor and *seva* [service]. Lower class women remained the object of their service, rather than those they formed social ties with as they did with fellow co-workers. In their autobiographies, women who worked in social service work often highlighted their social bonds with colleagues and comrades, but not the lower class or lower caste women they worked to provide services to. Many forms of sociality, like friendship or mentorship, reflected relationships across religious community, but not class. Part of that can be traced to the way the middle-class in Bengal was being shaped and formed in the late-colonial period. As Tithi Bhattacharya has shown, by the

[46] Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias.*

late nineteenth century, Bengal's middle-class, particularly the *bhadralok*, was creating a middle-class identity based on a specific idea of education and culture.[47] Women in schools and other educational institutes were able to forge social ties across boundaries of religion, region, and language, but not class since only women of certain classes were sent to schools. Most neighborhoods also clustered around families who shared similar occupations, which made cross-class interactions outside of the home difficult. One exception to this norm can be found in the case of young middle-class children who would sometimes play with the children of their family's servants within their homes, although sociality such as that was not often highlighted in the autobiographies I examined. This one exception notwithstanding, class remained a difficult boundary to transgress for the women who are the subjects of this dissertation. Nevertheless, women's sociality provides a window into their personal lives, making what was invisible a part of histories.

Alternative History, or Another History

South Asian history has been written to focus on the big events and important people who lived, but alternative histories, such as those constructed by women, are possible that show lived experiences. In an article on M. K. Gandhi, Ajay Skaria has argued that Gandhi's satyagraha as described in his autobiography can be understood as history as defined by the term *itihaas*.[48] In several South Asian languages, including Bengali, *itihaas* has been translated to mean history. But, as Skaria has cogently shown in his reading of Gandhi, *itihaas* for Gandhi meant the opposite of how historians have defined history. History as historians might define it is that of the spectacular, the unusual, that which is deemed large. *Itihaas*, on the other hand, is the history of the everyday. Skaria contends that *itihaas* means displacing professional history, that which can only account for the

[47] Tithi Bhattacharya, *Sentinels of Culture: Ideologies and Practices* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
[48] Ajay Skaria. "The Strange Violence of *Satyagraha*: Gandhi, *Itihaas*, and History," in *Heterotopias: Nationalism and the Possibility of History in South Asia*, ed. Manu Bhagavan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142-185.

"thus it happened" aspects.[49] He further elaborates, "itihaas reveals an other everyday life —one heterogeneous to the history's everyday life."[50] This *itihaas*, or happening, is in a different time and place from the "noise of history" which produces and is attuned to the big moments and grand ruptures. Drawing upon Skaria's reading of Gandhi's conception of history and *itihaas*, I align women's everyday experiences as *itihaas,* that which is the history of the people. What constitutes the history of "big" events and moments often obscures the messiness of everyday life, which should also be studied as part of history. Women's lives and experiences give a different understanding of what is history, especially in how they choose to construct histories in their autobiographical writings. Rather than getting a history of the major events of the twentieth century, such as the 1947 Partition, or 1971, we get a history of the twentieth century where those events were significant but were not necessarily the focus of women's lives.

I suggest that women's own understanding of their life histories is critical in writing an alternative history of their everyday experiences. For this dissertation, I am defining the everyday as processes that are repetitive, often banal, such as playing together every day after school, visiting each other's homes, frequent gatherings, and forms of conversation about daily life, from the mundane and personal, to the unusual and unexpected. My conception of the everyday is linked to the concept of the 'ordinary' as assemblages of practices and knowledges that shape the everyday life.[51] Women's sociality can be conceptualized as a distinct sphere, one where lived experience more than social-political identities takes precedence. Women's everyday is important in terms of the larger histories of the region, since it is incumbent upon scholars to interrogate what issues were central to the lives of half of the population. If women spent time worrying or writing about something, it is worth examining why these other, alternative, everyday histories are given such

[49] Ibid., 145.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Kathleen Stewart. *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

significance. Even if the focus of history is the political sphere, where scholars focus on political movements or motivations, for instance, it is equally important to understand women as actors and why they took such actions, something that is explored in chapter one of this dissertation where I ask why young women participated in revolutionary activities. However, at the same time, I want to challenge the idea that male dominated, patriarchal history should be seen as the most important history. In women's constructions of their past, political history is often decentered, which allows scholars a window into the alternative sphere of lived and embodied history. By taking seriously women's writings of their histories, I ask that we look at what half the population takes to be noteworthy based on their lived experiences. Not only does such an alternative history asks what it means to be important, but it also challenges the idea of who decides what history is and whose histories/writings become history. Taking into consideration Joan Scott's critique of experience as a defining category of analysis, I show that Bengali women's experiences of sociality are not necessarily just a way to get at women's experiences, but rather to think more broadly about the kinds of alternative spaces women were able to foster despite differences in their identities.[52] To that extent, this project aligns closely with historian Kathleen Canning's provocation that experience should be valued as a mode of historical inquiry. Canning has argued, "women's embodied experiences proved to be the most compelling means of contesting dominant discourses, of appropriating discursive space, and of altering the discourses that excluded or sought to define them."[53] Bengali women's experiences and interactions with other women provide alternatives to histories of major events.

Scholars of women's histories have long argued that women's writings and experiences merit a closer look *as histories*. In her monograph on women's histories and archives, Antoinette Burton

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[52] Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797.
[53] Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994): 397.

has skillfully shown that focusing on women's everyday writings, even during significant moments in Indian history, offer a point of access to history beyond 'big' events.[54] Burton argues that women's spaces, such as the sites I examine in this dissertation, can serve as the material archive for an alternative history.[55] Burton focuses on three twentieth century Indian women and makes use of their memories to argue that those women used the "domestic space as an archival source from which to construct their own histories."[56] In emphasizing the home as the space from which they constructed their histories, Burton is challenging the idea that only histories and events that were significant in the public sphere were worth writing about. In positing women's writings as primary sources for an alternative history, I am drawing upon scholarship that shows how women's writings blur the public/private divide instead of considering the sphere of the private as women's domain. Burton also contends that historians have not been attuned to the blurring of this divide because the discipline of history reproduced the private as women's domain.[57] Even when the histories written by women privilege the private spheres, their narratives challenge common misconceptions. In her monograph on early narratives of Bengali women, Malavika Karlekar showed the centrality of femininity and ideologies of education that were encouraged in the *antahpur*, or the sex-segregated spheres available to women.[58] By highlighting women's narratives in the *antahpur*, women's writings provided a window into a specific sphere of women's lives. As Karlekar explains, "in many instances, writing about one's life became a convenient escape mechanism in a segregated and

[54] Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[55] Ibid., 5.
[56] Ibid.
[57] This is argued by Burton most strongly but also shown in works where women's writings are emphasized. See Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of* Amar Jiban*, A Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999); Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991; and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).
[58] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991)

hierarchical society emphasizing feminine compliance."[59] Writing their own histories not only offers an understanding of the past, but it also acts as a way for women to construct an alternative sphere for themselves. The women Karlekar examines had the *antahpur* as the most prominent space in their lives, which she demonstrates was a more malleable space than is given credit. According to Karlekar, various notions and constructions of femininity were created in the *antahpur* despite the assumption that it was a space of "foolish" and "limited" women.[60] Both Burton and Karlekar have shown that women were asking to be seen as individuals and not merely victims of an unequal society, thereby shifting the focus so that women can be reclaimed as the subjects of histories.

Women's writings offer an alternative space of agency where they shape the narrative of their life experiences as well as broader histories. Karlekar summarizes the significance of the texts she explores and argues that "the reconstruction of women's lives through a reading of personal narratives and recording of life histories and oral histories help not only in creating alternative models but also in understanding better analytical categories, such as gender, woman and femininity."[61] Further, Burton explains that the women whose texts she examines "made use of memories of home in order to claim a place in history at the intersection of the private and the public, the personal and the political, the national and the postcolonial."[62] Burton's use of family history and archives of the home reveals that non-traditional sources provide illuminating histories of women, and the past more broadly. In this dissertation, women's autobiographical texts are examined through a focus on their social interactions to argue that sociality was one way that women were able to break out of the binaries of the public/private, as well as how women have been written about as appendages to the nation, community, or the family. Women's histories of

[59] Ibid., 3.
[60] Karlekar, *Voices from Within*, 195.
[61] Ibid., 21.
[62] Burton*, Dwelling in the Archives*, 4.

sociality, mediated through a focus on the everyday, help us to see how the history of the region can be reconceptualized. As my reading of Sufia Kamal's autobiographical text reveals in chapter four, history does not necessarily have to be composed of big events or moments. Women who wrote autobiographies provide a retrospective history of the past from the present moment. There are various ways of writing history, and this dissertation argues that the history of Bengal that is told through the analytic of sociality reveals an alternative to the dominant narrative.

Autobiographies as Histories

In order to write a history of women's everyday experiences and social interactions, I expand the definition of the 'archive' to materials discovered and recovered in spaces outside official and national archives. I began my search for personal writings by Bengali women at traditional archives and repositories but found very little. It was after I expanded my search to personal collections and went searching for books at smaller publishers that I found women's memoirs, autobiographies, life histories, and more. As I became immersed in women's writings about their lives, especially in the numerous memoirs that I eventually collected, I realized that despite the various genres that these texts were called in different translations, these can all broadly be termed autobiographical texts. My understanding of the fluidity of the category of 'autobiography' is drawn from the work of literary theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who have expanded the field of autobiographical studies to incorporate memoirs.[63] They argued that the "categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process."[64]

[63] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading autobiography: a guide for interpreting life narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 (2nd edition).
[64] Ibid., 4.

As scholars of life narratives and personal writings in the context of South Asia have shown, the idea of the self comes to be most significant in autobiographical texts, particularly in writings by women who are emerging out of *purdah* [veil] and the *andermahal* [inner sanctum].[65] In her monograph, Malavika Karlekar examines women's autobiographical writings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to argue that women constructed femininity through their writings. For her, women's "private or personal writings often became the medium through which this emergent consciousness expressed itself."[66] Karlekar's emphasis on women's "consciousness" highlights women's agency as subjects capable of constructing and negotiating with ideals and modes of subjectivity—a theme central to this dissertation. Her work also reveals that women constructed these ideals although they all complied with what was expected of them as women. In fact, Karlekar argues that they did so due to the "deeply ingrained socialization, of years of training and apprenticeship in being good wives and daughters."[67] Similar to Karlekar, Tanika Sarkar's examination of a nineteenth-century Bengali autobiography centered the 'self' as essential to the writing of history.[68] In her reading of Rashsundari's autobiography *Amar Jiban*, Tanika Sarkar argues it might be the first modern Bengali autobiography because of its self-reflective nature. Just as Karlekar insists that women's narratives were a way to constitute women as agentive subjects in the *antahpur*, Sarkar argues that the act of writing for Bengali women in the nineteenth century "would have reconstituted her subjectivity in radically new ways."[69]According to Sarkar, Rashsundari's writing functioned as resistance to the life imposed upon women. The 'self' that is constructed in

[65] See Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of* Amar Jiban*, A Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999); Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991; and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018) for historians of women and gender who have emphasized the "self" in women's autobiographical writings in relation to religion, education, and community.
[66] Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Narratives of Bengali Women,* 4.
[67] Ibid., 19.
[68] Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of* Amar Jiban*, A Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).
[69] Ibid., 5.

women's autobiographical writings is both a product of its time, and how women wanted to be remembered.

Women's autobiographical writings allow for a broadening of history writing by reframing both the 'self' and its relationship to history. In a recent monograph, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley argues that Muslim women in South Asia staged a self for themselves in autobiographical writings, modeling a theoretical frame for understanding gender and autobiography beyond the Western frames. Lambert-Hurley takes as her starting point the idea that the autobiography was seen as the purview of the West. In studying Muslims, she also challenges the idea that Muslim autobiographies were rare and deficient when compared to Western counterparts. Thus, her book is part of a feminist project of decoding a gendered self through Muslim women's autobiographical writings.[70] Lambert-Hurley shows an explicit connection between women, reformism, and autobiography in Muslim South Asia.[71] The historical movements and changes in women's relationship to the processes of reform, education, and religion were critical to pioneering scholarship that took women's autobiographies as its subject. Given that I also examine some of the same Bengali language autobiographies that Lambert-Hurley and Karlekar have examined, I find their arguments useful in thinking about how women not only showed the connection between historical processes, but how they were also intentionally constructing a history of the past where categories like education, reform, religion, and violence, were products of their sociality, in both sex segregated and coed spaces. While Lambert-Hurley emphasizes the unveiling of women, especially in the context of Muslim women, the practice of purdah and sex-segregation also impacted the lives of upper-middle class and elite Bengali women, both Hindu and Muslim, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bengali women's autobiographies were similarly "unveiling" women from the private

[70] Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2.
[71] Ibid., 5.

spheres in their writings. Sarkar, Karlekar, and Lambert-Hurley's scholarship on women and women's writings emphasizes the individual 'self' as the object that is being unveiled. Drawing upon their pioneering work, I argue that the product of women's writing is not only their self, but their understanding of their relationships to other women who they spent time with or with whom they were in close proximity.

While the self is central in most autobiographical writings, these texts are also archives of how women constructed their own histories, what I posit is an alternative to most scholarship on Bengal. Burton has argued that autobiographical texts, memoirs, and unpublished texts like family histories "should be read *both* as archival sites *and* as history-in-the-making: as legitimate, and as subject to interrogation, as official policy documents or other artifacts of the state or, for that matter, other accounts of the past."[72] In more recent scholarship, Burton has further expanded upon the significance of these texts by emphasizing the direct links between autobiographical writings and history, stating that, "women's autobiographical writings are "centripetal forces" that simultaneously attract and reveal the very density of history that is, arguably, impossible to fully appreciate otherwise."[73] Burton's call to give weight to women's writings as archives that should be utilized and similarly interrogated as "official" archives provides a response to one of the issues raised by Smith and Watson in how historians utilize autobiographies as evidence of "historical record."[74] In her monograph on gender and autobiographies in the context of Muslim South Asia, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley identified two approaches that historians have taken to autobiographies: one, similar to Smith and Watson's contention, that they are merely a documentary source for the past, and two,

[72] Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 26.
[73] Antoinette Burton, "'An Assemblage/Before Me': Autobiography as Archive." *Journal of Women's History*, 25, No. 2 (Summer 2013): 188.
[74] Smith and Watson, *Reading autobiography: a guide for interpreting life narratives*, 13.

they are a historically contingent, literary form.[75] Lambert-Hurley's monograph, as well as the scholarship of Burton, Tanika Sarkar, and Ruby Lal,[76] among others, have broadened the field of autobiographical studies by taking seriously women's writings as more than just a source, by interrogating the genre of personal writings and placing the act of these women writing within particular historical contexts. The autobiographies that are used to tell women's histories in this dissertation stress the act of women creating and inscribing their own histories, asking what their writings tell us about Bengal's twentieth century.

Scholars have chosen to use several terms to refer to women's personal writing, arguing that certain terminology do not adequately represent that variety of texts produced by women. In their analyses of how memoirs and autobiographies can be understood, Smith and Watson chose to call women's (re)presentation of their lives as "life narrative" which they define as "self-referential practices" that are tied to the author's identity in the present moment when they write down their experiences.[77] Within South Asian historiography, such personal writings have been termed everything from "life writing" to "personal narratives" to "life histories." Judith Brown argues that "life histories" that focus on the lives of institutions and families, as well as individuals, offer a broad and rich means of studying history.[78] Brown's study of prominent individuals as extensions of major historical events align well with my analysis of ordinary people to re-examine historical moments, but the term "life history" does not adequately cover the range of autobiographical texts I examine. In her study of nineteenth-century Bengali women's autobiographies, Karlekar used the term "personal narratives" to argue that they revealed the emergence of feminine consciousness.[79] By the

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[75] Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives*, 15-17.
[76] See Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive;* Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of* Amar Jiban*, A Modern Autobiography*; Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[77] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives.*
[78] Judith Brown, *Windows into the Past: Life Histories and the Historian of South Asia* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).
[79] Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Narratives of Bengali Women.*

time we get to the twentieth century, women writing about their lives was much more common. No longer were the works just focused on issues of identity as a woman whose domain was the household since many middle-class women left the *antahpur* and *andermahal*. By the twentieth century, more and more women wrote stories of their lives outside of the inner sanctum, as public spaces and places become a site of female interactions. While Karlekar chose "personal narratives" to describe Bengali women's writings, which for her included structured autobiographies, memoirs, and letters, I choose to refer to these sources as "autobiographies" which allows for a diversity of life narratives and histories. I use "autobiographies" to refer to written texts, whether they are memoirs, personal recollections, or diaries, but also include the personal narratives shared by women through oral histories.

Many of the autobiographies used in this dissertation were published in the 1990s to 2010s, with a few that were originally written and published in earlier decades and then re-published for a broader audience recently. The 1990s in South Asia saw a rise in the number of texts published on women and gender as scholars and publishers worked to unearth women's voices, especially those who have been marginalized in extant histories and historiography. The push to have more women's voices in literature and history have led to the creation of numerous publishing houses for women and the publication of edited anthologies of women's writings. The publishers of these autobiographies range from well-known to more obscure, and several of the autobiographies I collected share the same publishers. Many of the autobiographies that were originally published in English or translated to English include the Kolkata based Stree and the New Delhi based Zubaan. Stree, now known as Stree-Samya, was founded in 1990 and aimed to focus on gender studies, especially the status of women in India. Stree has come to be known for translating women's writings, both fiction and non-fiction, from Indian languages to English. Jadavpur University in Kolkata collaborated with various publishers to produce a series of anthologies titled Readings in

Gender Studies, which sought to include English translations of women's writings, some of which were jointly published by Stree. Two of these anthologies have been particularly useful for my research. Stree's 2014 publication with Jadavpur's School of Women's Studies, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals, 1865-1947*, was intended to address a need for more materials to teach gender studies in colleges and universities. As historian Samita Sen explained in the preface to the edited collection, the need for more material for women's studies courses led to a rise in publishing women's writings, especially in Bengali in the early 1990s. The desire of both scholars and publishers to reach a wider audience led to many translation projects in the years afterwards. One of Stree's other anthologies, *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938* (2008) emerged out of a need of scholars of women and gender in Bengal, who felt that most anthologies were only able to recover the voices of women from Hindu and Brahmo communities, and not those of Muslim women. As editors Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik wrote, they grew up across the Bengal border from each other, one in Kolkata and one in Dhaka, and sought to compile this anthology to show that Bengali Muslim women were writing during the early twentieth century.[80] First published in Bengali as *Zenana Mehfil* in 1998 by Stree, the English translation was later published to reach a broader audience.

Similar to Kolkata's Stree, the Delhi based Zubaan, started in 2004 by the feminist scholar and activist Urvashi Butalia, was an imprint of Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house first established in 1984. Butalia herself is known for collecting women's oral histories of 1947 in the 1990s which profoundly influenced scholars' understanding of what constitutes "histories" of the period.[81] In her monograph, *The Other Side of Silence*, first published in 1998, Butalia wrote that she grew up in a family of Partition refugees, and heard stories of the horror and brutality of the

[80] Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, "Editor's Note," in Women *in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938* (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), xxxiii.
[81] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2000).

time, mixed in with stories of an "often mythical" time when Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs lived in harmony.[82] In the late 1990s, academic works like Butalia's drew attention to previously overlooked women's lived experiences of violence and trauma during Partition. In writing of women's sexual assault and violence, works like Butalia's echoed other scholarship on women that highlighted women's lives as shaped by both colonial and Indian male violence. Much of the writing about women in history seems to necessitate a focus on violence, but the framework of sociality allows for us to pay attention to ways women created and maintained relationships that were friendly and sustaining. The trend to publish more writings by women in the 1990s and 2000s was similar in Bangladesh. Very few of the memoirs written or published in Bangladesh were in English, and unlike the memoirs published in India, were not concentrated within a few publishing houses. However, even in Bangladesh, Sahitya Prakash published more women's memoirs than other publishers, pointing to a market for women's writings during this time. There was a niche market among scholars and lay people for women's writings and life histories in the new millennium.

This surge in women's writings about their own histories over the last few decades can be seen as constituting yet another sphere of sociality, since the act of writing itself is a form of both remembering and inscribing modes of sociality. The Bengali and English texts that make up my sources were written from the 1940s to the 2010s, and include autobiographies originally published in Bengali and later translated to English. As historians have been unearthing and writing about women's writings, many women who lived through the major changes of the twentieth century were convinced by friends and family to write of their experiences and histories. Almost all the women wrote in their prefaces and introductions that they would have never written their memoirs if friends and relatives had not insisted that their life histories should be shared with the younger generation. The insistence of these friends as supporters shows the centrality of social ties even as women

[82] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 4.

constructed their histories for broader consumption. Many women stated that they were hesitant to write an autobiography, saying that they did not feel worthy; however, the existence of these memoirs shows that they wrote anyway. These women may have finally acquiesced to writing their life history due to their age, as most women who wrote autobiographies did so towards the end of their lives. Some may have felt a necessity to look back at a time that was different than their present. Another conjecture for the timing of women writing and publishing their autobiographies, decades after the events they describe, could be the period of crisis of secularism and doubts in their new postcolonial nation states. In Bangladesh, many of the women who wrote in the years after 1990s lived through the Ershad era, when religious freedom was in danger. They also watched the rise of communal violence in Bangladesh and India against minority religious communities. For many in India, the 1990s, and especially the aftermath of the 1992 Babri Masjid incident, bought the question of communalism back to the forefront. While most women's autobiographies do not necessarily begin with communal issues or their sociality, the fact that relationships between Hindu-Muslim communities in the past are always mentioned points to a need to stress a past where harmony and togetherness was the norm. Some of the women passed away long before their memoirs were published in the 1990s or later. For example, Hemangini Dutta, who wrote about the village she grew up in East Bengal, wrote down her memories in 1960, and passed away in 1965. It was not until the 1990s that her nephew, who had earlier asked Hemangini to write about her life, discovered the complete manuscript when cleaning out his aunt's former house. Others, like Bina Das and Kalpana Dutt, lived long lives after their memoirs were published in the 1940s, but these texts too tell us much about the significant relationships young women had in the pre-Independence era. The writing and sharing of their lives were a way to reconnect to their social ties as well as share their experiences as histories of a past.

The approximately fifty autobiographies that constitute my source base are primarily written in Bengali, with few originally written in English, and few others that are translated versions of the Bengali originals.[83] For example, one woman gave me both her Bengali autobiography and the translated English version. Most of these autobiographies focus on life in the middle of the twentieth century, ranging from the 1910s to 1970s. Almost all the women who wrote lived during the Partition of 1947 and the division of the region. These women were from all over Bengal, but most of them ended up, at some point, in the major cities of Calcutta and Dacca, as these cities were known then. Their writings tell of ancestral homes scattered around the region. Most of these women claimed to be ordinary and often began by writing that they are not famous, yet they felt the need to share their life stories. This need to be explicit about their "ordinariness" is reflected in titles that range from "An Unknown Woman" to the simple title "Memories." By selecting personal writings of women, my sources allow me to tell stories of the everyday lives of women who do not always feature in grand histories. Of course, the fact that these women chose to write and were able to get their personal histories either published or have them preserved by their families points to a larger theme of who the women were. These women can easily fall into the category of privileged Bengali women due to their access to education and ability to write, but as colonial subjects and women, they were marginal on various registers. As the women I interviewed often reiterated, their childhood diaries and journals were not kept when they left their natal homes after marriage or were thrown out because people felt that young women's musings and writings were not worth keeping, especially when families moved houses or across borders. Nevertheless, most of these personal narratives I examined are in published form, although not by major publishers. Some are self-published or published by children or grandchildren. I acquired a few of the autobiographies from

[83] See the Appendix I for the autobiographies that constitute my sources.

the memoirist's family members, while many others were only available from other scholars' personal collections.

The women whose autobiographies I utilized wrote retrospective histories: we see how and why they choose to write and what their conception of their histories are. Relationality to the region and other people were a crucial aspect of these autobiographical narratives. These texts provide information on the people and events that shaped these women's lives. We learn who their mentors and friends were, and how they navigated life in certain sites, whether schools or occupations. These texts reveal the historical and personal incidents that remained strongly grounded in these women's memories, while showcasing the changes in women's lives over time. Often, these autobiographies made claims of intimacy among women, many circumstantial, some long-lasting, and some ephemeral and momentary. The everyday sociality of women is represented in the throwaway lines written here and there, and in the accounts of sites and individuals who surface repeatedly in these texts. While these women might not see these interactions as forms of sociality, I argue that their inclusion in these texts point to their significance. These texts show us what these relationships represented in their past, and what they continue to represent in their life histories.

I supplemented women's writings with oral history interviews. I draw upon Margot Badran's theorization of oral history as autobiography to argue that my interviews with Bengali women also fall within the category of autobiographical studies.[84] As Badran states, her theorization of oral history as autobiography emerged out of her decades-long work on women in the Middle East, where oral histories have been crucial to understanding women and particularly their feminisms. My method of collecting oral histories closely aligns with Badran's. In the oral history interviews I conducted, although I prepared a few questions to start with, for the most part, I allowed the

[84] Margot Badran, "Theorizing Oral History as Autobiography: A Look at the Narrative of a Woman Revolutionary in Egypt." *Journal of Women's History,* vol 25, No. 2, Summer 2013: 161-170.

interviewee to control the conversation and share whatever she felt was pertinent to her life history and especially her relationships with others. I conducted about forty-five interviews, 17 in Kolkata [formerly Calcutta] and the other 28 with women in Dhaka [formerly Dacca]. These interviews were conducted between October 2016 and January 2018.[85] My interviews on the two sides of Bengal are uneven: in Kolkata I was able to interview a wider variety of women in terms of class, but in Dhaka, while there might have been class differences, the social circle of women was much smaller. My interviewees often sent me to their friends, allowing me to trace a network of educated women from prominent families. Many of these interviews began from a random selection of people I knew through my own contacts and networks, but over time, I was referred to other women by my interviewees. By the end of my doctoral research, I had been able to trace a network of women's current-day friendships through these interviews.

While the autobiographies were helpful in tracing those who made claims of intimacy and other forms of sociality, whether explicitly or implicitly, the oral histories provided accounts of sociality that were revealed in response to the questions I posed. In other words, my interviews were mostly unstructured. I asked my interviewees to tell me about their friends from childhood on. Most of the women, although not all, were ages sixty-five and older so that they could tell me about their lives in the 1940s to 1960s. Unlike the written autobiographical texts which often informed us about women's lives in the 1910s to 1930s, the interviews were strongest for the 1950s and 1960s. Part of that is due to the age of the women who were able to share lucid memories of their childhood. The interviews provided much more targeted information than was often found in the memoirs.

The primary sources that my dissertation rely upon all share the same issue of reliability: memory. By exclusively focusing on women's own words and understanding of their past, I prioritize women's voices and their representation of their affective ties. Since sociality is an

[85] See Appendix II for the list of women who I interviewed for oral histories.

embodied and deeply personal part of women's lives, memories serve as effective historical tools. Burton and other scholars have argued that memories should be read as archival sites and history in the making, since it allows women to blur the distinction between the public and the private, and challenge the conception of women occupying one sphere or the other.[86] By emphasizing women's memories through their written texts and speech rather than relying on colonial archives and national archives to tell us about women, my sources privilege and highlight vernacular histories of colonized and under-represented women. Memories are not always chronological and can be murky, but they provide one way to access women's histories from their own perspectives. Even though memories can be unreliable, they are often one of the only ways to access certain marginalized stories and voices. By utilizing women's autobiographies and oral history interviews, I centralize women's voices and experiences of everyday life to understand their connections with other women during a tumultuous century of change.

Periodization

This dissertation examines the history of the region from 1920-1965. A history of women's sociality provides a different temporal frame than the common divisions of colonial, Partition, and the post-colonial periods in South Asian historiography. Everyday time cannot be understood to be the same as political time, and in the case of women's intimacy, the sites examined through the analytic of sociality provide a way to rethink temporality. I use the years 1920-1965 to explore various sites and modes of women's interactions across communities. I begin with the 1920s since that is the period during which middle class women began to leave the inner sanctum of the home and became participants in the public arenas. The early decades of the twentieth century were periods of massive gains in women's education and participation in the public sphere, which

[86] Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive.*

historians have tied to Indian modernity.[87] Women formed connections and social ties with other women due to their participation in politics and social reform work, both during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Scholars have posited the 1920s as the period during which a regional Bengali identity emerged.[88] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has argued that there was an articulation of a regional identity centered around Bengali language and ethnic identity between 1920s to 1940s which fostered a sense of regional patriotism, rather than just a national Indian patriotism.[89] Central to the historical background are the issues of communalism and separation that shaped Bengal's history for the first half of the century, which historians have traced to the 1920s.[90] Given the dissertation's focus on women's sociality across religious communities, I want to highlight that women's social ties were also becoming critical in this period as more and more women were able to intermix at the same time as a Bengali regional identity was crystallizing and communal sentiments were rising in Bengal.

Continuing my focus into the 1960s contests the use of 1947 as the major disruption in Indian historiography and considers the connections between the pre- and post-1947 eras. This periodization shows Bengal's history as continual rather than truncated by Partition. Partition does not signal the end of social ties and intimacy for most Bengalis, especially since the borders in the Bengal region remained fluid throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Extending the periodization beyond 1947 allows us to examine the shifts and circumstances of the 1940s, a period where Bengali women

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[87] For more on the public sphere in India and how it was part of the debate on Indian modernity see Sandria B Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Amir Ali, "Evolution of Public Sphere in India" *Economic and Political Weekly,* 36, no. 26 (Jun.30-Jul 6, 2001): 2419-2425; Barton Scott and Brannon D. Ingram, "What is a Public? Notes from South Asia," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,* 38 no. 3, (2015): 357-370; and Dagmar Engels, "The Limits of Gender Ideology: Bengali Women, the Colonial State, and the Private Sphere, 1890-1930," *Women's Studies Int. Forum*, 12, no. 4 (1989): 425-437.
[88] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[89] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947 (*New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014)
[90] Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

are often erased, particularly Bengali Muslim women who are examined in the scholarship until the 1930s and then after the formation of Bangladesh. Part of this periodization also seeks to emphasize an all-Bengal history of women.

By continuing into the 1960s, I point to larger continuities as well as shift the focus to Bengali women as a more inclusive category. The borders became more difficult to traverse in the 1960s, especially in 1965 after the riots of 1964 which propelled an exodus of Hindu refugees from East Bengal to India. Although I focus on the spaces and places where women formed everyday connections, the incidents of riots and disturbances shaped whom they could interact with and changed the nature of the spaces of Hindu-Muslim sociality, even as these ties remained strong. Given the more rigid borders and the influx of refugees from one side of Bengal to another in 1964-1965, I chose 1965 as an ending point, when social attachments across borders became more difficult in the sites that I examine. I choose to not continue until 1971 since the impact of the Bangladesh Liberation war was disproportionately on Muslims in Bangladesh, rather than all Bengali women in the region. By highlighting Bengali women's connections and networks with other women, I move beyond traditional periodization to instead argue for an understanding of temporality aligned with women's socialization with people from various religious communities in certain spheres and spaces.

Chapter Overview: Sites of Sociality and Networks

This dissertation is both chronologically and thematically divided into four chapters, each focusing on a specific site or theme. These sites are educational institutions, neighborhoods, spaces of work, and a case study of mentorship in one autobiographical text. The spaces and sites of these interactions are critical to my argument that women's sociality, as constructed in their writings, show how these bonds can rupture across boundaries of family, community, and the state. These spaces can, and do, change as the composition of the women who gather at these sites shifts over time, but

the ties of women's social bonds do not. These sites show how they foster certain relationships and what happens when these spaces change over time.

The first chapter on educational settings points to the significance of women's interactions as influenced by school policies as well as student-led initiatives. This chapter shows the formation of young women's friendship, and how a shared class identity united people from different religious communities. In the context of schools, I examine how women create makeshift families among people of the same class. Furthermore, I trace how schools were places where women negotiate relationships with others from different religions, linguistic backgrounds, political ideologies, and even multi-generational mentorships. Through a case study of political activism, I show that young women activists were not only influenced by family, as has been argued by other historians, but were inspired and pressured by friends and classmates to join protests and revolutionary activities. This chapter also looks at the nascent consolidation of a Bengali Muslim identity for female Muslim students in the 1930s and 1940s, which has rarely been explored by other historians. I show how even as community identities were being solidified for these students, their cross-community friends and social bonds were maintained.

In the second chapter, neighborhood connections are read through a theory of the "ordinary" and everyday life to argue that the neighborhood acts as an "in-between" site of sociality, between the public and the private. I focus on the activities that young girls and women shared together in their neighborhoods, what I call "friendship rituals." These rituals range from activities such as playing in the neighborhood or sharing "gossip," to finding pleasure and desire in each other's company. This chapter demonstrates that the space of the neighborhood provided opportunities for girls' and women's pleasure and desire, the broadening of their social networks beyond the home and the family, and access to professional and civic opportunities. These

neighborhood connections not only cut across family and religious community, but also across generations.

The third chapter centers on sites of women's work, specifically in two arenas –social service work and the burgeoning performing arts industry, focusing on examples from the fields of film, dance, and theater. Here, I highlight the importance of women's networks in the institution-building of organizations that catered to working women's needs. This chapter explicitly engages with the interactions of middle-class and upper-caste social service workers and their efforts to help those from lower castes and classes. While certain forms of sociality could overcome constraints of religious identity and work towards Hindu-Muslim harmony, in this period women's sociality rarely cut across class. Middle-class women could only see lower-class women as objects of their service, even as they interacted frequently with poorer communities. This chapter also explores the tensions of rivalry and competition that emerged between lower- and middle-class women when middle class women entered the performing arts in the middle of the century, and reshaped dance, theater, and film into "respectable" industries. Strong social ties were difficult to foster among performers, and those who chose family or were unable to form bonds of sociality often realized they lacked a strong support system later in life.

The fourth chapter diverges from the spatial sites of sociality to focus on the theme of mentorship, harkening back to the sites explored in earlier chapters. While most of the earlier chapters examine women's construction of their histories and experiences in specific sites, chapter four shows how the autobiographical text itself is another construction of a past. This chapter emphasizes the life history of Sufia Kamal (1911-1999), who is one of the most famous yet understudied Bengali writers and activists, to trace her network of influence, including her relationships with other writers, activists, and leaders of Bengal. Using her memoir *Ekale Amader Kal*, I argue that the text provides a women's history and an alternative future where women should be

agents of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bengal. This chapter shows that twentieth century Bengal, especially the history of Bangladesh, cannot be fully understood without Sufia Kamal's influence in mentoring and organizing women in fields as diverse as education, activism, and cultural movements.

Following the various sites and themes that connect women, whether in schools, neighborhoods, or work, I end with a concluding chapter that explores whether these ties could break, focusing on how the riots and violence of 1950s and 1960s both inflicted trauma and led to nostalgia for earlier times. While the specter of communalism affected women's sociality in that the sites where they could come together changed, most of the dissertation emphasizes the ties that bound women together, despite their differences. The ties of sociality were not as fraught as the ties of family, state, and community. The riots and violence, however, played an active role in creating physical distance between friends and acquaintances as new borders tore communities apart. While women's lives changed drastically throughout the twentieth century, from gaining the right to be in public spheres, winning over the right to be educated and to work, they also learned to say goodbye to old friends and pause their social connections as the modern postcolonial nations enacted borders and boundaries. Nevertheless, these bonds of sociality did not break nor were they forgotten by women in how they chose to remember their life histories.

CHAPTER I

Making Connections: Fostering Friendships in Educational Sites

When congratulating the academic medalists for the year, the editors of the 1927 Bethune College Magazine wrote that the "greatest prizes they have won are the friendships they have formed" at the college.[91] This claim seems to have rang true for many Bengali women who attended colleges and universities in the early twentieth century and wrote about their college days in Calcutta and Dacca.[92] In the late nineteenth century, access to women's education was steadily on the rise in major cities like Calcutta, and in the decades following the First World War, even more women began attending colleges and pursuing university degrees. Schools and colleges were thus an important site of women's social interactions in the twentieth century. The consequences of these changes were various forms of sociality, particularly friendships, between women of different faiths and communities. Almost all the women who had access to at least secondary education were privileged in some ways, and these educational settings created new connections. Educational institutions facilitated the formation of friendships that allowed women to broaden their social networks.

Bengali Brahmo, Hindu, and Christian women made inroads into higher education as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) and Chandramukhi Basu (1860-1944) were some of the first female graduates in British India in 1883. Bengali Muslim women

[91] *Bethune College Magazine*, 1927 March-July. Accessed at the Bethune College Arts Library.
[92] I will refer to Calcutta and Dacca as they were called at the time rather than their present-day spellings of Kolkata and Dhaka, respectively.

lagged behind their Hindu contemporaries and only became college graduates from the 1920s onwards. Fazilatunnessa (1899-1977) was considered the first woman Muslim graduate of Bengal, receiving her Intermediate of Arts (IA) from Eden College in Dacca in 1923 and her Bachelor of Arts degree from Bethune College in 1925.

Bethune College and Eden College were important girls' schools and colleges in Calcutta and Dacca, respectively. Bethune, the first institution of higher education for girls in Asia, was founded as Bethune School in 1849 by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, an English officer in the Governor-General's Council interested in educating Indian women.[93] The school was upgraded to a college in 1879 in response to Kadambini Ganguly passing the University of Calcutta entrance exam in 1878 and was conveniently located in North Calcutta where many prominent and progressive Bengali families resided. Bethune counted among its alumnae many of the most well-known Bengali women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of the first female education activists of Bengal, figures such as Lady Abala Bose and Saraladebi Chaudhurani, were all educated at Bethune.

Eden School was first established in 1873 in Dacca as a social welfare organization and was converted into a school in 1878. It was named in honor of the then Lieutenant Governor Ashley Eden.[94] In 1926, it was renamed Eden High School and Higher Secondary when it began offering IA exams. Many women who lived in Dacca attended Eden before going to Bethune College for their BA. In the years after Partition, the location of the school moved throughout Dacca, and at one point it merged with Kamrunessa Girls' School, although a new campus in the 1960s eventually became known as Eden Mohila College.

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[93] Kalidas Nag, ed., *Bethune School & College Centenary Volume: 1849-1949* (Calcutta: Centenary Celebrations Committee, 1950), 11.

[94] Mahfuja Choudhury, "Eden Mohila College" *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (second ed). Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Accessed November 22, 2018 < http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Eden_Mohila_College > "Mohila" means "women."

Autobiographies written by Bengali women testified to the impact of their education on their lives, especially in how it shaped their social experiences. Almost all the autobiographical texts written between the 1940s and the 2010s that I have collected mentioned education, whether it was to discuss their own institutions or the state of female education at that time. It should be kept in mind that these authors were often looking back decades later and might have, to some extent, exaggerated certain things about school life, as well as being biased in extolling the benefits of education since they were some of the 'firsts' in their family and community to get an education. Akhtar Imam (1917-2009), whose autobiography is at the center of this chapter, was a professor and educator who wrote about her experiences in educational institutions in various books, including her autobiography *Amar Jiban Katha* [My Life Story] (1993). One of her earlier books, *Eden teke Bethune* [From Eden to Bethune], published in 1990, was eventually incorporated into her autobiography. While I draw upon Akhtar's writings for her experiences as a student at Bethune, it should be noted that she led an extraordinary life after her time at Bethune, which perhaps explains why she focused so much of her autobiography on education. She graduated from Bethune in 1937 with a degree in Philosophy, becoming one of the first Bengali Muslim women to do so. Widowed at age twenty-five with three young daughters under the age of five, Akhtar taught at Eden before completing a master's in philosophy at the University of London in 1952. In the late 1950s, she became the first female professor at Dhaka University, and then, the first Provost of the first Women's Hall of the University. Akhtar's life was by no means 'ordinary' but her writings about her friends in school pointed to the significance of educational institutions' role in broadening her social networks.

Similarly, Hamida Khanam, another Bethune alumna who was one of the first generation of Muslim women to receive higher education, also wrote about her school days in her autobiography *Jhara Bokuler Gondho* [The Scent of the Fallen *Bokul* Flower] (2001). In the introduction to her autobiography, she wrote that she never expected to write an autobiography, even though she was

given a notebook to begin writing about her life in 1952 when she went abroad to America. She did not begin writing until later with her historian husband's encouragement. Hamida wrote that her memoir is a collection of things she wrote over the years. It is not surprising that education was a central motif in her writing given that she studied abroad and eventually became the Principal of Home Economics College, Dhaka. Although Hamida was not as well-known as Akhtar among scholars, she was considered significant for being one of the first generation of Muslim women in Bengal who received higher education. In interviews conducted with her in the 1990s, Hamida highlighted the relationship between Hindus and Muslims at Bethune as very "amicable," supporting my point that the spaces of schools allowed for sociality beyond religious community.[95] Both Akhtar and Hamida were proponents of women's education and were themselves the product of debates on making education more accessible. Given the similar background of women who wrote about their school days in the first half of the twentieth century, it should be kept in mind that these memories were shaped by both their experiences during that period and the success they found from being given those opportunities.

The intimate space of women's colleges, especially sex-segregated dormitories, were part of the 'social' sphere where young girls bonded and came together in the name of education. All the memoirs and oral histories I have collected mentioned primary schools mostly as neighborhood schools while secondary and higher education sites as beyond the familiar space of the neighborhood. Bengali women gave particular attention to high schools and colleges because those who wrote about their lives were a privileged class of women who fought for or were allowed higher education. Those who had access to higher education were much more likely to have met women

[95] "Hameeda Khanam: Higher Education, The First Forays" in *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938,* Edited by Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, translated from the Bengali by Stree (Stree: Kolkata, 2008).

from all over the region. For the purposes of this chapter, my primary focus will be secondary and higher education sites.

This chapter focuses on women's memories and experiences at educational institutions that were critical to shaping their lives and argues that friendships enabled new social networks and participation in social and political activities. Even as some of these activities eventually turned into movements in the political sphere, the relationships were initially formed in the realm of the social where women interacted in sex-segregated spaces. Women's friendships with other women forced them out of their comfort zones and encouraged them to be open to new interests and activities. This chapter examines how institutional settings facilitated sociability and close intimacy between female students. Schools and colleges provided women a place to form bonds over shared interests and activities; these were contexts in which women inspired each other to take leaps, sometimes in terms of new interests and sometimes by partaking in revolutionary activities. I argue that educational institutions and venues enabled and engendered social connections between women in Bengal in five distinct ways. First, these schools introduced young women to women from across the regions and from other religions, which were sometimes the first opportunities these women had to interact with people outside of their family or religious community. Secondly, institutional policies actively encouraged and created places for girls to gather and participate in social activities. Third, as sites of study and play, women made friends and developed relationships through shared interests and passions. Schools and colleges became places where students took part in sports and activities that many had never experienced before. Fourth, these settings inadvertently introduced them to political tensions and the nationwide sentiments against oppressive governments. Considering the various ways women learned to socialize and cement relationships with others in schools, I analyze here how school connections and friendships were central to women's activism. I write about these interactions and the language of friendship based on the words women themselves used, calling

these women they write of as their friends, classmates, or acquaintances. Just as women shared academic interests and recreational activities, they also shared in student-led initiatives as friends. Some young women became emboldened by these friendships and actively took part in protests and led popular student movements. The friendships between young women empowered peer activism, challenging the enduring idea that women's activism was due solely to familial connections. Lastly, many women continued to tie their lives to these schools and colleges as they cherished the memories created there with other alumnae. These connections and alumni networks extended beyond the physical settings of these institutions, creating webs of relation that remained woven into their entwined lives decades later.

Crossing Boundaries

Before education was easily accessible to elite women, most Bengali women were married young, and therefore spent their lives in domestic spaces, where their social interactions were largely limited to other family members, relatives, domestic help, and occasionally their husband's friends. Those who were provided an education were primarily homeschooled. Schools introduced women to a much broader array of people. When women mentioned schools and colleges in their memoirs, they often described and introduced other students by references to students' background, whether their religion, class, or most often, the locality and areas in which they grew up. By highlighting the differences that distinguished their new friends from themselves, women demonstrated how school and college friendships allowed them to create new connections and social circles. Forming and maintaining close friendships with those who at first glance seemed different, whether due to regional, linguistic, or religious identity cultivated connections that were outside of familial and communitarian parameters. These connections expanded the boundaries of who women were able to interact with as well as allowed opportunities for new experiences that would not have been

possible for Bengali women who preceded them. I choose to define their social relationships as friendships because these memoirs described different degrees of intimacy from the level of alumni or acquaintance to confidant as facilitated by the school site.

Women emphasized the regional identity markers of their friends in their autobiographical writings which highlighted the geographic diversity of the women whom they befriended. Bethune and Eden drew students from various parts of Bengal and in doing so, exposed their students to women from an array of localities. Akhtar Imam (1917-2009) in her memoir *Amar Jiban Katha* [My Life Story] and Hamida Khanam (1922-2011) in her memoir *Jhara Bokuler Gondho* [The Scent of the Fallen *Bokul* Flower], both wrote about their time as students at Eden and Bethune colleges in the late 1930s. Akhtar's memoir was rich in mentions of numerous classmates and friends.[96] Born in Dacca in 1917, she spent her childhood there and attended Eden School and College where she earned her IA degree in 1935. She then moved to Calcutta to attend Bethune College. In her memoir, she described the women who shaped her life at Bethune by drawing upon diaries she kept as well as writings and snippets left in her autograph book by these women. She wrote at length about people who she says remained unforgotten. In her memoir, Akhtar used varying terms to refer to these women, such as calling them "classmate" and using the English word "friend" in Bengali transliteration to introduce them, as well as placing them within the various regions of Bengal. She described her friend and fellow philosophy student Pushpo Mukherjee as a "Calcutta resident" who nevertheless lived in the Bethune hostel with her.[97] When she introduced classmate Asha Palit right after she discussed Pushpo, we learn that Asha was also from Calcutta but did not live at the hostel

[96] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha* (Dhaka: Shafeni Mahal, 1993). I will follow the Bengali convention of referring to these women by their first names rather than their last names, mostly due to the similarities of last name among many of the women mentioned in this dissertation. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Bengali autobiographies are mine.

[97] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 67. Hostel is the term used to refer to dormitories where students lived.

since she used to travel in a big fancy car that Akhtar described as "similar to today's Mercedes."[98] Akhtar wrote that Asha's family was a well-known and wealthy Calcutta family. These descriptions revealed Akhtar's attentiveness to her classmates' regional and class identity. She introduced her friend Jahanara Haider as "the girl from Comilla" before saying she was also a classmate of hers when they did their IAs at Eden College.[99] She described Hamida Khanam as her junior and a girl from Pabna.[100] The various regions of Bengal were cited in Akhtar's introductions of these women, perhaps due to the fact that it was the first time she had encountered people from beyond Dacca. Based on their references to the different hometowns of friends, for Akhtar and many others, we can see that educational institutions introduced women from one part of Bengal to those from other parts, broadening their networks.

Women also encountered linguistic diversity in schools. Bethune and Eden were English-medium schools, which meant that instruction and classes were held in English. Even though English was the dominant language in elite schools, Bengali students continued to use Bengali, or Bangla, as the language is known among its speakers, in everyday conversations. Classmates and friends who were not Bangla speakers were identified as such in Bengali women's memoirs. When Akhtar mentioned her classmate Satyabrati Kataria, she highlighted that Satya, as she is called throughout the memoir, was from Bihar and Satya's "mother tongue is Hindi."[101] This difference in linguistic identities was further accentuated when Akhtar mentioned that Satya wrote in Akhtar's autograph book in three different languages: Hindi, Bengali, and English. Attention to linguistic differences among classmates is not surprising even in modern day India. Historian Yasmin Saikia has written about her student days in the girls' hostel of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) in the

[98] Ibid., 66.
[99] Ibid., 31.
[100] Ibid., 63-64.
[101] Ibid., 70.

1980s as one where most students did not share a mother tongue, but bonded as students away from home.[102] During the 1930s, it must have been even more noteworthy for these students had rarely interacted with people beyond family and local community.[103] Given the fact that most women who attended college in the 1930s and 1940s were primarily from elite families, they were well aware of linguistic differences in India, but did not encounter many other people outside of their families in person, or nurture close friendships. The variety of people in colleges meant that Bengali-speaking women fostered friendships that cut across linguistic communities.

Schools and colleges were also critical in enabling friendships among women from different religious communities. Hindus and Muslims were the dominant religious groups in Bengal, but not everyone was familiar with the variety of practices associated with those religions. In their writings, these women recounted the insular lives that they lived, so other students' religiosity was also noticed as a marker of difference. Jahanara Haider, a friend of Akhtar Imam's and senior to Hamida Khanam at Bethune, is mentioned in both of their autobiographies as someone who wore a *burqa*, the long outer dress common among some Muslims.[104] Both Akhtar and Hamida came from Muslim families, but their focus on Jahanara's dress points to differences among Bengali Muslim families. Akhtar and Hamida came from families where such dress may have been common in some settings but was considered unusual at college and in the hostels. The religiosity of non-Muslims is also explicitly recorded in memoirs. Akhtar's friend Amiya Bhattacharya, whom she characterized as one of her five closest friends in the hostel, was described as very religious. While introducing Amiya as her friend, Akhtar wrote that Amiya was known to spend time visiting temples and was known to

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[102] Yasmin Saikia, "Strangers, Friends and Peace: The Women's World of Abdullah Hall, Aligarh Muslim University" pp. 275-308, in *Women and Peace in the Islamic World: Gender Agency and Influence*, editors Yasmin Saikia and Chad Haines (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

[103] Many elite families practiced *purdah*, or seclusion, where the women were confined to the home and only allowed to interact with certain family and relatives.

[104] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 71; Hamida Khanam, *Jhara Bokuler Gondho (*Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 2001), 58.

carry *thakur*s [idols] with her.[105] Jahanara and Amiya and their particular forms of religiosity must have been unusual for Akhtar and Hamida to have singled out their religious observances as anomalies at Bethune.

For others, schools opened their eyes to the religious diversity of the region as they became aware of their own identities. In her memoir, *Smriti* [Memories], Rahmat Ara Hossain, later Principal of Eden College, narrated her experiences in primary school in the 1930s at St. Xavier's in Dacca, a Christian school where she learned all the Christian prayers.[106] She wrote that she did not realize she was Muslim until her older sister told her later. Although she was aware of her religious background by the time she went to Eden college in the 1940s, the primary social circle she encountered and moved among in educational sites was almost entirely non-Muslim. This was highlighted in her memoir of her college days when she mentioned her friend Renu who was one of the only other Muslim women in college with her at Eden. She did not dwell too long on the religious identities of her classmates except to say she was one of the only Muslims in her classes, highlighting the matter-of-fact attitude these women held about their friends' religious identities.

Given the variety of religious affiliations among students at elite schools like Eden and Bethune, these settings ensured that women interacted with people not only outside of their localities, but also with those whose religious observances were different from their own. Anecdotes reveal that even within the contained spaces of schools and colleges, women's religious expressions varied and were accepted by one another as markers of difference. These differences did not preclude the formation of close-knit friendships and connections. Identity markers such as hometown, language, religion, and religiosity were not particularly significant in creating divisions. These differences were easily visible, yet rather than creating conflict, these identity markers instead

[105] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 79.
[106] Rahmat Ara Hossain, *Smriti* (Dhaka: Usha Art Press, 1996). *Smriti* translates to Memories.

served to connect women who were meeting others outside of their home communities. The close-knit school community, and especially the enclosed space of the hostel for those who were boarders, ensured that women's sociality remained diverse.

Getting over "Shyness:" Institutional Policies and Structures

Educational institutions were critical spaces in fostering sociality and friendships between women from various backgrounds through their implementation of certain policies. Eden's and Bethune's school reports from that period reveal that these institutions wanted their students to form connections that extended beyond the classroom. Hostels and dorms were the obvious sites where they could enact policies to ensure social interactions. In the 1920s, as the number of girls attending schools increased and students flocked to Dacca and Calcutta from various regions of Bengal and beyond, the need for student housing became a pressing issue. According to the Bethune College report of 1917, the school board believed women could not get an essential college education unless they had proper accommodations and a place with students and staff living together and interacting.[107] Even at the high school level, the focus on expanding hostel accommodations was as crucial as improving the curriculum. Statistics in the Eden High School reports from the years 1918-1923 show both a gradual increase in the number of girls living in hostels and an increase in course options.[108] For the first time, girls were taught subjects like first aid and hygiene. The 1920s were a critical period for expanding both the academic curriculum as well as recreational and social activities.

In the 1923 Eden School report, we see the introduction of Girl Guides who taught the students how to get over "shyness" and be "active" and "self-reliant."[109] The focus on young women

[107] *Quinquennial Report on the Bethune College For Period Ending 31st March 1917*. Page 4. British Library: IOR/ V/24/4457
[108] Eden High School Reports. British Library Reference: IOR/V/24/4462.
[109] Ibid.

as innately shy was not surprising given gendered norms of female comportment at the time, but needing "to get over it" while at schools suggested the role schools envisioned themselves playing. The introduction of Girl Guides in schools and colleges was one of several institutional policies that expanded students' interactions with each other. Kristine Alexander argues that the Girl Guides movement in the British Empire sought to emphasize "domesticity, citizenship, engagement with nature, physical culture, and imperial and international friendships" while maintaining the status quo of class and race.[110] The idea of a global sisterhood was at the forefront of the movement. The need explicitly to teach girls social skills, such as how to communicate with each other, remains crucial in understanding schools as sites that not only fostered sociality because of circumstantial access, but also through policy via the administrative structure and curriculum. Despite the prevalence of Girl Guides in both schools and colleges, the Bethune College report of 1920-21 stated that the Girl Guide movement is more "suitable to school than college."[111] This was perhaps due to the need to introduce girls to the movement and foster sociality between these young women at an earlier stage. Girl Guides' gatherings and activities were sites where Indian women were exposed to women from various backgrounds.[112] Institutional engagement with Girl Guides and the fact that institutions pushed similar forms of interactions within schools and colleges reveals the extent to which schools believed it was their goal to engender sociality. These institutions established strict rules and policies to manage student life, particularly in the dormitories as the number of hostel residents increased.

As school enrollment increased and more and more elite families felt pressured to send their girls to schools, institutions worked to ensure schools were seen as sites of respectability, especially

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[110] Kristine Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 6.
[111] *Annual Report of the Bethune College for the year 1920-1921*. British Library: IOR/ V/24/4457.
[112] Hasna Saha, "Trauma & Triumph" in *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India*, ed Ritu Menon (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004). Hasna says that the only reason she has many Muslim friends despite growing up in a Hindu family is due to her participation in Girl Guides.

as educated women sought roles in the public sphere. Geraldine Forbes argues that education changed Indian women's lives and enabled many of them to take an active part in public life for the first time.[113] Access to education was the domain of the privileged few, but the women who were provided higher education were still expected by society to follow gendered norms of the time. Getting an education outside of the house and entering the "public" meant that women had to navigate how to maintain femininity in a new sphere. As Malavika Karlekar argues in her research on Bengali women's autobiographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, education was important in reinforcing ideals of duty and domesticity.[114] Educational institutions walked a fine line in pushing ideals of "modern girls" though programs like Girl Guides and conforming to Indian class sentiments of gendered expectations.[115] The struggle to increase female enrollment in schools meant that institutions and educators often had to convince parents that these were respectable spaces. For parents afraid of their daughters becoming opinionated and independent –indeed, unfeminine –these settings had to prove that education was important, and women would have proper supervision.

Through an emphasis on strict schedules, schools emphasized their roles in shaping how women conducted themselves both in and out of institutions. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when women were moving from the private spheres of the home to the public in settings like colleges and universities, the discipline taught at these institutions allowed for women to occupy public spaces. These institutions were intent on making sure that female students used time efficiently. When writing of everyday life at Bethune, Akhtar Imam described life in Bethune hostel as one where everything was regulated by the clock, writing that, "The bell rang every morning to

[113] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*.
[114] Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Narratives of Bengali Women*, 190.
[115] Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls*. She argues that the Girl Guides were concerned with the "Modern Girl" and making sure that it translated to what were expected from adolescents throughout the British Empire.

wake us up. Then, it rang once each for breakfast, shower, getting dressed, and for food. We would do one thing after another like a machine. After eating, we would head to the college. Classes would start promptly at ten."[116] She mentioned living like a machine dependent on the clock, where the rules were strictly followed. For instance, she conveyed that none of the students could be in their own bedroom unless it was specifically time for rest and sleep. When instructed to be in certain spaces, whether for classes or meals, students learned that women do not waste time unnecessarily in their rooms alone. The friendships and connections that flourished under such conditions were not only sanctioned by the school but seen as proper decorum for how women should conduct themselves. While creating conditions for the students to interact and share everyday spaces, institutions like Bethune ensured that parents and students knew that time at school was always accounted for and not to be wasted on frivolousness. Even though these students knew that living and studying at college and university was a privilege, the institutions ensured that everything that happened inside still maintained proper decorum and enforced control of women's free time. After all, if women were to take part in the public sphere, they needed to prove that they preserved respectability as they did in the private spheres of the home.

Institutional efforts to nurture sociality among students saw fruition in the dormitory halls and hostels. During the 1920s, a rapid increase in enrollment created a need for more student accommodations. Dormitory halls became critical sites of sociality and everyday interaction with other women. In a recent article, historian Yasmin Saikia argues that women's friendships inside Abdullah Hall, the women's hall of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), were an important aspect of the experience of being university students. Residential halls at AMU "served as intimate spaces for the cultivation of individual students and the ethos of friendship for building a moral Muslim

[116] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 45.

community," she writes.[117] Saikia argues that universities like AMU intentionally created opportunities for "sociability" through structured mealtimes and weekend activities like "visiting" when students could leave the school site to get ice cream or tea. She maintains that friendships were fostered through "face-to-face exchange" since the hall itself emphasized shared activities. Akhtar and others shared similar sentiments of looking forward to meals and teatime to catch up with friends and classmates. Given the proximity and the routine of hostel life, residential halls were sites where institutional policies of constructing sociality proved most fruitful.

For women who lived in college hostels, the intimate settings created bonds that not only provided them with support, but also a network of women who later became part of a social community. Hamida Khanam first toured Bethune before enrolling and later recounted that the visit revealed to her a very social atmosphere when she was asked to sing with current students.[118] When she enrolled as a student, singing became a part of her identity at Bethune. When Akhtar Imam mentioned Hamida as her junior at college, she wrote that she remembered Hamida for her singing.[119] Schools normalized certain activities for women in these enclosed spaces which allowed women to bond within the parameters of the institutions.

Akhtar Imam's pictures of classmates and close friends revealed an intimate relationship between women that was possible only in the dormitories of their college. Without the supervision of their family, these women enjoyed newfound freedom to intermingle and formed into an intimate collective of women. In her chapter on her life as a student at Bethune, she included numerous pictures with the five women whom she was closest to: Pushpo, Jahanara, Amiya, Savitri, and Kalyani.[120] These pictures were of them holding each other or wrapping their arms around each

[117] Saikia, "Strangers, Friends and Peace: The Women's World of Abdullah Hall," 276.
[118] Hamida Khanam, *Jhara Bokuler Gondhu*, 49
[119] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 63.
[120] Ibid.

other in an intimate manner. They were posing for the camera, but the friendly arms around each other and the closeness of their bodies suggested intimacy. The poses were extremely affectionate and reveal an attachment that was beyond that of acquaintances. Given the nature of life in women's hostels, homosocial interactions were the primary form of sociality. Female friendships in these homosocial sites provided young women with a sense of comfort and everyday support that previously would solely come from the family. In a way then, social interactions allowed women to create their "chosen" families in sites like schools and colleges. Throughout her memoir, Akhtar incorporated photographs of family and her life, but the chapter on Bethune was the one chapter in which she included pictures of her friends. There was no mention of who took these photographs or what, if any occasion, was the reason for these photos, but these women meant enough for her to have mentioned them in detail and have held onto the pictures she had with them. She often used the word "unforgettable" when describing the friendships she formed living in Bethune's hostels.

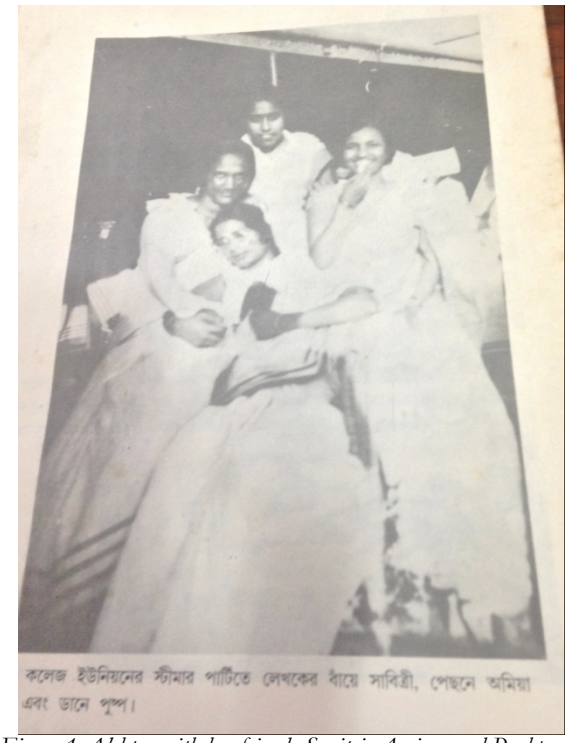


Figure 1 Akhtar with her friends Savitri, Amiya, and Pushpo

The images from Akhtar's memoir highlighted the importance of female friendships during college days. The women's faces were primarily full of joy and comfort. Looking at Figure 1 (above), what stands out are their happy faces, as well as the look of mischief on one friend's face, as if they were sharing an inside joke among themselves, even as they were posing for the camera. Akhtar, literally lying on top of her friends in the middle, looks relaxed and carefree, as if these sorts of intimate poses were common among their friends' group. In Figure 1, Akhtar was the only Muslim among the friends, but there seems to be no distance in the women's body language in terms of

comfort levels. The physical affection displayed seems to cut across religious differences, highlighting the strength and closeness of these college friendships. Figures 2 and 3 feature Akhtar with either one or two friends, rather than all her college friends as a group. It is not very clear from her memoir if all the girls were equally close to each other, but she seems to have cultivated close relationships with the five women she repeatedly mentioned, as shown by her inclusion of their pictures in the book. Figure 2 shows Akhtar leaning her head onto Pushpo's body while Figure 3 displays Jahanara leaning her head onto Akhtar's body. Given the fact that these women are not connected through their families, their bodily connections and intimacy appear to have provided them with a makeshift "family" at college. These friendships were certainly complex and layered, which provided women with bonds that were still important enough to recount decades later.



Figure 2 Akhtar with Pushpo

For most women who lived in hostels, being in a new place, often a new city, generated the ideal circumstances for friendships to flourish. Akhtar wrote that living at Bethune hostel was the first time she lived outside of her home. Before moving to Calcutta for college, she was a student at Eden High School where she commuted from home. She moved to Bethune because it offered courses she could not get in Dacca, yet she was anxious about leaving home. Anxiety played a critical role in shaping and creating friendships



Figure 3 Akhtar with Jahanara, and on the side, Savitri

among women in dorm settings.[121] Coming from all over India, these women did not always share the same language or identities, but the anxiety of being away from home forced them to think about the strangers in their lives as potential friends. Hamida mentioned that her parents were worried about her living alone, but she enjoyed life at Bethune hostel because everyone was friendly.[122] She explicitly wrote that everyone got along so well that she could not even tell what caste her classmates identified with, which, given the centrality of caste identities among some Bengalis, speaks to these women focusing on similarities rather than differences. Being away from familiarity, and having no choice but to interact with other women, produced friendships that helped make their lives in the hostels easier. She chose to remember and write about her school days in this manner decades later, long after India has been partitioned and Bangladesh was created. Was Bethune truly as cosmopolitan and welcoming as Akhtar and Hamida tell us, or is this simply a nostalgic idea of a place where the women first lived away from home? The anxiety and fear of being away from home makes sense, but these women choose to dwell on the opportunities and camaraderie of college rather than their fears. Both Akhtar and Hamida later worked as educators in Dacca, so it is not surprising that their memoirs extolled the benefits of education for women. Given such biases, it was easy to highlight all the positive aspects of schools and colleges. Nevertheless, it should not take away from the facts that women chose to remember and highlight their college days as spaces where friendships easily flourished.

Shared Passions and Interests

Educational settings allowed women to bond over their shared passions and interests. For some women, they recognized their positions as a rare minority studying a certain subject or field.

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[121] Saikia cites anxiety as reason for why the women at AMU opened up to each other. Saikia, "Strangers, Friends and Peace: The Women's World of Abdullah Hall."
[122] Hamida Khanam, *Jhara Bokuler Gondhu.*

Akhtar introduced her friend Pushpo as the only other girl studying Philosophy. They bonded over their shared interest, but also became friends over time. Many of the women who spoke about their school days in the 1940s and 1950s often talked of people in their *batch* [year], highlighting that some studied in the same field as them while others did not. They stressed their gratitude to friends for the support, encouragement, and camaraderie they found while experimenting in new subjects or activities.

Outside of classes, women were introduced to other academic interests by their friends and classmates. In her memoir, *Fire Dekha* [Looking Back], Chobi Basu wrote about attending Victoria College in Calcutta in the 1940s.[123] She mentioned her school friend Sukumari Dutt (later Bhattacharya), the prominent Sanskritist, with whom she used to exchange letters. In these letters, Chobi and Sukumari compared notes on the books they were reading. Chobi emphasized that before becoming friends with Sukumari, she was not as familiar with English literature. It was not uncommon for women to credit their school friends and classmates with introducing them to new interests.

While academic interests were an obvious shared passion for many women, their shared activities expanded beyond studies. Schools and colleges provided women opportunities to participate in new sports and other recreational activities. Schools actively encouraged physical education. Bethune College increased the sports and activities it offered from the 1920s to the 1930s. Badminton was a favorite. Almost all my subjects who discussed extracurricular activities, whether in memoirs or oral histories, mentioned badminton. Some girls played badminton at *tiffin* [lunch] time because of time constraints.[124] Suparna Bhattacharya's research on Bethune's physical education shows that initially the school offered sports to the girls for the sole purpose of gaining

[123] Chobi Basu, *Fire Dekha* (Stree: Kolkata, 2004), 32.
[124] Suparna Ghosh Bhattacharya, "Physical Education in the Curriculum: The Case Study of Bethune College" in *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 no. 12 (2009): 1855.

social skills, confidence, discipline, and training.[125] Sport, though, was also an important leisure activity, which, given the schools' schedule, was more accessible to boarders.[126] Some of the women grew up in progressive families where they were exposed to such activities, but for most, educational settings were the first time they participated in athletics of any kind.

In a memorable passage in Akhtar Imam's chapter on Bethune, she discussed how the students used to play many kinds of games from basketball to volleyball to tennis. Akhtar wrote that the students got immense joy from playing different things and when thinking about all those activities, she could not help but think of her friend Jahanara, who fell passionately in love with tennis and developed a great "affection" for the sport.[127] Akhtar described Jahanara's interest in tennis in such an unusual way, using a word like "affection," but explains why she was surprised at Jahanara's interest. As a religious person, Jahanara used to cover her hair with a veil at all places, but even she could not stay away from the allure of playing tennis with her friends, despite how difficult it was for her to keep her hair covered. For women like Jahanara then, an introduction to tennis helped her to take part in something she might never have done outside of Bethune. Seeing her friends play made Jahanara want to participate and try this activity that was new to her. The companionship of friends in discovering new interests was a part of the homosocial sphere of hostels. Colleges allowed women to develop and try out new interests without fear of being rebuked or experiencing familial pressure to limit certain activities. I argue that the encouragement of friends as well as the easy access to others willing to participate in new activities are significant factors in why women later recall school days with nostalgia and as a site of freedom from familial obligations. Akhtar's happy memories of shared activities with friends highlighted the nostalgia many women felt when thinking of their time at school and college, perhaps because life often left women with little

[125] Bhattacharya, "Physical Education in the Curriculum," 1855.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 44.

leisure time after their education was completed and they were married. Akhtar, for instance, following her education at Bethune got married and then within a few years, lost her husband when she was only twenty-five years old and was left to raise three daughters. In many ways then, schools and colleges provided women with opportunities for intermingling and sociality that were later difficult to come by.

In addition to sports, most schools in Bengal held cultural shows and productions that introduced students to the rich cultural traditions of the region, particularly its strength in music. As mentioned earlier, Hamida Khanam shared her joy of singing with fellow classmates. Many others expressed similar nostalgia of their school days in allowing them to establish and develop new interests. Eva Guha (1915-1999) became immersed in music as a student at Gokhale Girls' Memorial School in Calcutta in the 1920s, and later held gatherings for friends at her house.[128] Her love of sitar and Bengali song remained a critical part of her life, even though she was never encouraged to perform in public. Sharing these activities with other women who shared their interests was an important outlet for women whose families did not encourage them to have professional careers in the arts. Another woman I interviewed, Hamida Haq (b. 1943), did become an artist, but she discovered her love of performing and singing in public when she first performed with students and teachers in grade school in Dacca.[129] She went on to eventually perform during college and later, until giving it up to start a family. During an interview, she insisted that her closest friends are still those who she once performed with in school and college. These sites gave her the confidence and opportunity to try new things and form intimate connections with others who shared similar passions. Shared passions and recreational interests nurtured connections and friendships amongst Bengal's women during their schooling.

[128] Interview with Kumkum Moitra about her mother Eva Guha. She shared a newspaper clipping of her mother singing in public in 1927. Personal Interview. Kolkata, January 26, 2017.
[129] Interview with Hamida Haq. Personal Interview. Dhaka, October 22, 2017.

Political Activism

Revolutionary women of Bengal in the 1920s and 1930s

In the context of colonial rule and oppressive governments, educational settings inadvertently introduced women to political activism. If educational sites expanded students' opportunity for sociality through artistic programs, sports, and physical education, students' shared fervor for anti-British causes during the height of the anti-colonial movements of the 1920s and 1930s led them to organize and rise against their common enemy. Politics was another shared activity among friends in colleges. Educated women gained awareness of their political situation and joined other students' efforts to challenge imperial rule. Bengal was exceptional in Indian history in that most women who joined revolutionary and armed organizations against British colonial rule were students. The famous young female revolutionaries of Bengal—Kalyani Das, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutt, and Pritilata Waddader—were all students at Bethune College in the 1920s and 1930s. Existing historiography on revolutionary women emphasizes their actions as a form of "revolutionary terrorism," their conflicts with Gandhian non-violence, and their participation in the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century.[130] This scholarship also highlights the role of familial and male influence as explanations for why these women joined revolutionary struggles. Building on this existing historiography, I argue that in addition to familial influences, friendships in schools and colleges were a significant source of empowerment that drew women to activism." Women's colleges unintentionally became places where students gained political awareness and cultivated connections based on their shared rejection of colonial rule. I argue that friendships in

[130] See Peter Heehs, *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism: Essays in Modern Indian History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sandip Bandyopadhyay, "Women in the Bengal Revolutionary Movement (1902-1935)" *Manushi* 65 (July-August 1991): 30-35.; Durba Ghosh, "Revolutionary Women and Nationalist Heroes in Bengal, 1930 to the 1980s' in *Gender & History* 25 no. 2 (August 2013): 355–375; Durba Ghosh "Gandhi and the Terrorists: Revolutionary Challenges from Bengal and Engagements with Non-Violent Political Protest," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39 no. 3 (2016): 560-576.

schools and colleges also empowered and propelled women to become activists. Student-led initiatives were essential in furthering intimate connections and played a critical role in bringing women together. Kalyani Das, later Bhattacharjee (1907-1983), was one of the founders of the *Chhatri Sangha* [Association of Female Students], a revolutionary student group in Calcutta formed on the grounds of Bethune College in 1928. Leela Nag, later Roy, had earlier created the *Dipali Sangha* in Dacca in 1923, which offered many things that Chhatri Sangha went on to provide young women. For present purposes, I will focus on the Chhatri Sangha in Calcutta and its ties to women's colleges to show how educational sites fueled women's revolutionary activities.

Chhatri Sangha was the most important political student group at that time for young women. It was a significant training and recruiting ground for future female revolutionaries. It became the premier organization that alerted the students to political issues, raised awareness, and provided physical training. While schools encouraged physical education as part of a varied curriculum, organizations like Chhatri Sangha offered its members physical training for self-defense. In oral history interviews, Kalyani said that despite rumors, Chhatri Sangha was not a secret group and included members from numerous girls' educational institutions.[131] Young women from schools like Brahmo Girls' school, Victoria School, Diocesan College, and Scottish Church College all joined Bethune students in membership. The members organized study circles, motor driving, airplane training, swimming, and participated in *lathi* [stick/club] play and fencing. Just as other women discussed their classmates in terms of their regional identities, Kalyani stated in interviews that girls from Chittagong were also members, citing Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutt, and her sister Bina Das. Kalyani said that young women did not just join Chhatri Sangha and learn defensive tactics because their brothers were party members. Rather, the time was ripe for women to be in the

[131] Kalyani Bhattacharjee (formerly Das). Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Oral History Transcript. Also see Kalyani Bhattacharjee and Bina Das file in the Forbes Collection, British Library.

movement.[132] This peer-led student movement points to the role of women's connections in encouraging women's activism.

Many of the students involved in Chhatri Sangha maintained their connections and associations with revolutionary activities once they left college. Chhatri Sangha developed close links with Dinesh Majumdar, a Calcutta revolutionary organizer who was well-known for his involvement in various "terrorist" activities against the British in the 1930s.[133] Kalyani Das mentioned that she learned lathi and sword play from Dinesh Majumdar, which shows that women relied heavily on bonds created through group training. Kalyani's Chhatri Sangha played a critical role in creating future revolutionaries. When Mohandas Gandhi called for civil disobedience in 1930, Kalyani led the students of Chhatri Sangha in a demonstration outside of Bethune College.[134] She was arrested several times for her involvement in anti-British activities, including for leading a protest of students against the Governor-General of India in 1931 at Hazra Park in Calcutta.[135] Her sister, Bina Das (1911-1986), also credited her own involvement with Chhatri Sangha as the beginning of her political activism.

Chhatri Sangha and Bethune students took part in the Simon Commission Boycott in 1928, a watershed moment for many young women. The Simon Commission was appointed by the British Parliament in 1927 to review the constitutional progress of reforms created by the Government of India Act of 1919 and to suggest and implement new reforms. The commission, led by Sir John Allsebrook Simon, arrived in India in January 1928. The team was composed solely of British officials who were to determine India's constitutional future. Indians strongly opposed the Commission for its lack of Indian representation. When the Commission landed in India, it was met

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[132] Ibid.
[133] Bandyopadhyay, "Women in the Bengal Revolutionary Movement (1902-1935)," 30-35.
[134] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 138.
[135] Kalyani Bhattacharjee and Bina Das File in the Geraldine Forbes Collection, British Library.

with numerous protests across India, and Bengal was no exception. Anti-colonial leaders called for a general *hartal* [strike] the day the Commission arrived, and students were asked to participate.

The Simon Commission boycott in Bethune highlighted the importance of students foregrounding their solidarity with each other in the name of patriotism and student camaraderie. The Director of Public Instructions asked that Bethune College, being a government institution, be kept open the day of the protest.[136] On the day, non-residential students did not attend so the Principal, Miss Wright, decided to hold classes with hostel students only. The hostel students, however, refused to attend classes, so Miss Wright informed the Director of Public Instructions and threatened the hostel students with suspension. In response, the full student body started a protest movement, which was supported by Bengali anti-colonial leader Subhas Chandra Bose and became a matter of public concern.[137] Bina Das, a first-year student, and Ela Sen, a third-year student, led the student protest movement. The Bethune College archives still hold the letter with the names and signatures of all first and third-year students who stood in support of the protest. The students wrote a letter asking that the residents of no single hostel be punished, saying that "we beg to state that hartal on that day was observed by the whole College as a body" and that all the students stand in solidarity as Indians demanding self-respect.[138] The students banded together in support of one another, ironically fulfilling the school's efforts to produce cohesive relationships amongst its student population. Given such strong pressure from within and outside the college, the Principal eventually withdrew the order of suspension and she herself was fired by the Director of Public Instructions. Student solidarity and their ties of friendships and patriotism won the day.

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[136] Uttara Chakraborty, *The Rattling Chains: Bina Das, A Woman in Revolutio*n. Kolkata: School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2017.
[137] Ibid., 3.
[138] "Appendix IV: Figure 6.1 and 6.2" in Chakraborty, *The Rattling Chains: Bina Das, A Woman in Revolutio*n, 35.

Bina Das mentioned the Simon Commission boycott of 1928 in her memoir as a significant event in her life.[139] She wrote her memoir, *Srinkhal Jhankar* [Rattling Chains] in a hurried month in July-August 1947, just days before India's independence. She was in her thirties and had survived years in prison for her anti-colonial activity, so the focus was mostly on her childhood, days in jail, and her school days. As a revolutionary who gained notoriety for standing up against colonial rule, Bina knew she had an audience who wanted to hear how she became a heroic figure. This might explain her memoir's focus on childhood and the journey that led her to jail. She emphasized that student organizations were important in volunteering for the freedom movement and bringing about change. She, like many other revolutionary women, was adamant that the support and camaraderie of other women and classmates was a critical source of support. She wrote that her friend Suhasini, from her class, asked her if she wanted to do "real work" instead of making superficial efforts against the British. Feeling moved and inspired by her friend, she quickly set on joining the revolutionaries. Therefore, she and Suhasini spent hours in secret discussions of how to obtain freedom from foreign rule.[140] Bethune soon became an unsafe place for the young revolutionary because of constant scrutiny by the colonial government. The government sent regular queries about the girls to the new Principal. Bina passed her Matriculation Exams in 1927 and her Intermediate Examinations in 1929 from Bethune School and College before shifting to Diocesan College where she passed her BA Exams in 1931 with English Honors. The reason given for the move was presumably because her family moved from North to South Calcutta. However, it had the added advantage of camouflaging her political activities since Diocesan was seen as a harmless school run by the Clewar Community missionaries.[141]

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[139] Bina Das, Translated from Bengali by Dhira Dhar, *Bina Das: A Memoir* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010).
[140] Ibid.
[141] Chakraborty, *The Rattling Chains: Bina Das,* 6.

The irony of her moving to a harmless school meant that her greatest revolutionary action came as a total surprise. Bina Das is known in India for her attempted assassination of Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson on February 6, 1932, while he was giving a speech at the University of Calcutta's Convocation, where she was one of the recipient awardees. She was sitting with her friends from Diocesan College when she fired six shots at him.[142] She had acquired the weapon from a friend. She was only twenty-one years old at that time. The Governor moved out of the way and all the shots missed him. Government records of the event, including Bina's statement before the Special Tribunal of the Calcutta High Court showed her willingness to maintain secrecy and despite numerous queries, her refusal to name the person who provided her with the weapon.[143] Her allegiance to her friends and country triumphed over avoiding prison.

Indian and British officials were shocked that another young woman took part in "terrorism." Just months before, on December 14, 1931, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Choudhury, two Bengali schoolgirls in class seven and eight, had shot the Magistrate of Comilla.[144] Bina Das's assassination attempt in Bengal's largest metropolis led to an emergency meeting of government officials. The Bengal Legislative Council met in Calcutta on February 15, 1932, to discuss the aftermath of Bina Das's murder attempt. In their discussions, several members congratulated the Governor for the escape from the attack, while others, such as Babu Jatindranath Basu spoke of his disbelief at Bina's actions.[145] Basu stated that "it is a matter of deep anxiety that terrorism now finds its recruits not from habitually criminal classes, but from amongst young men and women, who lay claim to modern education and culture."[146] Indian and British officials viewed education as a way to

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Akhil Chandra Nandy, "Girls in India's Freedom Struggle," *The Patrika Sunday Magazine* (September 2, 1973). Clippings in the Geraldine Forbes Collection, British Library. MSS EUR F341/165.
[145] "Appendix VI: Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council Assembled under the Provisions of the Government of India Act" in Chakraborty, *The Rattling Chains: Bina Das,* 44-72.
[146] Ibid., 46.

mold women into being "cultured" while maintaining "traditional" gender roles of the ideal Indian woman.[147] This notion that educated women should know better than to engage in patriotic and "criminal" activity, points to what some Indian male reformers, British officials, and by extension, government educational institutions, envisioned women's roles to be. Basu further argued that "the participation of women and girls in such criminal endeavours has caused widespread pain and amazement in this country in which in the past all that is best and noblest in the life of the people has to a great extent been kept alive and encouraged by the supreme kindliness and generosity of nature of our womankind."[148] Women were expected to be kind and generous, rather than take part in revolutionary activities against the colonial state.

Despite the outrage the assassination attempt caused, Bina Das barely mentioned it in her memoir, choosing instead to focus on the inmates she became close to while in jail and the friendships that made her life in prison bearable. The fact that she skipped over the event for which she gained notoriety is surprising. Rather than giving political activism importance, she highlighted the people who inspired her before the event and shaped her everyday life while she was imprisoned. While activism was certainty important in Bina's life, she recognized that the people she met through that journey were her most meaningful connections. Bina wrote fondly of her close friendship with Shanti and Suniti, saying that the three became the best of friends in Midnapur jail.[149] Given how the three young women had become politicized while in school, they continued their activism in jail. Bina wrote that the three went on a hunger strike against an abusive jailer who was then eventually removed.[150] These women gained strength from female friendships to become

[147] The debates on what the "traditional" gender norms for colonial Indian women were quite extensive. For just a few views, see Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989); Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, nationalism, and colonialized women: the contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989); and especially Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," In *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).
[148] "Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council", 46.
[149] Bina Das, *Bina Das: A Memoir,* 29-34.
[150] Ibid., 33-34.

activists in the first place; and in the confinement of prison, they formed new bonds with other revolutionary women reminiscent of the friendships of their school days. Bina wrote that fellow prisoners were like "sisters or boudi; some were aunts and another my grandmother."[151] Women created forms of kinship in prisons just like they had in schools, even as they referred to these women as 'friends' elsewhere in their writings.

These relationships in the women's ward in prison helped women keep up their spirits as well as form life-long connections. Following her seven years in prison, Bina continued to seek out the friends who inspired her before and after she was imprisoned. She mentioned going to see her "friend and comrade" Neena's mother to console her since Neena died after she went home from jail.[152] Bina described Neena as someone who "was bursting with vigour and joyful enthusiasm. She was extraordinary in her capacity to spread joy all around her. Whenever Neena was by my side, the jail became a happy place."[153] Political activists like Bina Das could have used their memoirs to highlight their own heroics, but instead many chose to center friends and fellow activists. Bina's focus on the people, mostly the women with whom she shared her revolutionary life, reveals the necessity of peer interactions in helping these young women conduct daring acts.

Bina cited the actions of young Bengalis during the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 as a peer-led incident that influenced her choices. This citation further stresses that female friendships and other revolutionary peers were vital for students' political activism. The Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 was the first of many violent episodes in Bengal in which young women participated, beginning with Kalpana Dutt's involvement in Chittagong in the aftermath of the Raid.[154] The Chittagong Armoury Raid was an attempt by armed independent Indian revolutionary fighters on

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[151] Ibid., 30.
[152] Ibid., 46-47.
[153] Ibid., 46.
[154] Durba Ghosh, "Revolutionary Women and Nationalist Heroes in Bengal, 1930 to the 1980s" in *Gender & History,* 25 no. 2 (August 2013): 355–375.

April 18, 1930, to raid the armory of the police and auxiliary forces in Chittagong, a region in eastern Bengal. Bina Das's mention of the Chittagong Armoury Raid was tied to the women who participated in the event. Bina certainly knew many of the women who participated in anti-colonial activities through her revolutionary networks. Two of those women, Kalpana Dutt and Pritilata Waddedar, were also Bethune alumnae and from Chittagong, just like Bina herself.

Kalpana Dutt (1913-1995) came to Bethune after completing her matriculation exams in Chittagong. She was a member of the Chhatri Sangha at Bethune, although her time at Bethune was very short. She stayed in Bethune for one year before requesting a transfer to Chittagong. In her memoir, Kalpana wrote that the government surveillance of Bethune students made it difficult to be involved in the anti-colonial movement.[155] Written in 1945, her reminiscences of the Armoury Raid of 1930 described various figures active in the revolutionary movements. Although her recollections were mostly concerned with the raid, what stood out was the focus on the various people who participated in revolutionary activities rather than any personal and autobiographical information about herself. Kalpana wrote about the men who were central to the raid as well as the women who participated in the underground movement. As a young woman involved in political activism, perhaps Kalpana wanted to ensure that people knew about the event and the people involved, rather than about her own life. Written a few years before Indian independence, Kalpana was trying to reach an audience that was either strongly anti-colonial, or teach younger generation of students about a successful raid that was led by young people, giving them hope and an example of anti-colonial activity. Kalpana's memoir, like Bina's, highlighted the influence of fellow student revolutionaries in providing inspiration and support.

[155] Kalpana Dutt, *Chittagong Armoury Raiders Reminiscences* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1979) (first edition 1945).

One of the people Kalpana wrote about was the young revolutionary Pritilata Waddedar (1911-1932). Priti, as she was known to Kalpana, was "a close friend" from childhood. They went to school together and used to play badminton when Pritilata was a class ahead of Kalpana in Chittagong. Kalpana wrote that when they were in school, around class five or so, they realized that younger girls had to give up the courts to the older girls after school, so she and Pritilata used to play in the "burning sun during the tiffin recess."[156] Given that Pritilata was the only other girl who would play at that time, they quickly became best friends. Kalpana said that the girls took part in Girl Guides to learn the methods of the other (British) side. Even at an early age, the two girls were thinking about their roles as Indians in an imperial setting. They bonded over their awareness of the injustice of being subjects of the British Empire. The two friends took their exams around the same time and planned to go to college for their IA degrees, but Kalpana ended up in Calcutta while Pritilata went to Eden in Dacca. While Kalpana joined Chhatri Sangha in Calcutta, Pritilata joined Deepali Sangh in Dacca, and both girls learned lathi and swordplay in college. After graduating from Eden College in 1930, Pritilata followed Kalpana to Bethune for her BA, where she also became a member of the Chhatri Sangha. Both Kalpana and Pritilata moved back to Chittagong after college: Kalpana went to work in anti-British activities and Pritilata worked as a teacher.

A friendship that began in schools culminated with the two sharing a life on the run. Kalpana and Pritilata were both involved in revolutionary "terrorist" activities in Chittagong together. They both worked with Masterda Surya Sen, the mastermind behind the Armoury Raid of 1930. In September 1932, Sen planned to attack the Pahartali European Club at Chittagong, which allegedly had a sign that said, "Dogs and Indians Not Allowed."[157] Sen entrusted Kalpana and Pritilata with a plan to attack the club and to capture British officials, but Kalpana was arrested a few

[156] Ibid., 46.
[157] "80th death anniversary of Pritilata observed." *New Age.* 25 July 2013.

days before the planned attack, so Pritilata had to carry it out without Kalpana on September 23. That night, the group went to the club and fired shots, but the few police officers at the club also started shooting and Pritilata was wounded by a bullet. The group quickly escaped but were on the verge of being caught by the police. Pritilata Waddedar died on September 24, 1932, a few yards away from the Club by taking potassium cyanide rather than giving herself up to the police. She was only twenty-one years old. In her writing, Kalpana described Priti as the first woman to have died in action for the anti-colonial cause.

Given Pritilata's prominence as a martyr for the anti-colonial cause, made much more significant due to her being a woman, Kalpana's emphasis on Priti was a way of her connecting herself with someone heroic. Their friendship began in their school days, but that connection continued long after and was crucial in helping them become two of only four female leaders in Surya Sen's group. In her reminiscences, Kalpana wrote fondly of Pritilata and the time they spent trying to undermine the British. Kalpana said she and Pritilata used to discuss strategies together in Pritilata's room when she used to visit her home.[158] The connections created by these young women forever linked their names in association with the revolutionary heroes of Bengal. These female revolutionaries who met and were inspired by each other demonstrate the centrality of female friendships in facilitating their passions and quest for justice even after their school days were over.

The Language Movement of the 1950s

Educational sites continued to be conduits of women's interactions and peer-led student activism even after the British left India. This is exemplified in the events of the 1950s in East Bengal.[159] For many Bengali Muslim women, the Language Movement of the 1950s was one of the

[158] Dutt, *Chittagong Armoury Raiders Reminiscences*, 51.
[159] In 1947, Bengal was partitioned and its eastern part became the Bengal province of Pakistan. Its western portion became the province of West Bengal in India. In the few years after East Bengal became a part of Pakistan as East

first times they participated in mass public demonstrations and strikes. After the Partition of 1947, Bengali Muslims sought to gain political influence in the Pakistani government through their fight to have Bengali recognized as an official state language. As early as 1948, Bengali members of local government asked that Bengali be added as an official state language since it was the mother tongue of the population of East Bengal.[160] Even in January 1952, the Pakistani government refused to accept Bengali and reiterated that Urdu would be the only state language, which led to mass student protests and strikes. Student activists decided to defy Section 144 of the criminal code—implemented by the Pakistani state—that banned meetings and processions of more than three persons. On February 21, 1952, the police fired shots at students who protested by breaking Section 144 at Dacca University, fatally injuring many.[161] The Language Movement was centered in Dacca and much has been written about student activism at Dacca University in the 1950s.[162]

Bengali women, many influenced by peer pressure, played a significant role in organizing and provided various forms of support during the Language Movement as the university space became a battleground of protest against injustice. Despite evidence of female participation, Language Movement "heroines" have garnered little recognition. A veteran of the movement has stated that women's activism was crucial in two areas: collecting funds and in attending demonstrations despite

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Pakistan, it struggled to gain recognition as an important region of Pakistan. The population of East Bengal was mostly ethnically and linguistically homogenous while West Pakistan was composed of various ethnic and linguistic groups. The government of Pakistan established Urdu as the official language of the new state. Taking Pakistan as a whole, Bengali was the mother tongue of more than half of its population. For a short period, the Pakistani government considered Bengali as one of the national languages, but only if they modified it. The government wanted Bengali to be written using the Arabic script (as Urdu was), which the Bengalis refused.

[160] Badruddin Umar, *Language Movement in East Bengal* (Dhaka: Jatiya Grontha Prakashan, 2000).

[161] UNESCO celebrates International Mother Language Day on February 21 in honor of the sacrifice made by the Bengali students for their language. It should be noted Dacca University is now known as Dhaka University. This event was critical in forcing the government to officially accept Bengali as a state language, which it did in 1956. But the grievance about language festered and contributed to calls for regional autonomy that resulted in East Pakistan's independence from Pakistan in 1971, with the creation of Bangladesh.

[162] Umar, *Language Movement in East Bengal.*

familial disapproval.[163] Women like Sufia Ahmed were critical to that project of challenging the Pakistani government while fostering a sense of sisterhood. Sufia Ahmed (1932-2020) mentioned that she was a day student at Dacca University in 1952, working on her BA degree. In an interview I conducted with her, she told me about her involvement in the protest and that despite being a day-scholar, she was friends with the women who lived in hostels who also took part in the student protest.[164] In another interview, Sufia stated that she joined the protest on February 21st because of peer pressure, saying that she "had all these friends and they became involved in the movement and [she] also" decided that it made sense.[165] Along with her friend Shamsun Nahar, Sufia was part of the "first batch" of women who participated in the protest. There were only four women from Dacca University in the first batch who broke Section 144, and all of them were tear-gassed and lathi-charged. Students at Eden College also took part in the strikes and protests.[166] Sufia reiterated this in her interview when she mentions that there were two girls from Eden who were also in the "first batch" of women who faced police brutality.[167] Sufia became involved in activism due to her friendships with some of the other student protesters. Her bonds with her college friends and her conviction in the cause created an opportunity for her to become an activist against unjust laws and policies. Women participated in activism due to the influence of their friendships with others who actively took part in politics.

In the 1950s, despite its distance from the center of events in Dacca, Chittagong also became a site of student activism. Jowshan Ara Rahman, in her memoir, *An Unknown Woman* (2016), wrote

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[163] Kamrul Hasan, "Do Language Movement heroines get the recognition they deserve?" *Dhaka Tribune* (February 21, 2018). Accessed December 10, 2018. < https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/02/21/language-movement-heroines-get-recognition-deserve> He answers the title question as a definite 'no'

[164] Sufia Ahmed. Personal Interview. Dhaka, December 17, 2017. Sufia was selected the first female National Professor of Bangladesh in 1994. She was a well-known professor of Islamic History at Dhaka University until her retirement.

[165] Ahmed, Sufia. "Bengal Cultural Heritage: Visualizing Oral Histories." Interview by Iftekhar Iqbal. Tufts University. October 23, 2009. Retrieved December 11, 2018.

[166] Umar, *Language Movement in East Bengal*, 69.

[167] Ahmed, Sufia. "Bengal Cultural Heritage: Visualizing Oral Histories." Interview by Iftekhar Iqbal.

about her college days there. Her memoir, primarily written from 1999-2003 in Bengali after her grandson told her to write down some of the stories she was sharing with him, was based upon diaries she kept from her childhood days. Jowshan later translated her memoir into English, because, as her American editor friend writes, it allows us to see how women of Jowshan's generation established themselves both personally and professionally in a male-dominated society.[168] While Jowshan's adulthood as described in her memoir indeed shows her struggles as a professional woman, her childhood and college days revealed the significance of women's involvement in social and political causes. Jowshan's memoir shows that even though they were not in Dacca, the protests in Chittagong in the 1950s were also an important part of student activism.[169] She wrote about Halima Khatun, whom she called her closest friend. Halima was one of the women who lead the student protest and is remembered today for her part in mobilizing students, breaking government curfew, and being baton-beaten and tear-gassed.[170] The attention to these ties of friendships stress two things: one, that women were active participants in these movements, and two, that women recalled political activism as entwined with ties of friendship.

Educational institutions may not have wanted female students to become political activists, but they allowed women to gather support and recruit other women for their political causes in spaces that were supposed to be primarily sites of learning. One of the forgotten student activists of the 1950s was Protibha Mutsuddy (b. 1935). In an interview, she discussed her student activism in Chittagong during the Language Movement as one of the first times she engaged in public

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[168] See "Editor's Note" in Jowshan Ara Rahman, *An Unknown Woman: Memoir,* edited by Marianne Scholte (Dhaka: Yukta, 2016).
[169] Jowshan Ara Rahman, *An Unknown Woman: Memoir* (Dhaka: Yukta, 2016).
[170] Audity Falguni, "His-story vs Her-Story" *The Star*, Vol 9, Issue 9 (February 26, 2010). Accessed November 29, 2018. <http://archive.thedailystar.net/magazine/2010/02/04/special_feature.htm> This article looks at several forgotten women who were active participants in the 1952 Language Movement.

demonstrations.[171] She was a second-year student in Chittagong College in 1952 when protests erupted throughout East Bengal after the deaths of students in Dacca. Despite her parents' disapproval of her political activities, she joined in immediately. Here, we see the importance of the school environment in fostering interests that clashed with familial expectations. Protibha was a central figure in rallying school and college-age women into joining her in processions and marches. In her interview, she said that the boys rented a truck and a few of the women went to different girls' schools and started chanting slogans and started a demonstration. The closest school to Chittagong College was Khastagir Girls School which she had attended before college so she went there and started telling the girls there the slogan: '*beriye asho, beriye asho, rashtro bhasha Bangla chai, khuner bichar chai'* [come out, come out, we want Bangla as the state language, we want justice for the killings].[172] She said that some girls came out and started chanting with them but many did it from inside the school too. Protibha's own relationship as an alumna of the girls' school helped her relate to the students there and encouraged them to rise up. Protibha's goal was to get the word out and she accomplished that.

These incidents demonstrated the ways women interacted with other women to fight against injustice while using institutions as sites for organization and activism. Educational settings allowed them to learn about political situations and engage in demonstrations in ways that for many women would not have been possible from home. As the slogan above showed, this moment was critical in bringing women out into the public and making their voices heard. More importantly, it highlighted the significance of women organizing and encouraging other women to be activists, as they emulated their peers in schools and colleges.

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[171] Interview with Protibha Mutsuddy was conducted by a research team in May 2018, as part of Dhaka's HerStory Foundation; the author collaborated with the interviewers on developing a questionnaire and is grateful to HerStory for granting permission to use the interview here.
[172] Interview with Protibha Mutsuddy.

Beyond Education: Sociality After Student Days

Schools and colleges might have enabled connections within their halls and classes, but many social bonds that initially started in schools extended beyond these institutions. Even for those who did not stay in the hostels, the friendships engendered through school and college remained critical, as evidenced in many of the oral histories I have collected. Piyali Ray (b. 1934) talked about her friendships with Chintin Chang who was a student with her in Loreto House.[173] Loreto House was another well-known high school and college in Calcutta. Like most other girls' schools, Loreto was regionally diverse in terms of its student population. Piyali and Chintin were together for secondary education and for college, during the years 1947-54. Piyali, whose family lived in Calcutta, was a commuter, but Chintin was a boarder from Kalimpong. Although they met in school, Piyali's house became an extension of their friendship, and both girls often visited each other's families until Chintin's family moved to Hong Kong during the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Yet, unlike many school friendships, theirs continued to flourish long after they both left school, even when one moved to a different country. In her interview, Piyali said that even in 2017, they still talk on the phone frequently. Educational institutions might have enabled the start of their relationship, but their friendship continued decades later due to the strong ties that were fostered during their school days.

For some women, their school friendships have turned into family ties. Chitra Das (b. 1940) and Anuradha Datta (b. 1940) are two women who considered themselves best friends, a friendship that first flourished when both were students in Calcutta at Lady Brabourne College, from 1956-58, even though they had previously been classmates at Belltala Girls School during primary school.[174] By the time they were in college, Anuradha was the only friend who could come to Chitra's house after school because of Chitra's family's strict rules. Their friendship not only continued after

[173] Piyali Ray. Interviewed by author. Kolkata, May 20, 2017.
[174] Chitra Das and Anuradha Datta. Interviewed by author. March 4, 2017.

college, but it was their close relationship that allowed Chitra to meet Anuradha's brother Tapas and fall in love. Chitra's romantic relationship was facilitated by Anuradha, who often had to make sure letters from her brother were put in an envelope with her handwriting so that family members would not object to Chitra and Tapas's communication. Eventually, Chitra and Tapas got married, making Anuradha Chitra's sister-in-law. Lady Brabourne served as the site for their friendship to flourish, due to the frequent interactions both within college grounds and at their homes after classes ended.

Intergenerational Networks

When women wrote about their school days, they were keen to mention not only their classmates and friends, but also other women who they knew of or later met who also were alumnae of their schools. For instance, many autobiographies mentioned Pritilata Waddedar as a fellow Eden or Bethune alumna. Many students, even those who never knew her became admirers from afar and wrote of her as "one of our own." Educational institutions created an intergenerational connection among its alumnae. Outside of the physical place, they helped create sustained networks by reinforcing shared memories and values.

Educational institutions fostered friendships across communities, but also helped to consolidate certain identities. While women highlighted their friends and social circles, they also wrote extensively of other alumnae of their institutions. Akhtar Imam wrote about numerous women in her chapters focused on her life as a student in Eden School and Bethune College. For someone like Akhtar, who became a prominent educator in East Bengal, and then Bangladesh, her writings paid close attention to the Muslim students at Eden and Bethune. This is partly due to her acknowledgment that there were few Muslim women at these schools in the 1930s and 1940s. On the other hand, it also pointed to the consolidation of an educated Muslim identity with which she identified. In her chapter on her life at Eden School and College, she included a section on Muslim

women in Eden.[175] She wrote that Fazilatunessa was the first Muslim woman to get her IA from Eden in 1923, but by 1933, there were three Muslim women who were awarded the IA, including Akhtar herself. Akhtar mentioned several women who attended Eden, both around the time she went and those who were Eden graduates later. When she wrote about those women, she focused on what their degrees were in, as well as what they went on to do later in life. Not surprisingly, many of them went to work at schools and universities. Akhtar, who became a professor at Eden in the late 1940s mentioned several of her students, highlighting their achievements. Including her students' achievements was probably a marker of her pride in her students, yet there was also a sense of the Eden community and the educational progress of Bengal's Muslim population.

Women's sociality as an analytic also points to the act of how women count other women as part of their legacy, with sites like colleges as the connecting thread. Rahmat Ara Hossain wrote about her connection to Akhtar as her teacher at Eden in the late 1940s, but Akhtar wrote about Rahmat Ara as part of the greater Eden network.[176] Rahmat Ara wrote of Akhtar as a teacher who was one of the only Muslim professors at Eden. Akhtar mentioned that Rahmat Ara was only the second Muslim woman to get a degree in Mathematics from Dacca University and went on to later become a Provost of Rokeya Hall, the women's hall of Dacca University.[177] Akhtar herself was the first Provost of Rokeya Hall and she traced a lineage of students and others who followed in her footsteps. Both women, in their acknowledgment of the other person in their autobiographies, wrote of Eden women who made significant contributions as Muslim women in Bengal. As one of the first Muslim woman graduates, Akhtar might have felt compelled to recognize her compatriots. Yet, she was also perhaps drawing attention to people who later become prominent in Bangladesh, where she was writing from in the 1990s. By tracing other Muslim women who preceded them as

[175] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 30-35.
[176] Rahmat Ara Hossain, *Smriti*, 12.
[177] Akhtar Imam, *Amar Jiban Katha*, 33-34.

well as those who followed them, women like Akhtar and Rahmat pointed to the tenuous consolidation of their identity as part of the larger Muslim community of Bengal.

The current historiography looks at pioneering educated women as successes who shaped society for the better. Such is the case when schools like Bethune celebrate the impact they have had on women in South Asia.[178] Bethune's Praktani Samiti [Alumni Association] celebrated Bethune School's 150 years anniversary by publishing a volume of essays on women's education in South Asia. Most of these essays highlighted the accomplishments of their alumnae and the impact they made through their work in the spheres of women's empowerment. Yet, none of the essays tried to show the connections between various figures that allowed women to change society for the better. Given the role of the Alumni association and that it was meant to celebrate the school, one would have expected personal reminiscences of student life, but that was not found. This genre of college publication celebrating the anniversary of such an elite institution focused on the academic and societal influences of the college. Bethune also consolidated and published a collection of essays in honor of one of their former alumnae, Pritilata Waddedar, which expanded to include shifts in women's progress outside of India.[179] Both Bethune publications were very academic in nature, despite the role played by the Bethune Alumni society in producing these books. The incidents and anecdotes highlighted in this chapter show that even though education changed the lives of women, it is crucial we think about the connections they formed in these sites.

As one of the first educational institution for women in Bengal, Bethune was able to focus on the impact they have had on women not only in Bengal, but all over India and abroad. This was not the case for smaller colleges like Lady Brabourne College. Lady Brabourne College was established in 1939 in Calcutta to meet the growing need to educate Muslim women in India. It was

[178] *Education and Empowerment: Women in South Asia* (Bethune School Praktani Samiti: Calcutta, 2001).
[179] Simonti Sen, Ed., *They Dared: Essays in Honour of Pritilata Wadder* (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2011).

named after the wife of Lord Brabourne, the Governor of Bengal until 1939. To make the school accessible to Muslims, it was conveniently located in Park Circus, a neighborhood in Calcutta where many well-known Muslim families resided. *Brabourne Bichitra,* the title of which can be loosely translated as the "diversity of Brabourne," was an alumni publication that was written in honor of the women of Brabourne and highlights the Muslim women who attended the college.[180] It was published by the Student Association of Lady Brabourne College in 1996. There are few dates describing when many of these individuals were students, but they appear to be mostly students from the 1940s and 1950s. The volume was composed of numerous musings and essays written by various women about their days at Brabourne.

Friendships and personal relationships were central in the essays written in *Brabourne Bichitra.* Hamida Khanam, who we learned about above and whose memoir told of her time at Bethune, also has a short essay in this volume on her time at Brabourne.[181] She remembered her time as a lecturer at Brabourne College from 1945-47. In her essay, Hamida shared that she secured the job while going to visit the college because of her mentor Dr. Roma Chowdhury, a senior faculty member there. She wrote about her life at Brabourne and Calcutta as important moments where she had her first job as a professor. In 1947, Hamida went abroad to London to continue studying, and when she returned in 1949, she went to live in Dacca, then a part of Pakistan. She made a trip to Calcutta, which after 1947 was a part of India. The reason she returned was to visit Roma Chowdhury, whom she only refers to as "Roma-di," adding the honorific term used by Bengalis to refer to older women. When she was there, she recalled that Roma-di told her that she "could have stayed here," meaning in Calcutta. This was a poignant moment, as it connected two women who were for a brief time colleagues, but now do not live in the same city due to the Partition, as one is Hindu and the

[180] Latifa Akand, editor, *Brabourne Bichitra* (Lady Brabourne Student Association: Dhaka, 1996).
[181] Hamida Khanam, "Amar Smriti-te Lady Brabourne College ["Lady Brabourne College in my Memories"]" in *Brabourne Bichitra*, 202-207.

other Muslim. Hamida's memories of Roma Chowdhury are tied to Brabourne, where their relationship flourished. Despite becoming nationals of different countries in the span of a few years, Hamida's ties with Brabourne are best understood through her relationships with the people she met there.

The volume on Brabourne also included essays about prominent women of Bangladesh who were students at Brabourne, such as Nurjahan Begum, the editor of *Begum*, the most important magazine for Bengali Muslim women during the latter half of the twentieth century. Given the nature of a volume like this, it makes perfect sense that former students wrote nostalgically about their college days. The inclusion of alumnae from other cohorts and generations, on the other hand, served to tie women with various interests and experiences into a community. Many of the women I interviewed also spoke fondly about other well-known women who attended their same intuitions. They described a sense of institutional loyalty that bound them to these women. These social communities became a way to look back to their times at the institutions even if they were there at different times.

The alumnae described connections with each other by speaking of their shared experiences at these institutions. They saw themselves as harbingers of progress and change and linked themselves to other successful people. Hamida Khanam explicitly wrote that she herself was quite happy to say that "five decades ago the girls who were students at [her] first workplace of Brabourne College, out of them, many later changed the terrain of education, culture, social welfare, journalism, and even in the case of politics where they have played an important role."[182] Institutions highlighted the success of their alumni in order to garner prestige; while these women placed other alumnae in the same frame in order to share in their successes and to build connections. These publications and reflections highlighted an ironic aspect of women's networks – while these networks cut across

[182] Ibid., 207.

religious differences to form friendships that transgressed those boundaries, at times, they also ended up consolidating specific identities as Muslim women. However, even as these Muslim identities were being consolidated, these women did not foreclose or sever any of their friendships with those from other communities.

Enduring Friendships and Sociality

One of the most common refrains in these autobiographies and interviews was the idea of progress. Almost all women wrote about the past as one that was long gone, and the present as one where women had made significant gains. The authors of these autobiographies all tried to provide background on the dismal state of female education when they first started school, but were quick to state that women in contemporary times were lucky to have options they never had. From the 1990s, it became easier for middle-class Bengali women to study whatever they wanted in almost any institution they want. No longer were women relegated to schools and colleges only meant for girls and women. Coeducational settings brought forth countless changes and opportunities for women. Yet, despite the opening of major universities to women throughout Bengal, many women continue to attend Bethune, Eden, Loreto, Lady Brabourne and other women's colleges. These sites continued to provide them with an arena where they could learn to flourish.

For women in India, education exposed women to other women outside of their family. Educational settings gave them peer friendships, but also mentors and role models in the teachers and professors they encountered. The connections they formed with the women who attended school and colleges were sometimes temporary, but often, these associations continued long after they left those institutions. Many women lost touch, but when asked to talk about their college days, most highlighted the other women who provided support and company. Women's memoirs and

personal interviews were littered with stories of their friends and acquaintances who shaped their everyday life.

Women in educational settings found a space where they could bond with other women and foster connections, whether temporary or long-term. Being in female-only sites where they were asked to become productive and educated members of society also gave them a reprieve from having to conform to familial restrictions on their social interactions. They were free to interact with women outside their families or religious communities. At a time when some political leaders were fomenting divisions while others were working to create harmony between Muslims and Hindus, girls' schools maintained the illusion of religious tolerance and interactions as religious differences were glossed over in everyday sociality. The friendships that came out of these experiences were formed along lines of age and interests, rather than religious identities. The proximity to a variety of women normalized the diversity of women's personal identities. Schools and universities also fostered sociality and deep friendships through policies meant to bring classmates together. Yet, the intergenerational connections that are recalled later because of connections to the same educational institution show that they did not necessarily have to be at the same place at the same time. In order to form connected communities, memories of a place alone were enough to bind people together.

Women's construction of their experiences and life histories in educational sites point to the significance of social interactions. Modes of sociality such as friendships opened up avenues for female activism in Bengal. Schools and colleges tried to shape and provide a place for female education and sociality to increase the number of educated women in Bengali society. Yet, institutions never expected women to utilize the connections forged among themselves to become activists against state policies. Educational institutions enacted policies to mold young minds, but they also sought to manage and contain women's interests to specific activities. They feared female activism as a potential result of fostering sisterhood. Early education reformers sought to defuse

fears about women being overly educated by arguing that women should remain "feminine." Education taught women to think beyond their insular lives. Women's friendships were an important factor in how and why women became involved in politics. Framing women's contributions in the context of their institutionally fostered friendships forces us to reconsider the impact of peers on young women's political activity. Institutions enacted policies that enabled sociality and were important in providing a space for certain types of interactions, but most social connections also flourished due to circumstantial access and shared interests and passions.

CHAPTER II

Girls Next Door: Neighborhood Sociality from the 1930s to 1960s

The categories of public and private have played a key role in conceptualizing the histories of women and gender. Scholarship on women's roles within society continue to utilize the two spheres to explain how women both subvert and conform to gendered roles and values. However, this binary of the "public" and the "private" to understand gender politics is limiting when considering sociality in the neighborhood. The scholarship on the public sphere has been dominated by Jurgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere as one where exchanges of ideas are debated, often seen as outside of the authority of the state.[183] In her critique, Nancy Fraser argues that Habermas's conception of the public sphere was both a bourgeois ideal and "a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule."[184] Drawing upon her reading of revisionist historiography, Fraser argues for alternative publics, or "subaltern counterpublics," which are constituted by marginalized or subordinated groups.[185] Taking a cue from Fraser's notion of competing public spheres, I argue that the neighborhood and the social relations that women foster in that space create an alternative women's sphere, one that is outside of the binary of the public and private.

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[183] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).
[184] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990), 62.
[185] Ibid., 67.

As scholars of South Asia have shown, the formation of the public sphere on the subcontinent could not follow the model of Western Europe due to the role of colonial rule and governance.[186] Scott and Barnum, among others, also make a case for expanding the category of the public when thinking about South Asian publics and to interrogate how the "public" can be imagined in a place like South Asia.[187] Similarly, the idea of the private sphere as "women's space" has also been challenged in South Asian historiography, where the "private sphere" of family, community, and women have often been the site of Indian male debates and anxieties. The scholarship on women and community has been understood through the impact and collusion of colonial rule and Indian male elites.[188] Dagmar Engels has argued that the "private sphere" was utilized by the colonial state and Indian men to subsume women even when women emerged onto the public sphere as activists and protestors.[189] Engels further nuances the category of the public sphere, writing that "an ideological term like 'private sphere,' which implied male control of female sexuality within its boundary, was highly negotiable and its meaning depended on changing political circumstances, on the class background of men and women involved and, in particular, on activities by women."[190] Feminist scholars have shown that the dichotomy of the public/private does not correctly map onto how women's lives are structured, and that dichotomy might itself be the main contentious issue in how women have been written about.[191] Taking Bengal's jute mills and gendered

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[186] See Sandria B Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Amir Ali, "Evolution of Public Sphere in India" in *Economic and Political Weekly,* 36 no. 26 (Jun.30-Jul 6, 2001): 2419-2425.
[187] Barton Scott and Brannon D. Ingram, "What is a Public? Notes from South Asia," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,* 38 no.3 (2015): 357-370.
[188] See Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), and Rachel Sturman, *The Government of Social Life in Colonial India: Liberalism, Religious Law and Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[189] Dagmar Engels, "The Limits of Gender Ideology: Bengali Women, the Colonial State, and the Private Sphere, 1890-1930," *Women's Studies Int. Forum*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1989), 425-437.
[190] Engels, "The Limits of Gender Ideology," 435.
[191] See Carole Pateman, "Feminist critiques of the public/private dichotomy" in *Public and Private in Social Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

labor as her case study, Leela Fernandes argues that spheres of work, community, and family are constructed to be masculine.[192] Such conceptions logically translate to the sphere of the neighborhood—a space that is structured by both community and family. While the neighborhood cannot be deemed "private" since it is outside the *andermahal* [inner sanctum] that was the purview of women in colonial India, it was also not entirely "public." For one, the neighborhood is bound both physically and structurally to the communities that reside within, rather than being open to the larger Indian society, which likens it to the private sphere. However, like the ideal public sphere, it is also a space where conversations and debates can take place, even if the hierarchy and stratification is not necessarily equivalent.

Fraser's argument for how the public sphere can be reconceptualized to serve stratified societies allows for a reimaging of the public sphere itself, including an alternative space open to women and other marginalized groups.[193] I argue that the neighborhood is an "in-between" space in the public/private dichotomy. By foregrounding the space of the neighborhood as one that is understood through women's experiences, rather than refracted through colonial and male intervention, this chapter not only moves beyond the dominant historiography, but argues that our construction of the neighborhood should be expanded. Bengali women's voices show that women are central agents in shaping neighborhoods and the social ties that constitute them.

The neighborhood can be seen as an "in-between" arena of intimacy: it spatially fits between the "private" home and the 'public' settings of school and work. The Bengali categories of *ghare baire,*[194] or the home and the world, further supports the nature of the in-betweenness of the space. In the dichotomy of the "home" and the "world," one is allocated to be a men's sphere and the

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[192] Leela Fernandes, "Beyond Public Spaces and Private Spheres: Gender, Family, and Working-Class Politics in India" in *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 525-547.
[193] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere."
[194] This term, which literally translates to the "home and the world," is also the title of a well-known story by the Bengali Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

other the purview of women. The neighborhood is spatially where the home is located, but it is also where one can easily move outside of the home and interact with others within the bounded space of the neighborhood. Given my focus on women's voices and experiences, I want to acknowledge that the concept of the neighborhood is not the same for all women. When Bengali women spoke of their *para* [neighborhood] for some it might have been the same bounded neighborhood space that city planners mapped, but for others, the *para* just might be the few places within the neighborhood that they could roam. When I asked women where in the neighborhood they could go, one woman answered that her father gave her limits on how far she could leave the neighborhood, but that did not preclude visiting her friends' homes in the neighborhood.[195] Even if there were limits on how far they could go within the bounded space of the neighborhood, women still felt free to explore and form social connections that they would not be able to within the constraints of the home.

The neighborhood is where the home is, but it also includes others who are not family. Thinking of the neighborhood in this manner challenges the binary of the public being associated with outsiders and the private with the family. It was a 'safe' environment for young girls in ways that other places in the city and country were not. If parents feared schools as sites outside of their control, the neighborhood gave the illusion of easy surveillance over their children. The familiarity of the milieu and the proximity to the home ensured that neighborhood sociality was usually amenable to their families. Unlike the broader "public," the neighborhood was semi-public while still being geographically bounded within the perimeter of few streets or family injunction. The neighborhood then, mirrors the 'in-betweenness' of women's social ties that emerge from women's writings as a category that fluctuates between family relations within the home and strangers from the outside world.

[195] Alia Amin, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 6, 2017.

Social relations were at the heart of the neighborhood. The word neighborhood is rooted in the verb "neighbor" which means living near and "engaging in practices of friendliness and sociality."[196] The spatiality of the neighborhood, and its interconnectedness with sociality, positions it as a unique site of intimacy. As broadly understood in the social sciences, space is seen as conceptual, while place is more material and geographic. Geographers define space and place in a particular manner, but my conception best aligns with Doreen Massey's work on the role of gender in understanding space and spatiality. Massey writes that "space and place are important in the construction of gender relations and in struggles to change them," something that is critical to my understanding of sociality in neighborhoods.[197] Massey's definition of space as "constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global" is most pertinent to my understanding of the neighborhood as formed by and through social relations.[198] Neighborhoods form informally and often through social networks, where people look for opportunities to build community by finding similarities. The neighborhood is a complicated and layered space that allows for multiple visions of a shared life and serves as a symbol for larger conversations on identity and belief.[199] Indeed, the interactions between people shape the space as much as time or infrastructures. Historian Richard White has similarly argued that space is not just a vacuum, but something that is affected by humans. White's argument that "representational space" is "lived and experienced through a set of symbolic

[196] Michael E. Smith, Ashley Engquist, Cinthia Carvajal, Katrina Johnston Zimmerman, Monica Algara, Bridgette Gilliland, Yui Kuznetsov & Amanda Young, "Neighborhood formation in semi-urban settlements," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 8:2 (2015): 177.
[197] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 179.
[198] Ibid., 264.
[199] See Benjamin Looker, *A Nation of Neighborhoods: Imagining Cities, Communities, and Democracy in Postwar America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

associations"[200] further supports the idea that the neighborhood, especially one of the past, was always refracted in memories through nostalgic associations.

This chapter examines the significance of neighborhoods in fostering sociality among girls and women in Bengal. It shows how these relationships shaped female lives and the forging of social and intimate ties. Utilizing examples from women's autobiographies and interviews, I argue that women's everyday interactions— "friendship rituals"—not only provided companionship but also offered a way to create an alternative sphere of sociality separate from male intervention. Sociality in the neighborhood manifested in various ways, from providing women with experiences outside of their physical home, to spending time and finding pleasure in friends' company, to helping them with professional connections. One of the most salient sites of women's interactions were local neighborhood organizations that opened up opportunities for children to take part in cultural and political activities, providing them with a chance to engage with local and global issues. These activities were influenced by social and political events in the region.

Bengali women, primarily based in Kolkata [Calcutta] and Dhaka [Dacca], fondly recalled their childhood memories of neighborhood playtime, games, and other gatherings.[201] The neighborhood enabled women to foster a sphere of sociality that gave women the space to learn from and create intimate connections. The physical proximity of neighborhood communities, or the *para*, as it is known in Bengali, was a space that allowed the home and the world to collide within a few streets. When asked about their childhoods in interviews and memoirs, Bengali women mention their *para* rather than just their physical homes. The neighborhood as part of the home and the family signifies the intimacy of neighboring connections, while the physical spatiality of the

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[200] Richard White, "What is spatial history." *Spatial History Lab: Working paper [online] (2010).*
< http://www. stanford. edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/pub. php >

[201] I will use the old spellings of Calcutta and Dacca when talking about the twentieth century and memories of the past. I will use present-day spelling of Kolkata and Dacca when referring to fieldwork interviews or the two cities in present-day.

neighborhood as more than just the home points to the fuzziness of the categories of *ghare baire*. In other words, neighborhood as a social space does not neatly fit within the public/private binary. Women's sociality formed within the neighborhoods reveal the importance of "in-between" spaces in fostering a sense of belonging and intimate ties.

Bengal's Neighborhoods and the Cities

In highlighting the major neighborhoods of Bengal, Calcutta and Dacca come to the forefront as significant places in most of these women's autobiographical writings and oral history interviews. Calcutta and Dacca have primarily been studied as colonial cities that were influenced by Europeans, most significantly the British. Swati Chattopadhyay has convincingly made a case against such a reading of Calcutta, arguing that such histories privilege European perspectives and render Calcutta as a failed colonial city that did not live up to its potential.[202] Recent scholarship has highlighted how the people have shaped the space of Bengal, pointing to the impact people have on the space and vice versa.

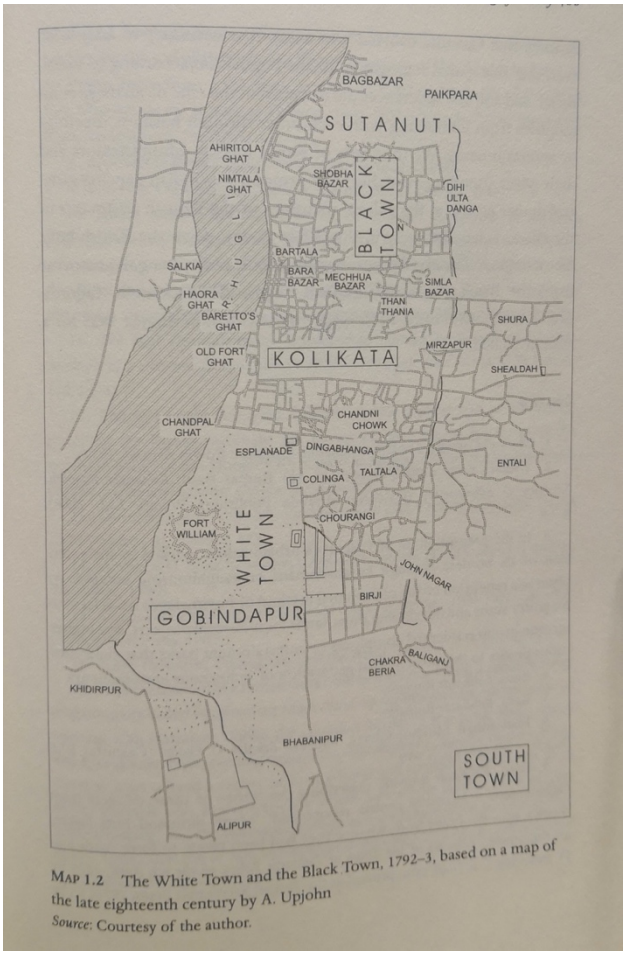
In his monograph on roads in Calcutta, Sumanta Banerjee shows how the urban landscape changed from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century.[203] Banerjee's book focuses on three specific roads that cut horizontally across the city, demonstrating the interrelated nature of infrastructure and social relations. Banerjee argues that "a road cannot always be moulded to fit the wishes of the city planners of a centralized economy. It interacts more with the local natural environs and needs of its inhabitants rather than the rules of a central power."[204] Just as women were agentive forces in how neighborhoods affected their lives, Banerjee too shows how ordinary people shaped the city.

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[202] Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism, and the colonial uncanny* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
[203] Sumanta Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads: Calcutta from Colonial Urbanization to Global Urbanization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[204] Ibid., 111.

Scholars have shown how the growth of modern Calcutta was impacted by colonialism, most notably in how the city came to be segregated.[205] Banerjee argues that the urbanization of Calcutta was fractured from the nineteenth century on.[206] His claim is supported by the growth of the "white" and "black" towns in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Calcutta. The two sections of the city were in what is technically part of northern Kolkata today, and was at that time the city's most heavily populated area. The northern part of the city was known as Black Town, where indigenous Bengali and other residents of Indian descent lived. The southern part was known as White Town, comprised of the British and other Europeans. The Black Town, from the eighteenth to nineteenth century, consisted of a minority of rich Bengalis, and the growing Bengali middle-class. In this part also lived masses of laborers, both Bengalis and Indians, from other parts of the country.

In terms of spatial orientation, houses in the Black Town were close together, often without boundary walls, which mimicked the houses or huts in the villages of joint family living. Neighborhoods in cities further opened up social spaces for sociality among new people as the family became smaller in urban areas. In such close-knit spaces in old areas of the cities, social



MAP 1.2 The White Town and the Black Town, 1792–3, based on a map of the late eighteenth century by A. Upjohn
Source: Courtesy of the author.

Figure 4 Image from Banerjee's Memoirs of Roads

[205] See Anindita Ghosh, *Claiming the city: protest, crime, and scandals in colonial Calcutta, c. 1860-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) for an argument on how the urban poor and working class also fashioned and claimed the space of the city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
[206] Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, 32.

ties expanded to people outside of relatives. On the other hand, the White Town became "white" from the mid-eighteenth century as Europeans began to move south of the city. The area known as the White Town consisted of the neighborhood of Fort William to the Chowringhee-Birji area. Here, the houses were built with empty spaces in between. The White Town also set up new market areas different from the bazaars of Black Town, creating further segregation among the European and Indian populations.[207]

Calcutta was not a homogenous city, and this segregation did not prevent elites of Indian and European communities from interacting through business meetings or entertainment.[208] By the end of the nineteenth century, barriers between black and white town were breaking down and led to the rise of Bengali South Town. This South Town developed at the beginning of the twentieth century as a middle-class Bengali enclave.[209] The composition of this new "South" Calcutta made it a more middle-class area than just the rich Bengali barristers that dominated old Calcutta. Most of the women whose life histories and memories are mentioned are part of this middle-class milieu. As city planners added footpaths and roads, the composition of residents on the streets and neighborhoods were broadened. The footpaths created to protect the gas light pillars have become central to city dwellers and daily wage laborers who use it as their bedrooms at night, even if they were often forgotten in middle-class memoirs and storytelling.[210] The transformation of the city and new neighborhoods was affected by new efforts to increase walkability. Pavements, or footpaths, which originated in Central Calcutta's Theatre Road's neighborhood in 1858, were meant for pedestrians but have since been transformed into "a site for trade in minor items during the day, and into

[207] Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, 56. Hogg Market (known as New Market now) opened in 1873 and mainly consisted of European and Jewish traders' shops in nineteenth century.
[208] Ibid., 34. Swati Chattopadhyay also reiterates this idea of the segregation not always being true in practice in *Representing Calcutta.*
[209] Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, 71.
[210] Ibid., 68-69.

residential quarters for wage labourers during the night."[211] In the memoirs I examined and interviews I conducted with Bengali women, very few women discussed the poor and laborers who shared living spaces in their neighborhoods, pointing to the obscuring of certain class politics in these women's reconstructions of their neighborhoods.

Dacca, the current capital of Bangladesh, shared a similar story of development as Calcutta. Dacca was a provincial capital of Bengal under the Mughals in the seventeenth century when it was an administrative and manufacturing center. It lost much of its economic and political importance in the late eighteenth century. Some scholars argue that the city declined under the Mughals and then was revived under the British.[212] In the mid-nineteenth century it was slowly revitalized as it became central to British administration, including from 1905-1911, when it served as the capital of partitioned East Bengal and Assam. Dacca's growth as a metropolitan city was similar to Calcutta's, and one that was spatially structured by the British as part of their expansion into controlling the economic wealth of Bengal.[213] Dacca's industrialization and urbanization is much more recent than Calcutta's in that its revival is believed to have been more significant in the nineteenth rather than the eighteenth century like Calcutta. The growth of Dacca as a residential and cultural hub in the twentieth century mirrored much of the development of urbanization in Calcutta. There was a part of the old city that was constructed for European usage and surrounding areas that were occupied by Bengalis. However, unlike Calcutta, where the new middle-class expanded to the South, in Dacca, the new middle-class flocked to the north of what was originally Mughal Dacca, today known as Old Dhaka. New neighborhoods expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, with a population explosion in the city in the 1970s. My interviews with several women who grew up in Dacca in the 1950s point to the

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[211] Ibid., 128.
[212] See Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Dacca: A Study in Urban History and Development* (London: Curzon Press, 1986); "Dhaka" in *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*. Modified 24 December 2014. <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Dhaka>
[213] Ahmed, *Dacca: A Study in Urban History and Development.*

newness of the city. For instance, sisters Taheerah Haq (b. 1948) and Ameenah Haq Ahmed (b. 1946) remembered their childhood in old Dacca as being almost rural-like.[214] Ameenah mentioned that when her father built a bungalow house in Dhanmondi in the 1950s, they were one of the earliest families to settle there. Dhanmondi today is one of the most heavily populated residential areas in old Dhaka. In Ameenah's recollections of life in Dacca in the 1950s, she alluded to the city as being very similar to a village and recalled that her primary social connections were with villagers who lived across from what is now Dhanmondi Lake.[215] At that time, the area of the Lake was primarily rice fields. The rapid urbanization of Dacca in the middle of the twentieth century created new forms of social ties and connections in developing neighborhoods among middle-class Bengali families, especially for the growing Muslim middle-class that migrated from Calcutta in the aftermath of the 1946 riots and 1947 Partition.

The Everyday, Affect, and Rituals of Friendships

The Bengali word for neighborhood, *para*, evokes a sense of community and structure that shaped the residents' social relationships, especially since most women mention the *para* as *amader para* or "our neighborhood." Remembering and recalling the neighborhood as "ours" suggests a sense of belonging to a collective community. These affective ties to their localities molded the movements and activities in which women participated. In thinking of the impact of the *para* on the lives of young girls and women, we might look at everyday activities that fall into the repertoire of "friendship rituals." I define "friendship rituals" as frequent activities shared by young girls and women that led to them bonding. These include everyday activities like walking to school together, playing after school, visiting one another's homes, sharing meals, singing together, or picking

[214] Taheerah Haq, Personal Interview, Dhaka, January 25, 2018; Ameenah Haq Ahmed, Personal Interview, Dhaka, January 24, 2018.
[215] Ameenah Haq Ahmed, Personal Interview, Dhaka, January 24, 2018.

flowers. The moments and times shared between women in Bengal in the neighborhood shaped how women understood their relationships with the larger community.

In their autobiographical writings and interviews, women stress the "simple life" they shared with neighboring friends and acquaintances in their childhoods. In trying to understand everyday life, we might consider the impact of "ordinary affects" on young women's lives. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart has succinctly defined how to write about the everyday and the "ordinary" aspects of life in her monograph on American life. Stewart states:

> The ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life. Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in public and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like something.[216]

Stewart's theorization of the everyday provides a context for understanding the ordinary and routine activities in which women in Bengal participated. Since my definition of "friendship rituals" is contingent upon routine and ordinary activities, these "ordinary affects," as conceptualized by Stewart, provides a frame for the mundane everyday activities that structured women's lives in the neighborhoods. My conception of the neighborhood as an in-between looks at interactions that go beyond conversation. Thereby, "friendship rituals" consist of activities and the mundane that shaped women's interactions with the space of the neighborhood, melding the home and the world.

The women I interviewed frequently stressed the idea of a "simple life," which interestingly is one of the main components of how Stewart defines the "ordinary." Bengali women emphasized the banality of their childhood activities as something that they just did, without any thought as to why. As Stewart tells us, "a world of shared banalities can be a basis of sociality, or an exhausting

[216] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1-2.

undertow, or just something to do."[217] In order to locate modes of sociality, the banal must be examined to show how the ordinary affects of neighborhood life entered into women's lives. Women's casual interactions with others might be seen as one of the banalities of their lives, but over time, the banal became a process of socialization that created bonds. The sociality formed by the banal and the ordinary everyday in the neighborhoods can be understood through three significant analytics: pleasure and desire, the opening of the home and heart to people whose identities might differ from their own, and the plethora of professional and civic opportunities that were available to middle-class women.

The Pleasure and Desire of Women's Sociality

In women's writings, neighborhoods took on a central role in shaping their life histories. Krishna Bose (1930-2020) was one woman who wrote a memoir which exemplified the importance of neighborhood communities in Calcutta in her life. Krishna was a former Member of Parliament, an educator, and a member of the well-known Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose family in West Bengal, through her marriage to Netaji's nephew Sisir Kumar Bose.[218] Subhas Chandra Bose and his brother, Sarat Chandra Bose, were prominent members of the Indian National Congress and regional politics, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. The Bose brothers have occupied a venerated position among Bengalis for their anti-communal and anti-colonial politics. Subhas was also known for his leadership of the Indian National Army (INA), an armed force of Indians during World War II in Southeast Asia that sought Indian independence from the British. The INA under Subhas Chandra Bose has come to be seen as a model for its members' diversity in regional,

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[217] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 27.

[218] Netaji is an honorific meaning "respected leader" and is used throughout India to refer to Subhas Chandra Bose. For more on Subhas Chandra Bose and his role in Indian nationalist politics, see Leonard A. Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Subhas Chandra Bose and middle class radicalism: A study in Indian nationalism 1928-1940* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), among others.

religious, ethnic, and gender identities. Krishna's husband, Sisir, was close to his uncle Subhas, and helped him escape from India when Subhas was under British scrutiny for his anti-British work. In her own life, Krishna, like many others in the extended Bose family, has tried to uphold ideals of communal harmony, as well as the significance of Netaji and his family in significantly shaping Bengal. Alongside this background, it should be noted that Krishna's memoir is primarily focused on her life before her marriage, although the translator's note, that the book is a "blend of the private and the public, the personal and the national"[219] is apt. Krishna's memoir was first published in 2003 in Bengali, before being translated into English by her son in 2015. Although her memories about her childhood and young adulthood is extensively covered in the text, I also interviewed Krishna Bose in Kolkata in 2017, asking for clarifications about details in her books. Having spent almost all her life in Bengal, Krishna's experiences of growing up in Calcutta and the various specific homes she lived in points to the significance of neighborhood sociality in shaping her life.

The title of Krishna Bose's memoir, *Lost Addresses*, evokes nostalgia for life in certain neighborhoods and homes in the late 1930s to mid-1950s. Her text is organized around important historical events and the neighborhoods she lived in during the years 1934 to 1955.[220] Krishna's memoir highlights the centrality of public spaces through her emphasis on numerous neighborhoods in Calcutta during that period. Her attention to the characteristics of each neighborhood, as either new or old, as well as its predominant social class, revealed the rapidly changing nature of the city, as well as the new pleasures that were becoming accessible to girls and women. Krishna's memoir allows us to trace the city's changing political landscape and the gradual opening of public spaces to women as well as the growing politics of respectability. Physical spaces within the neighborhood became conduits for women to experiment with various leisure activities, often in the company of

[219] Sumantra Bose, "Translator's Note" in Krishna Bose, *Lost Addresses* (Calcutta: Niyogi Books, 2015).
[220] Krishna Bose, *Lost Addresses* (Calcutta: Niyogi Books, 2015).

their friends. As an in-between space in the public/private binary, neighborhoods functioned as sites for expressions of pleasure and desire. Krishna wrote about her parents' shared love of morning walks, especially to Victoria Memorial, the imposing marble edifice in central Calcutta built in the early twentieth century in honor of Queen Victoria.[221] This area of central Calcutta was originally part of the "White Town," which was settled by British officials and merchants in the late eighteenth century to create residential spaces for Europeans.[222] During the early decades of the twentieth century, the first Indian feudal gentry moved in, followed by Bengali civilians and professionals like barristers as well as some North Indian Muslim families.[223] In her memoir, Krishna started with her life in central Calcutta in the 1930s as one where Bengali upper-class and middle-class norms were gradually taking root. Krishna wrote that her mother was taunted for going on walks in public spaces, which was perhaps due to parts of Calcutta "still living in the nineteenth century," while her mother was used to a liberal lifestyle in East Bengal, being from a progressive family there.[224] This anecdote emphasizes gendered middle-class norms in Calcutta in the 1930s, but it also points to something else. Pleasure, such as enjoying public parks, was something denied to women due to respectability politics that expected women's desire to engage in public movement to be hidden from sight. However, young children, even young women, were allowed in public parks and neighborhood gatherings without being ostracized like adult women were. Girls were afforded certain liberties that those who reached puberty and womanhood were not. Of course, these shifts were also changing with time. By the time Krishna was married in the late 1950s, going for walks in parks and throughout the city was no longer considered spectacular, as norms for middle-class women moved towards greater public visibility in post-colonial nations.

[221] Ibid., 13-14.
[222] Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, 116.
[223] Ibid., 120-121.
[224] Bose, *Lost Addresses*, 14.

Public spaces within neighborhoods, particularly public parks, played a crucial socializing role for young women in the 1950s as spaces of pleasure and friendship formation. In interviews, women mentioned that during their college and university days, they relied on campus spaces and public parks to gather and socialize. For example, Sayyada Ruby Ghuznavi (b. 1936), a well-known advocate for natural dyes and crafts in Bangladesh, who grew up in Calcutta in the 1940s but moved to East Bengal in 1952, described her university life at Dacca University from 1954-58.[225] She described her friends' circle as a mix of men and women who had different academic interests. While they often met at the university, they also congregated in public spaces like Ramna Park, not far from the University area. The large, green open arena was an oasis in the newly developing neighborhood of affluence. Other women who lived in Dacca during the 1950s and 1960s also highlight the importance of Ramna Park as a site for gathering among young women, whether they met for conversation or picnics with large groups. Women's leisure activities, such as talk and gatherings, were forms of community building as well as resistance to gendered norms.[226] In another interview, Dhaka University Professor and activist Sufia Ahmed (1932-2020), mentioned that even earlier in the 1940s, her mother used to go for walks in Ramna Park at night with her friends.[227] Such anecdotes show women utilized public parks to create spaces of sociality. These public spaces provided neighborhood women with opportunities to spend time with peers and foster connections.

Women's leisurely gatherings in neighborhood public spaces opened up venues for pleasure. While women mentioned certain spaces of sociality in detail, the nature of their conversations and activities are not always easy to document. Much of the time spent in conversation in public spaces like parks appear closer to what we might call "loitering." Loitering has been defined as a lack of

[225] Sayyada Ruby Ghuznavi, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 18, 2017.
[226] Eileen Green, "'Women Doing Friendship': an analysis of women's leisure as a site of identity construction, empowerment and resistance," *Leisure Studies*, 17:3 (1998): 171-185.
[227] Sufia Ahmed, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 17, 2017.

visible purpose, which deems it as a marginal activity. However, some scholars have questioned this negative connotation of loitering by asking what it might tell us about how women derive pleasure. Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade, and Sameera Khan posited that "desire for pleasure has never been as legitimate as the struggle against violence."[228] They argue that loitering should be seen as an act of claiming public space, which might be one approach to how women assert a sense of belonging. Given that loitering as an activity has liberatory potential for women, neighborhoods as a space allows for freedom for women since the constraints of the "public space" is potentially removed. As mentioned in Sufia Ahmed's anecdote of her mother utilizing the neighborhood park as a site to socialize with her friends, women derived pleasure from being in such spaces.

Deriving joy and pleasure from being around friends is an affective response.[229] In these everyday, ordinary meetings and unstructured gatherings, women navigated a site of empowerment, where neither work nor familial responsibilities were emphasized. Given the nature of these sporadic meetings among friends in open spaces such as public parks, whether after school or in the evenings, women actively utilized the relative safety of the neighborhood to claim a physical space. Alia Amin (b. 1933), a retired teacher and educator, mentioned another public space, the area around a river in Barisal, a smaller city in East Bengal where she briefly lived in 1947. In an interview, she said her closest friends in Barisal, Lily (the *daaknam* of the aforementioned Sufia Ahmed) and Renu used to accompany her and they would walk, talk, and gossip by the river.[230] By specifically mentioning "gossip" and "talk" in describing how she spent time with her friends, Alia sheds light on the carefree nature of such activities. Eileen Green has argued that "talk, intimacy and laughter

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[228] Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan, "Why Loiter? Radical possibilities for gendered dissent" in *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities*, edited by Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 185.

[229] See Jennifer Nash, "Pleasurable Blackness" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education*, ed. Louisa Allen and Mary Lou Ramussen (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp: 261-278, for how pleasure and affect become intertwined.

[230] Alia Amin, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 6, 2017. *Daaknam* refers to the nickname that most Bengalis have which is usually different than their official names. Daaknams are usually reserved for family and friends.

[are] key elements in the friendship *process* of women."[231] These girls were in their teenage years, and since they were not allowed to go far from their homes, public spaces like parks and rivers gave them an opportunity to remain within the neighborhood, while finding ways to have private moments with friends. These walks and times spent with friends might not have had any real purpose, but they were ultimately moments that were affectionately recalled decades later. If loitering can be seen as a way to reimagine gendered experiences of the city and urban spaces in twenty-first century India, Bengali women's utilization of public spaces within the bounded neighborhood in the mid-twentieth century provides a prime example of how women ingenuously used public spaces to loiter and gossip, thereby creating a space where women could move around comfortably.

Women's leisure activities and desire to engage in unstructured pleasurable conversations through loitering and gossip point to the centrality of everyday and ordinary forms of sociality that challenge how time is utilized. In making a case for taking women's sociality seriously, I suggest a reconsideration of how the gendering of social interactions has been theorized. The idea of the banal, everyday interactions as a source of positive outcomes was recently explored by Craig Jeffrey in his monograph on *timepass*, the idea of waiting.[232] *Timepass* is generally seen as wasting time doing nothing. Jeffrey argues otherwise. Using case studies of unemployed men, specifically students in the Meerut district, Jeffrey shows that waiting is not just a passive activity, but one that infuses creativity and is a source of positive energies where waiting allows potentially progressive forms of politics to emerge. His research focused on an approach that looked at the social implications of waiting from the perspectives of struggling lower middle classes, especially educated unemployed young men. Jeffrey's concept of *timepass* reads as one that is explicitly male and is complementary to Dipesh

[231] Green, "'Women Doing Friendship,' 178.
[232] Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

Chakrabarty's argument for the concept of *adda* or "hanging out" in Bengal, which he posits as a significant form of modern sociality.[233] Chakrabarty argues that *adda* allowed for the democratization of urban public sphere for men in a setting that was often homosocial. Chakrabarty explicitly states that the *addas* that men were able to enjoy in the twentieth century were predicated on the separation of spheres between the sexes.[234] However, Green argued that women's "talk" was an essential ingredient of women's friendships as well.[235] By focusing on the sociality of women in the neighborhood, I argue that women's everyday interactions provide a generative sphere that merges the potential of *timepass* and the widening of *adda*. Women's everyday activities, like walks or loitering in parks and common neighborhood spaces, also stand in as activities of *timepass* and *adda*. In thinking about the way time is spent or "wasted," women's everyday social instances might not map onto productivity the way that Jeffrey argues for *timepass* for men waiting for employment, but they are productive in other ways. They are productive in generating friendships and intimate ties. A women's sphere of sociality, one that allows for a hybridization of *adda* and *timepass*, allows us to rethink the everyday rituals and practices of being neighbors.

One of the most significant "friendship rituals" that neighbors engaged in was visiting and practicing neighborliness. My interviewees discussed visits to each other's homes as essential aspects of friendships, and something done purely for pleasure. Historian Amy Mills argues that neighboring visits among women in Istanbul linked home and streets and created ties of belonging, often allowing neighbors to be seen as a collective.[236] Given that Bengali women often spoke of their *para* as a collective familial space, frequent interactions in each other's homes, especially for married women, helped to cement a sense of belonging to the community. Visiting each other's homes was

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[233] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity," *Public Culture* 11 (1) (January 1999): 109–145.
[234] Ibid., 139.
[235] Green, "Women Doing Friendship," 183.
[236] Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 135-44.

one of the most vital friendship rituals in which girls and women took part. Often when I asked about friendships with their neighbors, women pointed to the fact that as young girls, they were only allowed to visit certain people's homes. These homes often included those of family friends or families that had children of similar age. One of the safest places where their families gave them permission to visit were relatives' homes or friends in the neighborhood, often to play.

Play was one of the easiest and earliest opportunities for pleasure and sociality available to girls in the neighborhood. Most women who described their childhood neighborhoods did so by bringing up their play companions and those they would play with in common neighborhood spaces. For some, the physical structure of the neighborhood shaped their social and intimate relationships. Children who grew up in certain occupational enclaves shared stories of social gatherings that took place in the homes of whichever neighbor had more open space or fields surrounding their houses. This experience of playing as children in open spaces was repeated by almost all the women interviewed. One woman, Mrs. Hena, made sure to highlight the gendered aspect of playing in these sites, pointing to sociality in sex-segregated spaces.[237] She spent her childhood in Dacca, in Dhanmondi, a neighborhood that was on the rise in the 1960s. Today, Dhanmondi is a very populated residential area, but in the 1950s and 1960s, it was mostly full of marshes. Mrs. Hena recalled that during her childhood, there was a large field in front of her neighborhood where neighborhood children used to play. She recounted that the children were separated by gender even in playtime. The girls used to come home from school and go out to play in the open field while the boys would be elsewhere. For those women who grew up in much more established neighborhoods, courtyards of enclosed neighborhoods were often play spaces for kids after school, where young children ran around and participated in various activities. Sufia Ahmed

[237] Mrs. Hena, Personal Interview, Dhaka, October 24, 2017.

recalled playing with the children of her landlord in old Dacca in the 1940s.[238] She lived near a training college, which had a large field where the neighborhood children would play cricket and run around. Play time might have been somewhat unstructured, but even then, she was accompanied by a servant to ensure her safety. Regardless of such surveillance, play time provided her with a space outside of the home to interact with neighboring girls. Since she was homeschooled, Krishna Bose used to play with neighborhood children daily after they returned from school. She described one specific game they played, which was an adaptation of Robin Hood, her favorite book.[239] While the neighborhood was a small unit in the large city, the semi-public nature of this enclosed space provided a site for social interaction. The space for play with neighboring peers gave young girls opportunities to both hone social skills and foster intimacy.

Expanding Networks: Connections Beyond the Home

Neighborhoods are reliable sites of social interaction, if not for anything other than the fact that they force people to be in proximity with others. For many children, neighbors were their first social connections outside of tight-knit family units. Forming these connections eventually allowed women to interact more broadly outside of the home and provided them with both tangible and intangible connections over time. While these interactions allowed girls and women opportunities to expand their relationships to those outside the family, they also functioned as chances for their circles to expand to those outside of their age groups, religious communities, and to professional networks.

For many young children, neighborhoods created a sense of camaraderie and earliest childhood friendships. For instance, Krishna Bose admitted that her neighborhood in South

[238] Sufia Ahmed, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 17, 2017.
[239] Bose, *Lost Addresses*, 36.

Calcutta helped her dispel loneliness as an only child who was homeschooled.[240] She gained many neighborhood aunts and uncles and became friends with neighborhood children. Her family's big garden "became a kids' playground" for the neighboring children.[241] Her father constructed a badminton court in the garden and since her parents and other adults played, it encouraged the children to also play. By changing the physical space to allow for recreational activities that emphasized leisure, Krishna's father created a place for the neighborhood children to gather and participate in activities. Due to such efforts and the families' proximity, Krishna became good friends with Minu, a young girl who lived in the house next to hers. She felt like one of Minu's siblings and described the way that Minu's brothers treated her like their second little sister.[242] During her interview, Krishna further commented on her friendship with Minu, telling me that Minu was for a long time her only friend since Krishna did not go to school until she was thirteen years old.[243] Krishna reiterated how these neighborhood friends were paramount to her life as they acted as substitute siblings for her. Even if understood through kinship terms of the family, Krishna's neighborhood sociality expanded her circle of friends to those besides her cousins, who, until she met Minu, were her most prominent playmates and confidants. Krishna stressed the importance of neighborhood friends as crucial for an only child like herself in her interview as well.[244] As a shy child, neighborhood friendships opened her up to socializing in a safe environment long before she was ready to meet peers in settings like schools or workplaces.

The bonds created between women began early in their lives, often before they ventured outside of the home and the neighborhood. In the previous chapter, I delineated how schools were important sites of socialization for women during college and university. Similar forms of sociality

[240] Ibid., 32.
[241] Ibid., 33.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Krishna Bose, Personal Interview, Kolkata, March 30, 2017.
[244] Ibid.

were evident in primary and secondary educational sites as well, except that these had the added benefit of allowing neighborhood friends to attend the same schools. A number of my female interviewees noted that they connected neighborhood friendships to school friendships. For example, Niaz Zaman (b. 1941), a well-known Bangladeshi academic and writer, moved several times throughout her childhood, but spent many of those years in Dacca starting from 1948.[245] Niaz lived in Baily Road, a posh area of Dacca in the 1950s. She was good friends with Nazma Sadiq, a girl who lived in the same building as her. Being in close proximity allowed the girls opportunities to be playmates. They would visit each other's homes and socialize within the neighborhood complex. In her interview, Niaz mentioned playing hopscotch and other games within the neighborhood, but nothing that stands out as eventful, once again emphasizing the ordinary activities and leisurely time spent that bought the girls together. When asked about the composition of the community she lived in, even by 1950s, Niaz remembered encountering few Hindu girls as part of her neighborhood friends' group in Dacca's Baily Road area. As someone who was not ethnically Bengali, she stressed that there were a few non-Bengali families in the neighborhood. Within her neighborhood, then, she had to learn early enough to befriend those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Her neighborhood was mostly comprised of families of men who worked in government service, like her father. In Niaz's interview, even though she lived in a neighborhood that was mostly populated by Bengali families, she emphasized that she spoke to her neighbors and friends in English. Given the fact that most families were educated and of upper-class status, English was the common language that connected her neighbors. Niaz moved from Baily Road to Minto Road around 1955, another up-scale area not too far from her old neighborhood. In her new neighborhood, she recalled being friends with the children of other government officials. She started attending school at Virqannessa

[245] Niaz Zaman, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 17, 2017. Niaz Zaman is currently a Professor at the Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB). She is a scholar who often translates Bengali women's fiction into English and has been involved in getting more women's voices published in Bangladesh.

Girls School from 1955-1957, a school that was close enough for her to walk. Her friend Nazma from Baily Road was her classmate. Even when Niaz changed neighborhoods, her friends and neighbors from her childhood neighborhoods were at the same high school as her. For Niaz and many others, the foundations of female sociality were formed during their childhood days before formal schooling began. Niaz's anecdotes and experiences point to a common sphere of childhood social networks that provided girls with playmates and early friends.

Neighborhoods provided early childhood experiences of inter-religious friendships and relationships among Bengal's Hindu and Muslim populations. Childhood friendships were contingent upon the composition of neighborhoods, which were often populated by families of similar social status, but not always the same religious communities. Hasna Begum (1935-2020) shared her memories of her childhood in Calcutta and Dacca in the 1940s and 1950s in her Bengali memoir and in an interview.[246] Hasna's memoir, *Sonar Horin Chai* [I want Golden Deer] was written and completed in 1978, drawn from the diaries she kept from when she was twelve years old. Hasna stated that she never intended to publish her memoir, which is surprising given that she was a prolific academic and writer who wrote more than a dozen books and numerous articles, in both English and Bengali.[247] Yet, she was eventually convinced by friends to publish her autobiography towards the end of her life in 2015, but she chose to focus only on her life until 1978, when she first began teaching as a professor of Philosophy at Dhaka University. She felt that her childhood, adolescence, and youth represented one stage of her life, and that the years afterwards constituted different life stages. She planned to write a second volume on her life, but that unfortunately did not

[246] Hasna Begum, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 11, 2017. Hasna Begum was professor of philosophy at Dhaka University; see also her memoir, Hasna Begum, *Sonar Horin Chai* (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash, 2015).
[247] Hasna Begum, *Sonar Horin Chai* (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash, 2015).; See also her obituary, Rainer Ebert, "Bangladeshi philosopher, feminist author, and social activist Hasna begum dead at 85," <https://rainerebert.com/2020/12/01/obituary-hasna-begum/>

happen. Given her focus on the first forty years of her life, Hasna's text provides insight into the life experiences of a young woman.

Hasna spent her childhood in north Calcutta, in the Maniktala neighborhood. This neighborhood was part of the "Black Town." From the mid-eighteenth century, many Bengalis who made fortunes working with the East India Company, like banians and dewans, or the nouveau rich, settled down in this area. One of the oldest roads in Calcutta, the Bagbazar Road became a "well-structured Bengali urban middle-class territory through a reorganization of the old space."[248] Hasna mentioned that her family was the only Muslim family in Maniktala at that time. Given that she lived in a predominately Hindu neighborhood, Hasna's friends' identities reflected that. During her childhood in Maniktala, Hasna used to play with two daughters of her father's Hindu colleague. Her father was a police officer and the family lived in a *thana* [police] complex. Her playmates, sisters Abha and Sobha, lived very close to Hasna's house. Hasna, her younger sister Jharna, Abha, and Sobha used to play together before they started school in 1945. They would usually spend their days playing in the courtyard and fields surrounding the complex. The open and accessible spaces within the neighborhood fostered easy sociality among the children since proximity facilitated face to face interactions. In her interview, Hasna stated that she did not remember religion being an issue in terms of who she was allowed to play with.[249] Perhaps for Hasna, friendships allowed her to refuse alignment with what Leela Gandhi calls "possessive communities of belonging."[250] These memories of friendships seem to occlude critical assessment of the role played by religion. Ordinary affects normalize certain habits of relating, perhaps pushing differences like religion aside. From what Hasna wrote and shared in conversation, class and parental occupation seemed to have been the determining factor about the children with whom she spent time. Hasna shared that she, her sister,

[248] Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, 90.
[249] Hasna Begum, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 11, 2017.
[250] Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, 10.

and her friends shared a morning friendship ritual of going to pick flowers. They used to compete to see which girl would pick the morning *shefali* flowers each day. After Manikatala, Hasna's family moved to the Ultadanga neighborhood in 1946, near a Jain temple, also in north Calcutta. There, the local neighborhood girls used to go and pick flowers from the temple. Hasna was not the only woman to have highlighted girls going out in the morning to pick fresh flowers. This everyday act of young girls gathering to pick flowers was a friendship ritual that was possible only among friends in the neighborhood. Being able to meet in the morning provided the girls with easy companionship to begin everyday by socializing with friends. These inter-religious modes of female sociality were remembered as being the norm rather than the exception in today's divided Bengal.

Interreligious friendships in neighborhoods were paramount in providing resources, support, and lifelong friendships to young girls. For example, we can look at how neighborhoods fostered a strong connection between best friends Jinnat and Pratima. Jinnat Ara Begum (b. 1956) and Pratima Kundu (b. 1956), friends from when they were children, in their interviews, described their childhood in Dinajpur, a town near the Bangladesh-India border.[251] They met each other in their early teens, in the district where they grew up. Jinnat was from a Muslim family while Pratima was from a Hindu family, but religion was never a point of contention in their relationship throughout their lives. Jinnat emphasized that they did not go to the same school as children, but that they knew each other from seeing each other at neighborhood events and occasions. They spent time at each other's homes as part of their everyday friendship rituals, and in doing so, became extensions of each other's families. Pratima participated in multiple cultural programs in the neighborhood and was often involved in activities like drama and singing. Jinnat attended the events as a supporter rather than a performer due to family responsibilities.[252] The neighborhood and the small town in

[251] Jinnat Ara Begum, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 13, 2017; Pratima Kundu, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 13, 2017. I interviewed each woman separately first and then together about their friendship.
[252] Jinnat Ara Begum, Personal Interview.

general had groups that organized events for the neighborhood children, where there were no divisions between the children in terms of religion or gender. Pratima recalled that she and Jinnat used to go to the local *Rajbari* [nobility's home] for big events like Durga Puja and other *melas* [fairs].[253] During the interview, Jinnat also added that she used to go to Pratima's house for Durga puja.[254] Like many other Bengali women, they only know each other through their *daaknams* [nicknames], Lata for Jinnat and Buli for Pratima. The usage of *daaknaams* in how they refer to each other among young women points to the intimacy of their relationship, since casual acquaintances would only know each other's "formal" names used in school. Jinnat and Pratima's neighborhood friendship has survived to the present day and even though both women left Dinajpur in the 1970s, the two reunited again in Dhaka, where they both currently reside. During our interview, the women solemnly bought up the fact that many Hindu families left East Bengal after 1971, but they were grateful that Pratima's family stayed. Pratima continues to be an important part of Jinnat's life and is thought of as family by Jinnat's daughter who introduced me to Pratima as her *mashi* (aunt). These interreligious friendships that began in the neighborhoods have expanded to intergenerational friendships.

Intergenerational friendships connected girls and women to others in the contained space of the neighborhood who became supporters and mentors to them. Some women also highlighted the role of older girls in the neighborhood. Jinnat mentioned that she liked learning from the older girls by collecting books and magazines from them in the neighborhood.[255] One such periodical was *Begum*, the premier magazine for Bengali Muslim women. As the eldest child, Jinnat had many responsibilities, especially since her mother was often ill. However, in her spare time, she read

[253] Pratima Kundu, Personal Interview. Durga Puja is one of Bengal's most prominent Hindu festivals, honoring the Goddess Durga.
[254] Jinnat Ara Begum, Personal Interview.
[255] Jinnat Ara Begum, Personal Interview.

voraciously by borrowing books from neighborhood girls. Her neighborhood friend, Sakina, whom she called Buri-*apa,*[256] was five or six years older than her, and used to often give her books. Even though she attended school, her neighborhood friends were a source of support separate from the friends she made at school. Many other women, both in their autobiographies and interviews, also spoke affectionately of older neighborhood girls, whose company and friendships gave these young girls solace. One woman, Chitra Das (b. 1942), who grew up in Calcutta in the 1940s and 1950s, spoke effusively of Khuku-di, a girl four years her senior with whom she used to share stories.[257] Khuku lived across the street from Chitra, and was the only friend with whom Chitra's family allowed her to go to the movies. By virtue of living in proximity to each other, families welcomed and encouraged neighborhood friendships among young girls. These relationships were also convenient when girls were going to school and had peers to accompany them on their walks to and from schools. These activities and rituals may have been permissible for girls' safety but also provided easy companionship.

A widening social circle allowed for both support, help, and companionship in new spaces for married women who often moved to new neighborhoods. Married women in Bengal often sought solace and companions among neighboring women. For these married women, the neighborhood was also a space for new forms of sociality. Krishna wrote that when her family moved to South Calcutta, a neighborhood *mashima* [aunt] became close friends with her mother and taught her mother new recipes.[258] Many newly married women left their natal families to live with their husbands and oftentimes their in-laws, in new neighborhoods and new cities. Alia Amin, and other women whom I have interviewed, repeated similar trends of turning to neighboring women

[256] The term *apa* is an honorific used for elder sister or elder woman in Bangladesh. It is the equivalent to *didi* in West Bengal.
[257] Chitra Das, Personal Interview, Kolkata, March 4, 2017.
[258] Bose, *Lost Addresses*, 31.

for support. Alia Amin was an army wife and due to her husband's posting in a different city every year, she moved around a lot.[259] Alia was married at age sixteen and immediately left her natal family. In her interview, she fondly recalled the women in neighborhoods across Bengal with whom she bonded. She stated that older neighboring women often provided support, such as helping with housing as she and her husband moved from one government posting to another. Alia also recollected hosting gatherings at her house for her neighbors, where the women exchanged recipes and new foods, helping the younger and newer wives adjust to married life and learn new skills. Mrinalini Raha (b. 1938), an educator and social worker who spent much of her time in north and central Calcutta, declared that her friendship with Mira Tiwari, one of her closest friends today, came out of a chance meeting at a neighborhood pool.[260] They lived in a middle-class neighborhood where the young children were provided swimming lessons at a local pool, and they met when taking their children there. Being in a new space as a young mother meant that Mrinalini's network was primarily limited to family and in-laws, but meeting other young mothers in the neighborhood provided her with a community of others similar to herself. Sanchi Kar (b. 1943) was another woman who recalled being young and in a new place just outside of Calcutta in the 1950s when she was married at age fourteen.[261] She moved to Sodepur, a town just outside of Calcutta, from Faridpur, East Bengal for her husband's work while her own family remained in East Bengal. When she moved to Sodepur in 1959, she did not have any family or friends there. Over time, she became friends with Manorama Biswas, her neighbor in Sodepur. Sanchi remembered relying upon Manorama for many things, including helping Sanchi look after her children. Their close friendship and neighborly connections led to them becoming in-laws when Sanchi's son married Manorama's daughter years later. In her interview, Sanchi was adamant that neighborhood women taught her how to cook, and

[259] Alia Amin, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 6, 2017.
[260] Mrinalini Raha, Personal Interview, Kolkata, January 25, 2017.
[261] Sanchi Kar, Personal Interview, Sodepur, May 23, 2017.

adjust to a new country as she was alone and childless at that time. When her husband went away to work in Calcutta for a few years, she would rely on her female neighbors, including Manorama, to provide comfort and support. For these young, married women, the neighborhood became vital to forming friendships and connections, helping them to survive in new places where there was minimal family support.

The neighborhood allowed for an expansion of girls' and women's social ties and intimacy through public celebrations and festivals. The neighborhood offered women opportunities to interact with other families, particularly during cultural festivals and events. In my interview with Krishna Bose, she answered a few of my questions regarding a major neighborhood event in Calcutta, the Moni Mela.[262] It was a large, citywide fair that encouraged children's participation. Krishna recalls going to Moni Mela, which took place in north Calcutta, in the Entally area on Ananda Palit Road. There, she was exposed to other children—some of whom were not from her neighborhood—who shared her interests in writing. Through events like Moni Mela, the local neighborhood was expanded to briefly connect with nearby neighborhoods.

Sultana Kamal (b. 1950), a Bangladeshi lawyer and activist, in her interview discussed a similar organization in Dacca in the 1950s.[263] The Kochi Kacha Mela, which literally translates to "Young and Fresh Fair," was a gathering of young people that was based in Old Dacca, a neighborhood of stalwarts of the period. Sultana shared that the entire neighborhood would become involved in this young people's congregation. The goal was to organize and provide neighborhood children with various social activities. Sultana recalled it as a fond memory where she learned many things. She mentioned that one of her closest friends today is a woman named Jhinu, whom she first

[262] To my understanding, the Moni Mela is no longer celebrated in present-day Kolkata.
[263] Sultana Kamal, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 5, 2017. Sultana is the daughter of Sufia Kamal, a figure greatly admired by Bangladeshi people. Both Sultana, as a student, and her mother were some of the people involved in the creation and establishment of independent Bangladesh in 1971. As such, Sultana Kamal is of the generation of women who actively fought for an independent nation, and watched the nation take shape.

met when they were children at Kochi Kacha Mela. These small fairs were opportunities for young women to interact and forge friendships with neighboring women.

Fairs and festivals were being newly created and introduced throughout the twentieth century as ways to raise cultural and regional awareness. They allowed an expansion to the world beyond the home and neighborhood to engage broadly with the region of Bengal as a whole. In her memoir of life in Calcutta in the first few decades of the twentieth century, Saraladebi Chaudhurani (1872-1945) of the Tagore family wrote that it was difficult to maintain social interactions with people outside of intimate marital relations.[264] Saraladebi's autobiography, *Jeevaner Jhara Pata* [Scattered Leaves of my Life] was serialized in a Bengali periodical towards the end of her life, from 1942-43. The text primarily focused on her life until 1905, when she married and moved from Bengal to Punjab. The autobiography was translated into English in 2011, with a focus on her nationalist politics. While Saraladebi spent most of the text on her upbringing and various ventures in the realms of education, writing, and activism, she also pointed to the varying relationships she fostered and the people who were a part of her everyday life. Despite her suggestion that she could not always maintain strong social ties, the activities she participated in created spaces for sociality among women. Saraladebi wrote that for cultural events she would invite neighborhood women and ask them to dress a certain way for occasions.[265] Through such efforts, women like Saraladebi created "tradition" for cultural activities, such as encouraging extravagant celebrations for the new year. Celebrations for the Bengali new year, *Pohela Boishak,* took on a greater importance in the twentieth century.

Cultural festivals like Pohela Boishak were crucial in maintaining connections among Bengalis in the 1950s and 1960s in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal. It was particularly

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[264] Saraladebi Chaudhurani, *Scattered Leaves of my Life: An Indian Nationalist Remembers,* Translated and edited by Sikata Banerjee (Kolkata: Women Unlimited, 2011), 170.
[265] Ibid., 172.

significant for Bengali Muslims who lived outside of Bengal. Khushi Kabir, a well-known activist in Bangladesh, and other women who lived in West Pakistan during that time, discussed the importance of maintaining and creating Bengali traditions while the Pakistani government attacked "Bengali" cultural activities as anti-Islamic.[266] The cultural revolution during the 1950s and 1960s in East Bengal flourished due to the creation of new traditions that emphasized East Bengal's "Bengaliness" in the face of government opposition. The cultural revolution in East Bengal, which gave rise to organizations like Chhayanaut, explains in part why "Bengali" cultural traditions are heavily emphasized in modern Bangladesh. In East Bengal, residents had to actively fight to maintain their Bengali identity and language as the government of Pakistan sought to ban Bengali music and traditions deemed too "Hindu." Pohela Boishak is celebrated in both West Bengal and Bangladesh every year. Young people in many neighborhoods of Dhaka spend the night before Pohela Boishak painting *alponas* [murals] on the streets. In Kolkata, many celebrate the occasion at home, while in Dhaka it is a far more public affair. In both cities, the celebrations revolve around food and gatherings with family and friends. Women often wear new saris and prepare meals highlighting Bengali cuisine. Socializing is the crux of the occasion, therefore it is hardly surprising that the Bengali women I interviewed associate Pohela Boishak gatherings with friendship and the cementing of intimate ties beyond the home.

Professional and Social-Political Networks: Neighborhood Connections

Neighborhood sociality often took on the role of not only providing companionship but strengthening those connections by opening other doors and opportunities for girls and women to learn. Neighborhoods were often clustered around similar social class and status. For Bengali women who came from prominent and well-connected families, their childhood and young

[266] Khushi Kabir, Personal interview, Dhaka, November 20, 2017.

adulthood interactions with neighbors influenced their career choices and participation in social and political activities. In her memoir, Krishna Bose wrote about her life in the 1940s at Rashbehari Avenue, a prominent street and neighborhood in South Calcutta. Southern Calcutta, which was considered a "newer" part of town, was shaped by the development of Rashbehari Avenue, which was itself developed from the backwaters of the southern fringe of the city.[267] It was scarcely populated during the early years of the twentieth century, but was on the rise by the time Krishna's family moved there. The areas around the road became a microcosm of Calcutta's twentieth-century urbanization. The number of residential houses grew, as increasing numbers of Bengali Hindu and middle-class families settled in the area.[268] By the 1940s, Rashbehari Avenue was a "full-fledged Bengali neo-middle-class locality" of government servants, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and literary personalities.[269] It also became a site of a multilinguistic society, and included people from other parts of India, especially South India. Rashbehari Avenue and the Bengali South Town allowed for the proximity of rich and poor in the city due to the paucity of urban space, even if the poor are erased in middle-class women's memoirs. In her memoir, Krishna remembered that Rashbehari Avenue in 1940s was "like a colony of artists, writers and scholars."[270] She went on to mention prominent figures like the poet-writer couple Narendra Dev and Radharani Devi who lived nearby, the eminent portrait painter Atul Bose, and the famous poet Buddhadev Bose and sculptor Pradosh Dasgupta, all of whom lived on Rashbehari Avenue. A few of these artists who lived in her neighborhood started the "Calcutta Group" in 1943, India's first collective of modernist artists.[271] Krishna reflected that she did not realize until she became an adult the extraordinary group of

[267] Banerjee, *Memoirs of Roads*, 134.
[268] Ibid., 136-38. For instance, Kankulia Road was dotted with slums since slums grew in plots earned by upper-class residents. Middle-class households sprung up around streets like Jamir Lane, Swinhoe Street, Fern Road in the 1930s.
[269] Ibid., 143.
[270] Bose, *Lost Addresses*, 76.
[271] Bose, *Lost Addresses*, 77.

people she lived around.[272] It is not unusual given such people around her that Krishna's social circle was composed of creative and well-connected peers. Nor is it surprising that that she was encouraged to write and publish her own poetry and essays before she went to college. Living in this neighborhood honed her skills and confidence in her abilities. These neighborhood connections in her youth opened a myriad of professional and network opportunities for Krishna. While many middle-class women were provided an education, the access to influential neighbors no doubt provided additional opportunities and advantages.

Sultana Kamal (b. 1950), the daughter of the famous poet and activist Sufia Kamal, expressed similar sentiments regarding her childhood and easy access to professional networks.[273] She described living in a neighborhood in Old Dacca in the 1950s and 1960s composed of prominent activists and artists. Old Dacca during that time was similarly rising in status as a middle-class hub. Given her mother's status as a well-known writer and activist and the fact that their family's associates were at the forefront of creating the new nation of Bangladesh in 1971, it is not surprising that Sultana felt that she never had to seek out friends or support. People often introduced themselves to her, unprompted. Being in a neighborhood of well-connected people who often sought her family out meant that Sultana had a plethora of professional opportunities when it came to being involved in education, arts, and politics. Having neighbors who embodied variety gave her the tools to later become part of the Bangladeshi independence movement, something that was only possible due to the social networks she was able to foster as a young woman in a vibrant community.

While neighborhoods opened Bengali women to socializing with women from other religious communities, they also ensured their friendships were with women who shared the same

[272] Ibid., 78.
[273] Sultana Kamal, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 5, 2017.

social class. The examples of Krishna Bose and Sultana Kamal, two women who are well-known for their family connections in present-day West Bengal and Bangladesh, point to the truism of neighborhoods forming around people of similar social status. Both Krishna and Sultana were aware that their upbringings and the social connections of their parents allowed them to meet other prominent women and make friends with other women who went on to become trailblazers within their respective milieus. Most of these educated women tended to cluster around affluent and progressive families, many of whom were people who became architects of the new postcolonial nations.

For others, the neighborhood provided opportunities to be a part of a community and give back. Bela Bandyopadhyay (1933-2009), a schoolteacher who penned a memoir of her life in Calcutta, wrote that in 1940s she lived in a flat in Calcutta.[274] Bela's father moved the family to the Kumartuli-Bagbazar area of North Calcutta, due to the Japanese bombing in Rangoon (Burma), where they were staying earlier. Because her family lived in many places, she did not have a stable school life, but loved learning.[275] She recalled becoming involved in neighborhood activities during that decade. She wrote that the girls of the upper class, like her, also volunteered around the neighborhood before Partition, allowing opportunities for them to learn from each other. They often worked with poor girls and families and helped them to access resources to do better in school and take care of their families. Learning how to identify educational needs and teach young girls provided Bela with skills that were useful when she later became a schoolteacher and social worker. Another woman, Sidiqua Zaman (b. 1939), mentioned starting a school for younger children in her neighborhood in Shamibag, what is now old Dacca, when she was in class eight.[276] She described her neighborhood as full of prominent personalities of Dacca society. In her interview, she stated that

[274] Bela Bandyopadhyay, *Alo Andharir Kolkata* (Kolkata: Setu, 2011).
[275] Ibid.
[276] Sidiqua Zaman, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 11, 2017.

she was "lucky" to be exposed to many others who shared similar social class as her family. Sidiqua felt the neighborhood was safe and everyone knew each other. Therefore, the idea to give back by making sure the younger children in the neighborhood had access to education was an easy decision. For women like Bela and Sidiqua, the neighborhood was a community that often functioned like a large family where everyone knew each other and helped out. Being in such a community allowed these women to utilize their social networks and give back through volunteer opportunities by learning skills that later shaped their work as adults.

The location of political and social organizations within the neighborhood meant that girls and women did not have to venture far to be a part of the public sphere; they could remain within the bounded space of the neighborhood and still participate in political and cultural debates. Neighborhood organizations in the cities mirrored the political and social issues of the time. Such associations were a critical part of young women's lives, allowing them to become active in local and national issues. To show the significance of these organizations in fostering sociality and an alternative women's sphere, we can look at examples of two organizations, the Hindustan Sangha in Calcutta in 1940s and Chhayanaut in Dacca in the 1960s. These organizations were early sites of female political activity and sociality.

In her memoir, Krishna Bose stated that young people of her *para* decided to form a neighborhood club in the 1940s, and called it Hindustan Sangha because it was in the Hindustan Park area.[277] The club was inaugurated with much fanfare, and Krishna described dressing in a sari, which was an act reserved for special occasions for young girls. She also detailed that she danced at the occasion and that "it was the first public dance performance of my life."[278] Neighborhood clubs were important sites where girls and young women publicly participated in activities outside of the

[277] Bose, *Lost Addresses*, 31.
[278] Ibid.

home. Krishna articulated that neighborhood clubs served various purposes, where "for some, the social and cultural activities were simply a cover for spreading the message of anti-colonial nationalism."[279] For many young people, these clubs were vehicles that introduced them to nationalist discourses and political sentiments. For some, the club was "intended to divert youthful energy away from nationalism and into innocuous channels."[280] For others, the purpose was cultivating cultural activity, such as dance, music and poetry. Krishna stated that her neighborhood club was the third type, and it "fostered a sense of community in our neighbourhood."[281] The significance of community building through social activities allowed these organizations to ensure that neighborhood children had a place where they could safely participate with their family's consent since the family was often involved or could keep a close eye on the organization. Some of the activities of the Hindustan Sangha were celebrating *Pohela Boishak* and staging cultural events. Despite Krishna's suggestion that it was primarily a cultural organization, the Sangha's activities in the 1940s show otherwise. Neighborhood boys and girls took part in protest parades leading up to Indian independence, inspiring a sense of community and patriotism. While neighborhood clubs provided socialization, they also provided experiences and activities that kept women informed of larger social and political matters.

Similarly, neighborhood cultural organizations played a large part in the 1960s in Dacca as Bengali resistance against the Pakistani government increased. In East Bengal, the poet Sufia Kamal and several other progressives founded Chhayanaut in Dacca in 1961. The organization emerged during the celebration of Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary, when a group of Bengali intellectuals and artists decided that they needed a space to celebrate Bengali culture during a period when the government was strongly discouraging the celebration of Tagore and his songs,

[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid., 32.

rabindrasangeet.[282] The group observed Tagore's birth centenary and immediately decided to create an organization to disseminate and observe Bengali cultural traditions, through activities such as musical performances that highlighted Bengali songs, and festivals like the Bengali New Year. Chhayanaut grew from a small neighborhood organization to one of the most well-known cultural spaces in Dhaka today, with a large complex where many seasonal festivals are held. The organization opened a cultural center to teach music and general cultural activities to children as well as published a quarterly journal, *Bangladesher Hridoy Hote* [Be the Heart of Bangladesh], on Bengali language and literature.[283] When it first emerged as an organization under Sufia Kamal, the goal was to ensure a space for Bengali cultural activities where children could easily learn and participate in what it meant to be Bengali during a period when "Bengaliness" was seen as a threat to the state. If neighborhood organizations in the 1940s encouraged young women in Bengal to protest colonial rule, in the 1960s East Bengal's organizations sought to instill a love for a Bengali cultural identity. Neighborhood organizations provided young women space to actively partake in social and political debates.

Many other women mentioned smaller neighborhood organizations that encouraged sociality that helped to cement friendships and widen their networks. Niaz Zaman, for example, described the importance of neighborhoods in fostering socialization through organized groups, like the Maidens' Club, which parents in the neighborhood started.[284] Members included girls of different ages and meeting took place at the Chief Secretary's house. Club activities included picnics, *melas*, and cooking simple dishes like *kichuri* together. These activities, although not always initiated by the girls themselves, can also be understood as friendship rituals that fostered sociality. Although events

[282] "Chhayanaut," *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*. Page modified November 27, 2014. Accessed April 30, 2019 <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Chhayanaut>
[283] Ibid.
[284] Niaz Zaman, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 17, 2017.

like group picnics and *melas* were occasional, the ordinary and everyday skill of cooking simple dishes produced intimate bonds between the girls. By emphasizing the unit of neighborhood as a vehicle for young women's socialization, neighborhood clubs like the Maidens' Club provided girls opportunities to connect and create life-long friendships. While many others were torn from their friends due to the riots and violence of the 1950s, Niaz lost friends when her father was transferred to a new location in 1956. She stated that after moving to Rajshahi in 1956 from Dacca, she did not have many friends. Yet, when she returned to Dacca to attend college at Holy Cross, she reconnected with friends she had previously made at the neighborhood secondary school, as well as the friends she made through groups like the Maidens' Club. Smaller, intimate neighborhood organizations were crucial in cementing friendship ties that lasted beyond childhood, even as over time women changed neighborhoods.

Creating a Women's Time: Neighborhoods in Rural Bengal

Despite the focus on neighborhoods in cities, rural and village Bengal were not devoid of neighborhood sociality. Many girls and women primarily interacted with family and relatives due to the structure of joint family homes. However, there were also other ways that women in rural Bengal connected to each other. Neighborhood sociality in the villages of Bengal shared similar tropes observed in urban neighborhoods. Hemangini Dutta (1891-1965), in her memoir, *Harano Gram* [The Lost Village], showed how the neighborhood functioned as a place of sociality in a small village in Comilla in East Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century.[285] The title of Hemangini's memoir already evokes a sense of nostalgia and a past that she hopes to capture in her writing. Written in 1960 on a relative's request, just five years before her death, it looks back on Hemangini's life in the village primarily until the 1920s, juxtaposed with a return trip in the 1940s. The memoir was lost

[285] Hemangini Dutta, *Harano Gram (*Dhaka: Gonoprakashani, 2010).

after her death and found years later by her nephew and published in 2010. Rather than writing an autobiography focused on her life, the emphasis, as the title indicates, was on the place Hemangini's memories always returned to, even as she moved away from the village. Her memoir painted a life of an idyllic village that she wrote was once common of villages around Bengal, but which she suggests no longer exists. Hemangini wrote about life in the *bari*, a neighborhood unit in the village composed of various households clustered around an open space. Hemangini described an incident from women's everyday life in the neighborhood that points to village women's creation of an alternative space for themselves. She recalled that girls and women in the *bari* always liked to talk and be in conversation with one another. After lunch, the *bari* women would gather, including housewives and new brides.[286] The after-lunch period was one of the only free times available to women, since their male children would be at school and the men at work or at the office for those who had government jobs. This period available to women, what I call "women's time," was an essential moment in their daily life. Hemangini wrote that the women's gathering, or *botuk*, was held in an open verandah, which harkens back to what many women have confirmed about the importance of open spaces in creating intimate congregation. In these spaces, women discussed a variety of topics, from everyday subjects like recipes, upcoming relative visits, household changes, to discussions on subjects like marriage arrangements for the young women and men in the village. Having easy access to other women at the neighborhood level gave women an opportunity to not only meet and socialize, but also to discuss familial problems and changes with other women in similar situations. Given the constraints on women's time, the neighborhood and this structured social time acted as an oasis for women's social connections and networks. "Women's time" was as much an escape from domestic life as it was a catalyst of socialization.

[286] Ibid., 94.

Young girls in villages interacted with the neighborhood similarly to the girls in the cities, forming connections through everyday friendship rituals that bonded them. Jowshan Ara Rahman, a social worker who spent her childhood in Chunati, a small village in Chittagong, revealed similar activities that girls took part in during the 1940s in her memoir of an ordinary woman, aptly titled *An Unknown Woman*. [287]Initially published in Bengali in 2005, Jowshan decided to translate it to English in 2016, arguing that more people should learn about what life for women was like in the past. In her interview with me, when I asked about her childhood, she spent a considerable amount of time discussing the courtyard where she played with other neighboring children.[288] Similar to the women mentioned by Hemangini, Jowshan's cousins would gather in the verandah and sing together. The girls would also regularly awake at dawn and visit nearby fields to collect *shiuli* [night jasmine] to make wreaths.[289] Additionally, girls also took part in cultural activities. Jowshan specified that she had a "colorful home environment," where music, especially *rabindrosangeet*, was the norm.[290] In her memoir, she further expanded on this by writing that she and her siblings used to put on cultural events at their village home that the whole neighborhood would come to, where they would have music and dancing. Like the village women who carved out time with neighboring friends, so too did young village girls seek opportunities to participate in creative activities.

Nostalgia and Neighborhood Memories

In looking at how women spoke or wrote of their neighborhoods, it is essential to remember that these idyllic and past memories were ways women were constructing their own life histories. Since these women were often writing and sharing their memories decades later, they might be influenced by the present in how they read and understand not only their own past, but also

[287] Jowshan Ara Rahman, *An Unknown Woman: Memoir*, Edited by Marianne Schotle (Dhaka: Yukta, 2016).
[288] Jowshan Ara Rahman, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 5, 2017.
[289] Jowshan Ara Rahman, *An Unknown Woman*, 27.
[290] Jowshan Ara Rahman, Personal Interview.

significant historical events and moments. For many women in South Asia, the specter of traumatic events like Partition have shaped how they define people of other religious and social communities. While it is easy to discount women's pre-Partition memories of harmonious friendships and social interactions as nostalgia, the larger question I am interested in is why women felt the need to recall or write about specific past memories in certain ways. By emphasizing the fact that their playmates and neighbors were often girls from different religious or ethnic traditions, they showed that they were aware that so much has changed over time that in many neighborhoods, the idea of living side-by-side with what are now minority communities in their current respective nations is rare. Women's nostalgia for life "back in the day" is common, but we must wonder why particular everyday and mundane activities were emphasized or mentioned in their memoirs and interviews. Nostalgia here functions to emphasize what has been lost— specifically the inter-religious friendships between women that the *para* made possible in the pre-Partition period. What makes these ordinary, everyday neighborhood interactions significant enough to be important memories decades later? Perhaps nostalgic memories may be seen as histories for marginalized groups. Women's memories of a past, depicted in their memoirs and interviews, is one way that women understand and shape the historical past. By focusing on what is being said and why, we learn what neighborhoods provided for women and how that impact has shaped their lives.

Women's recollections of a past are often refracted through nostalgic memories as they craft historical narratives. A common theme of longing and wistfulness emerged in the memoirs and interviews when Bengali women spoke of their neighborhoods. However, this nostalgia is not necessarily limited just to one neighborhood, but to the whole city, and to an extent, the larger region of Bengal. Given the significance of Bengal in the history and historiography of colonial India, Bengalis are often depicted as always looking back to a great past. In writing of the nostalgia people have for post-communist cities, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "longing for a home that

no longer exists or has never existed,"[291] an emotion similarly expressed by Bengali women who often had to migrate between Dacca and Calcutta. Women's lived experiences and reminisces of the two cities of Bengal are easily intertwined with the historical hold Calcutta and Dacca have on the Bengali imagination. As Boym tells us, "nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory."[292] An understanding of nostalgia as one that is interconnected with space and place allows us to take seriously women's recollection of their neighborhoods as sites of socialization and belonging. While women's memoirs and memories are specific to their individual life histories, they often place their reminiscences and the past within the present in crafting a biography and a history of the past. Therefore, nostalgia can also be seen as a way to create a historical narrative that gives a voice to women. In considering how people talk of cities and spaces, Boym writes:

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desire to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.[293]

While Boym's definition of nostalgia places it directly in contrast to how "history" itself is commonly defined, women's narrations of a past tinged with nostalgia for "old Calcutta" or "old Dacca" itself allows women to craft a history of an alternative sphere. The comparisons between Calcutta and Dacca show how nostalgia has shaped the cities on both sides of the partition border. While nostalgia is emotionally multi-valent, the nostalgia for old Calcutta and Dacca became similar when describing female friendships in the past. Nostalgic memories function to both obscure the past and show an element of wistfulness for a future that has been foreclosed.

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[291] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xii
[292] Ibid., xvi.
[293] Ibid., xv.

The neighborhood was one of many sites in which girls and women interacted in twentieth-century Bengal. As I have shown, it was a liminal space that girls and women utilized to create social ties and opportunities. In the many different neighborhoods of Bengal, most girls and women felt a collective sense of belonging to their childhood *para*. Memories of the neighborhood produced histories of women's sociality that cannot be easily found elsewhere.

CHAPTER III

In Pursuit of Fulfillment: Women's Occupational Interactions

In 1940, the activist Leelabati Roy, better known as Leela Roy (neé Nag), wrote an essay in *Jayasree* titled "What is the ideal sphere for women's work?." There, Leela wrote about the divisions of labor that continued to make it difficult for women workers to be taken seriously. In her argument for women's work to be expanded, Leela wrote, "we feel that any kind of artificial division between the home and the outer world is unnecessary, all work spheres within and outside the home need to be open for both men and women. Men and women irrespective of their sex should choose their work spheres according to their tastes and necessities."[294] By the 1940s, women's 'work' was quickly becoming an important topic of discussion. The 'tastes' and 'necessities' that Leela mentioned highlight two reasons why women might have taken up work in the twentieth century: some may have chosen to work due to the choice of tasks that they enjoyed or felt compelled to, while others were entering the workforce due to financial necessity.

Although a proponent of women's foray into the public sphere in terms of employment, Leela Roy also held many of the elitist views common among middle-class Bengali women. This is evident in several statements that compare the classes such as: "among the Bengali women, the poor women can work much harder than the rich delicate ones, but this does not mean that the children

[294] Leelabati Roy, "Which is the Ideal Sphere for Women's Work?" in *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*, edited by Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi (Kolkata: Stree and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2014), 365. The article was originally published as *'Meyeder Upajukta Karmashestra Ki*?' in the Baishak 1347 issue of *Jayasree*. *Jayasree* was the first magazine edited, managed, and completely contributed to by women writers.

of the latter are less healthy than those of the former. . ."[295] Given the dominance of middle-class women in these debates, scholars often view such statements as progressive given the overall nature of her argument that women can maintain their traditional roles while still being gainfully employed. However, in the sphere of women's work and careers, class played a significant role in determining which jobs were suitable for which women, and with whom the women could interact. Middle-class women most commonly engaged in service work, whether it was tied to women's organizations, government positions, or pushing for reform and rehabilitation in the 1940s and the refugee crises during the decades after Partition. In contrast, lower-class women were prominent workers in factories, as domestic laborers in middle-class homes, and in entertainment. In the twentieth century, middle-class women started garnering a name for themselves in the entertainment industries, especially in film, dance, and theater. Consequently, the sociality and politics of friendships among women in these fields were often fraught with class prejudices and negotiations.

Indian women's social worlds vastly expanded as more and more women joined the workforce, whether through paid labor or unpaid volunteer service. Domestic service was the largest employer for women in colonial South Asia—most of whom belonged to the lower classes. However, this chapter will not be focusing on the domestic service industry primarily because middle-class women were not servants. In this chapter I focus on two arenas of women's work: work in the social services and the performing arts. These two fields are chosen as representatives of middle-class women's occupations and professional forays during the twentieth century for two reasons. First, from the beginning of the twentieth century, most "respectable" middle-class women viewed volunteer social service work as crucial to helping society, especially by helping those less fortunate through political or social organizations. Since I am concerned with looking at forms of sociality and interactions among middle-class women, social service work is a crucial sphere of

[295] Ibid., 365.

connections. Social service work also allows us to examine both how middle-class women conceived of themselves as saviors and protectors of other (lower-class) women as well as how they interacted with their colleagues. Many social service workers also worked to create spaces of harmony and friendships among Hindus and Muslims in their work. Secondly, while the performing arts—broadly defined here as work in film, theater, and dance—was primarily a space for lower-class women, in the twentieth century it became a space that opened up to middle-class women who then had to interact with women from lower classes as their colleagues. By focusing on the world of the arts, we get a glimpse into the evolution of a profession as it became part of respectable society. The performing arts gained enough acceptability for middle-class women to join in the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1960s, many women had become significant members of the entertainment industry, service work, and the workforce in general.

Middle-class Bengali women have occupied the public sphere since the early twentieth century when they became involved in the protests against the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and then in the 1920s as social reform work opened up a venue for women's voices. By the 1930s, women were becoming more and more involved in women's organizations as the Gandhian call for women's involvement increased women's presence in anti-colonial movements. Historian Geraldine Forbes notes that women were already in the public sphere before Gandhi bought them into public life in the 1930s.[296] Many women's organizations formed during World War I as women took part in war work. This trend of women working during war time drastically increased during the 1940s as the anti-colonial movement dovetailed with World War II. The 1940s and 1950s saw major shifts in the number of women in the workforce due to numerous events, including the 1943 famine, the 1947 Partition, and the subsequent riots of the 1950s and 1960s that created major refugee crises in Bengal.

[296] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 7.

This chapter examines the spaces of work and various modes of sociality of the women of Bengal. In looking at work sites, I include places where women provided labor outside of the home— even if unpaid. I analyze various women's autobiographical writings to examine how they understood the changing workforce for women in the middle of the century. The autobiographies analyzed in this chapter have varying publication histories. Most of the versions I examine were published in the 2000s and 2010s, even though many were written and originally published in Bengali decades earlier. It seems the proliferation of texts on women in various fields of work and social activism during the early 2000s, led to the (re-)publication of translated texts from well-known figures from decades ago. Perhaps the new millennium found an audience who were curious about how women in the past entered and changed various professions and spheres of labor. In my examination of these texts, I look at what women's work entailed as well as what the authors focused on in their autobiographical writings. Women's involvement in these professional performance and volunteer activities were fraught with the negotiation of what it meant to work, how to engage with their co-workers, and their place in the larger communities they sought to serve. Throughout, I argue that women's interactions in the workplace fostered important social bonds that dovetailed with the institution-building of organizations that catered to women's needs. The chapter ends with a section on what the opportunities to work outside of the home meant for women as well as the significance of social connections and friendships formed at work spaces. Ultimately, women's recollections of their work experiences in professional and volunteer settings emphasized various modes of sociality as critical to their successes and failures.

Changing Society and Giving Back: Women in Social Service Work

Most scholars agree that there was an increased number of middle-class women going out in public, both as activists and as professionals. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw

the emergence of the first women doctors, lawyers, and educators in Bengal.[297] With the advent of heightened anticolonial nationalism, women were encouraged to show that they were a part of the solution in working towards progress to change the lives of women generally and all people from the lower classes. Most middle-class women who labored outside of the home took part in social service work or teaching. Female teachers were themselves usually educated, however, social service workers were not always formally educated, but still sought to do work that was deemed respectable. Providing *seva* [service] to the nation and the community came to be seen as an appropriate extension of women's roles from the home to the outside world. Social service volunteer work was one of the few opportunities open to (non-educated) middle-class women in the twentieth century. These opportunities allowed for public socialization among women that extended beyond their community and the family.

Many Bengali women have written that women's service work and social ties were often linked. One early proponent of this argument was the well-known social reformer and writer Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) of the famous Tagore family. Swarnakumari Devi's daughter Saraladebi Chaudhurani (1872-1945) mentioned *Sakhi Samiti*, an organization founded by her mother, where women at her house were often seen sharing knowledge and service work. *Sakhi Samiti* translates to 'Society of Friends' and was started in 1896 by Swarnakumari. It was conceptualized as a social service organization to help orphans and widows. Swarnakumari's report on the organization in the Tagore family magazine *Bharati* stated the following:

> The first aim of the *Samiti* is to help helpless orphans and widows. This will be done in two ways. In those cases where such widows and orphans have no near relations or if those relations have not the means of maintaining them the *Sakhi Samiti* will take their full responsibility. In other cases the *Samiti* will give them help as far as possible. In the case of those women whose full responsibility the *Samiti* will take they will educate them and

[297] Kadambini Ganguly and Anandaibai Joshi were the first female doctors while Cornelia Sorabji was the first female lawyer in India in the late nineteenth century. See *The Memoirs of Dr. Haimabati Sen: from child widow to lady doctor*, Edited by Tapan Raychaudhuri and Geraldine Forbes (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2000) for the struggles of another Bengali woman who fought for financial independence and became a doctor.

> through them spread women's education. After they have finished their education they will take up the work of *zenana* [female] education. The *Samiti* will give them remuneration for their work. In this way two objectives will be accomplished. Hindu widows will be able to earn through service to others according to sanction of Hindu religion.[298]

In keeping both with Hindu values and the contemporaneous women's platform, the focus on uplifting orphans and widows through schooling reveals that early social service and reform work by women aimed to encourage female education. The *Samiti* recognized that widows and orphans without means were often in desperate situations and sought opportunities to ensure they could support themselves. "Service to others" was considered the best way for these "helpless" people to redeem themselves. Invoking religion, they emphasized that the work done by these widows would be "sanction[ed] by Hindu religion," thus ensuring that the work is seen as within the bounds of respectable society.

The objectives and goals of this social service organization were also intertwined with the relationships shared by its members. Given the name, it is hardly surprising that friendship was one of the tropes associated with *Sakhi Samiti*. In her autobiography *Jivaner Jara Pata* [Scattered Leaves of my Life], originally serialized in 1942-1943, Saraladebi explained that her mother created the organization with her friends when the Theosophical Society disbanded.[299] While it was connected to their larger goals of improving women's lives in colonial India, the gatherings and structure of the meetings were premised on the ethos of shared friendships. Saraladebi's memories of her mother's gatherings of women can be read through the lens of 'friendship rituals' and the intimacy of friendships. She wrote about "bed gatherings" where Swarnakumari and her friends would often spend time discussing matters while gathered around the bed.[300] Saraladebi's accounts emphasized

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[298] Quote taken from Lotika Ghose, "*Social and Educational Movements for Women and By Women 1820-1950*," in *Bethune College and School Centenary Volume*, edited by Dr. Kalidas Nag (Calcutta: 1949), 14.
[299] Saraladebi Chaudhurani, *The Scattered Leaves of my Life: An Indian Nationalist Remembers,* translated by Sikata Banerjee (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011), 45.
[300] Ibid., 8.

the centrality of the bed, and she stated: "the women of India cannot speak familiarly when seated on chairs, separated from each other. They need to gather closely, touch one another, before they can communicate comfortably."[301] The intimacy of these gatherings among women who worked together to bring about social reform was connected to a desire to be of service to society. Their sociality was the linchpin their service work hinged upon.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, middle-class women who ventured into the public sphere did so in the name of service work for their country. Middle class women involved in these efforts were able to do so in their spare time, as many often relied upon servants in their household to take care of work in the home. While access to education continued to be important among women's efforts, women's social service work expanded to include skills training, rehabilitation, and relief efforts during the middle of the century. Women like Ashoka Gupta and Manikuntala Sen worked in cities and villages of both East and West Bengal as colonial India transitioned into independent nation states during the 1940s and 1950s. The contributions and work of many of the women in social service fields, such as Ashoka Gupta and Manikuntala Sen, were widely recognized by locals during the middle of the twentieth century when they were most active but forgotten in later decades. The broadening of a reading market and the proliferation of texts on and about women during the 1990s and early 2000s meant many were also eager to learn about women professionals and other workers of the past. As the writer Mahasweta Devi wrote in the foreword of Ashoka Gupta's autobiography, the text is an example of "women marching forward to throw off their shackles to ensure women's progress."[302] While women's autobiographies point to the often unpaid labor provided by women like Ashoka and Manikuntala to social and political

[301] Ibid., 9.
[302] Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, translated from the Bengali by Sipra Bhattacharya and Ranjana Dasgupta (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), viii.

causes in the name of social service, the texts also construct a history of women's sociality as crucial to these women's successes.

Ashoka Gupta and Social Service Work

Social connections and friendships are highlighted in women's autobiographical writings of their occupational lives. Ashoka Gupta (1912-2008) was a well-known Bengali woman who was a member of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), serving as the President of the AIWC in 1986. Ashoka's life of service began in the late 1930s and 1940s. She was especially known for her work in Noakhali during the 1946 riots where she worked to rehabilitate the ravages of communal violence. Before her death, Ashoka recorded her life history in Bengali, which was transcribed and translated by a team at Stree Publishers, a women-centric press based in Kolkata. Ashoka's text, titled *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century,* was written when she was ninety-two years old. In the preface, Ashoka wrote that this text was first recorded in Bengali into a tape recorder, and then transcribed and translated into English. Although this autobiography has been mediated through several channels to get to its written form, it is a remarkable narrative of a woman whose life has been spent in social service work.

Ashoka Gupta performed voluntary, unpaid work, but was nevertheless a significant figure in helping with numerous crises that occurred throughout her life. In the preface of her English memoir, Ashoka wrote that many friends—such as the well-known writer Mahasweta Devi—and family members asked her to write her memoir, but she did not do so until her granddaughter bought her a tape recorder.[303] Her autobiography was initially a recording of her life history which was eventually transcribed. The publisher of Stree, Mandira Sen, was Ashoka's relative and convinced Ashoka that her recording should be transcribed and translated into English. Having

[303] Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, translated from the Bengali by Sipra Bhattacharya and Ranjana Dasgupta (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), xii.

strong support from her family and friends made it easier for women in Ashoka's position to get their writings published. Ashoka stated that she reviewed the draft before it was approved, ensuring readers that the life history told is hers.[304] Her letters and other writings, in both English and Bengali, were later published by friends and colleagues.

In her autobiography, Ashoka discussed the importance of the friendships established through social work. Ashoka's text has a chapter titled "Making Friends and Forming Networks" wherein she described many of the people she worked alongside. She remarked that she came into contact with extraordinary people due to her work in relief and rehabilitation and described those friends as "remarkable women who had a vision for the future and dedicated themselves to working selflessly for the attainment of that vision."[305] The focus on the women who were her colleagues and co-workers points to the centrality of women's involvement in rehabilitation efforts during the post-Partition era, as well as their significance in Ashoka's life. After 1955, a Social Welfare Board was created to do constructive work for women, which Ashoka explained was to make women more independent.[306] A life dedicated to helping women overflowed with friendships with extraordinary women. In terms of her friendships closer to home, she wrote of Romola Sinha and Sneharani Kanjilal, women who were also involved in social reform work in Bengal.[307] Just as proximity to neighbors fostered connections, so too did sharing similar experiences among colleagues in the larger field of social service work.

Ashoka emphasized the sociality of service work even as the nature of the work changed over time. At one point, Ashoka reflected on how social work has changed over the years; now it is a career option while for her it was "motivated by a simple philosophy of social need and

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[304] Ibid, xiii.
[305] Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, translated from the Bengali by Sipra Bhattacharya and Ranjana Dasgupta (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), 156.
[306] Ibid., 159.
[307] Ibid., 246.

compassion."[308] She felt at that time there was no need for rewards or incentives—a hallmark of her own middle class status within the community in addition to altruism. For Ashoka, it was the altruistic nature of service work, as emphasized by Gandhian ideals of what *seva* signified, that shaped her own views of what social service meant to the nation and the people. Additionally, "at that time, social work was not seen as a career," but was similar to "sisterhood" where "a strong bond developed among us."[309] Ashoka's insistence on the centrality of sociality in her work, where the women counted upon each other for mutual support, illustrates her understanding of social work as labor that fostered communities and friendships.

Ashoka's writings have also been posthumously published in *A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta.* In one essay, found among her private paper by friends, she reflected on what social service meant for her:

> As I recall all this, I think to myself that my life is now drawing to a close, and my capacity for work has also reduced. After being a social worker for so many years, have I actually achieved anything worthwhile? And have I received something that will remain forever a source of constant joy? I have no doubt about the answer to this question. The most rewarding and memorable period of my working life was spent in Noakhali in 1946 when I worked for eight continuous months among the riot victims there. This was memorable for me not because we were providing relief, or setting up hospitals and schools or helping in the planning and construction of roads. The work was fulfilling because we were trying to bring human beings closer to each other. We were trying to build bridges between people, between communities. We were trying on the one hand to bring about an attitudinal change among the strong, and on the other helping the weak become strong and courageous.[310]

Here, she harkens back to what she saw as essential to service work: the bridging of people and communities. The context of Ashoka's musing was the aftermath of one of the deadliest communal riots in Bengal, a year before the region was partitioned along religious lines. As someone who helped set up camps and worked to revitalize traumatized populations, Ashoka's insistence that the

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[308] Ibid., 213.
[309] Ibid., 214.
[310] Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta,* compiled and edited by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta and Narayani Gupta (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2013), 31.

importance lay not in the relief that was being provided, but in the changing attitudes reads as the thoughts of a lifelong Gandhian who sought to create love and peace between South Asia's religious communities. The work she did in Noakhali exposed her to the violence perpetrated by Hindus and Muslims against each other. Even decades after the Partition and the tearing apart of the two communities, she still focused on the hope of harmony that many Bengalis continued to have. For Ashoka, the "constant joy" of the work she did was the fact that she helped to bring people together. Her greatest service was the act of fostering friendships between communities, which she saw as the reward for her hard work. In highlighting the impact of social ties among the people she worked to serve, Ashoka's writings also constructed a history of how women's lives were constituted by their relationships.

Ashoka's attitude towards her work illustrates the shifting ideals around women's work in twentieth century Bengal. As someone who came from a well-to-do, upper-middle class family, she never struggled financially the way most working-class women did—as evidenced by her disregard for paid labor as indicated in her writings. Yet, over time, Ashoka realized the necessity of paid labor for women. In her recollections, she stressed the importance of women's financial independence, writing:

> I speak of the importance of financial independence from bitter personal experience. It has always been a matter of deep personal regret to me that I never held a paid job, never earned money myself. The regret is firstly on the question of self-esteem: I never realized how much fulfillment women could find through their jobs, how much they gained in selfhood and confidence. Secondly, a woman can be truly free to follow her own wishes only if she is financially independent.[311]

Women's independence is easily linked to financial security, which was an issue for women as they sought control over their lives. Ashoka's attention to the 'fulfillment' of work and careers for women revealed the changing perceptions of women's work among middle-class society in the later

[311] Ibid., 216.

decades of the twentieth century. Women were previously expected to work only in service for the nation, but now their own desires and choices were recognized as motivation to partake in paid labor. Ashoka's lament that she regretted not having financial independence is illustrative of the shift in ideals from when middle-class women the first half of the twentieth century were expected to provide service to the nation and society to the latter half of the century when financial independence was understood to be a necessity for women. The "bitter[ness]" she felt about the issue of financial independence revealed two things: in trying to uphold the norms of which kind of work was acceptable for middle-class women, she became involved with social reform and social service work, but over time, realized that her labor was unpaid and never allowed her the freedom to do as she wished were she financially independent. Ashoka could take on unpaid work only due to her class position, but acknowledged that financial independence would have provided her with freedom that her gendered class position did not.

In terms of the work Ashoka did over many decades, her contribution to nurturing connections among women should not be ignored. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the Girl Guide movement was a critical space of socialization for school- and college-aged women. Ashoka utilized this organization to help refugee girls in the 1950s. She introduced Girl Guides into the rehabilitation camps and set up training centers in each camp. She herself had been part of the Girl Guide during her own school days, but it was not until she began working to rehabilitate refugee girls and women that she decided to incorporate the organization in her work. She went to the USA in 1956 to study the inner workings of the international Girl Guide organization,[312] which was also her first trip abroad.[313] She spent a few months there with an international group of representatives. In her autobiography, she explained that she went all over the United States, from New York to

[312] The "Girl Guides" of the United States had already changed its name to the Girl Scouts in 1949.
[313] Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service,* 160.

Niagara Falls to Chicago, from the Midwest to California and more visiting various Girl Scout troupes. According to her writing, it was very "educative" and ensured she knew how to foster the ethics of the Girl Guides among the refugee girls and women. Ashoka's relationships with those she helped should be viewed as a form of mentorship rather than the friendships she describes with her colleagues. Ashoka's experiences abroad exemplify another opportunity available to middle-class working women: the chance to travel and expand their working knowledge to outside of India. While she may have been focused on thinking of ways to be a better organizer, she nevertheless discovered the freedom of being able to travel and find joy in her work.

Ashoka wrote about her work as service work, which was in her case, unpaid. She mentioned that she personally paid for all work travels between cities and regions, and even international trips. As we will see in the next sections, unlike Ashoka the Communist Party's Manikuntala Sen's understandings of labor exposed the different views society held about women's work, as well as the views held by different political and social organizations. Once again, class played an important role in the work that these women did. Women in the Communist Party were often paid, even if a paltry amount, whereas women like Ashoka who were part of the AIWC often did unpaid work due to the societal expectation that middle-class women should work to better society rather than for their own gains.

Manikuntala Sen and the work of the Communist Party

The life and work of Manikuntala Sen (1911-1987), one of the most well-known women in the Communist Party, also opens a window into the work life of women involved in politics and service work. Manikuntala's Bengali autobiography *Shediner Katha* [Stories of Those Times] was published in 1982 toward the end of her life. According to her husband and fellow Communist Party leader Jolly Kaul, the autobiography's audience would have been familiar with Manikuntala's

life since she was a prominent figure between the 1940s and the 1960s.[314] The new English translation by Stree Publishers, titled *In Search of Freedom*, was published two decades later, at a time when she had become unknown to many readers. For this translation, Jolly was asked to provide a brief biographical sketch in this edition, which was not a part of the original text. The English translation was the work of a group of people and includes input from Manikuntala Sen's husband Jolly Kaul to get the language used by Sen herself.[315] The English autobiography, like others in translation, is certainly a mediated text, but constructed histories of a past and a person are nevertheless valuable for their proximity to the time and person and the contextualization offered by those who knew them well.

In her autobiography, *In Search of Freedom*, Manikuntala wrote of her experiences as a member of the Communist Party and the service work she was involved with in the 1940s and 1950s. The 1940s was a crucial time for the Communist Party as it sought to build a cultural identity.[316] As such, its outreach to women emboldened numerous Indian women to enter the workforce. Manikuntala was one of the most well-known activists who worked to rehabilitate Bengal in the aftermath of the 1943 famine. As a committed member of the Communist Party, Manikuntala was most known for her role as one of the founders of the *Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti* (MARS) set up in 1942 with her colleagues Renu Chakravarty, Kamala Mukherji, and Kanak Mukherji. The organization was formed to provide relief during the famine. Rather than emphasizing cultural mobilization (as the theater group within the Party did), MARS focused on mobilizing working class women and raising awareness of health, hygiene, sanitation, and work place exploitation.[317]

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[314] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Kolkata: Stree, 2001), viii.
[315] Ibid, xii.
[316] Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity.* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2010).
[317] Ibid., 102.

Manikuntala stated that Communist women started a new organization, their first *mahila samiti*, MARS, because "we felt that the AIWC would not suffice anymore. We would form our organization primarily with middle class and lower middle class, working and peasant women. We would also try to include upper class women: indeed, why shouldn't they too be our partners in this task of fighting for women's rights?"[318] While the AIWC privileged middle-class women like Ashoka Gupta, MARS sought to expand social work to a wider community of women. The women of MARS started a monthly journal, *Ghare Baire* in which many famous women wrote. Manikuntala asserted that "whenever any of us went on tour, she had to contribute a write-up about her experiences. These write-ups became the link between the monthly journal and the *mahila samitis* far and away."[319] This journal also merits mention as one that privileged women contributors, to the extent that no man's contribution to the journal was published—similar to *Mandira* run by the women of the Indian National Congress and Leela Roy's *Jayasree*. Within a few years, the number of social service workers increased, and MARS branched out throughout the neighborhoods. In many ways, women working with MARS had a broader reach than those who were a part of organizations like AIWC.

One of the laudatory characteristics of MARS was its attempt to be inclusive both in terms of its members and the people who were helped by the organization. As Manikuntala wrote, the "secular character of our organization made it a united platform of Hindu and Muslim women."[320] Of course, this did not always mean equal representation of both communities. In discussing the composition of the members, she admitted that "in all these places, the *samiti* comprised women who were peasants or middle-class Hindus and Muslims. Generally Muslim women were fewer in number and our activists were always alert in ensuring the best of relations

[318] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Kolkata: Stree, 2001), 74.
[319] Ibid., 75.
[320] Ibid., 120.

between Hindus and Muslims."[321] Given the increasing rise of communal sentiments in the 1940s, the explicit focus on bringing in both Hindu and Muslim women endeared MARS to those who still hoped for communal harmony. MARS became a way to organize women from all classes and encourage women to participate in the freedom movement. As Manikuntala recounted, "they grew aware of their political, economic and social rights as well as their duties."[322] The Party members worked to educate slum children and teach women handicrafts while the youth also became involved in social service.

While personal information in Manikuntala Sen's memoir is scarce, she was fastidious in recounting the different types of work she participated in and the people who shaped this work. Her work included touring the districts to help form *samitis* all around Bengal. She described an incident that occurred while working at a village after the famine. She recalled that she and other members went to get food and one neighborhood business refused to give them funds to feed hungry people because the Party was planning to feed Hindu and Muslim women together. This enraged Party member Manorama Basu. Manorama lashed out at them for wanting Hindus and Muslims to be treated separately when people were going hungry due to famine.[323] Examples such as this reveal the deep mistrust and community sentiments that service workers often had to navigate as they sought to rehabilitate villages and towns, even before the riots and Partition. These experiences also point back to the necessity of inclusivity for service organizations like MARS and other *mahila samitis* that were on the rise in Bengal during this period. As Manikuntala succinctly stated, "poor women in the towns and the Hindu and Muslim peasant women of the villages provided strong foundation to the *mahila samiti*."[324] Without the support of the everyday, regular women, their work could not have

[321] Ibid., 104.
[322] Ibid., 96.
[323] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*, 82.
[324] Ibid., 83.

progressed. Manikuntala described the everyday work of getting supporters involved to carry out the organization's larger goals:

> In order to get a milk booth opened, it was necessary for the *samiti* to try to get hold of the milk from the Red Cross, St, John's Ambulance, FAO and other organizations, and then draw up a list of poor children and distribute the milk amongst them. Whenever we started such relief work for the poor and the destitute we received encouragement, blessings and financial support from the public. Whenever we had to agitate to get help from the government, all these people would support us and even at times join our processions. This was our experience almost everywhere."[325]

Manikuntala's recollection shows how much the workers relied upon the masses for support rather than just members within the organization. Even the bureaucratic process of asking for governmental support was punctuated by processions and protests to garner aid and services.

MARS also included other specific programs that ensured women's progress, regardless of class. Manikuntala wrote that "every unit would have to open a centre or two for constructive work. Milk booths and schools for children, handicraft teaching centres for women and the elderly were essential, and most of the work began in the *basti* areas."[326] The *basti*, or the "slums", were specifically targeted to reach poor women. Through their association with the *mahila samiti*s, many women workers would also go sell vegetables or rice in the markets. The encouragement of workers like Manikuntala propelled an increase of women in the workforce. She stated that "they were new additions to the existing labour force of women in the city, and their numbers slowly started increasing."[327] These services worked to uplift poor communities that were often forgotten in the aftermath of tragedies like the famine and communal riots. Poor women had always been part of the public sphere, but the support of the middle-class organizations legitimized these women's visibility as workers.

Within their work, women formed bonds that were a result of their social work.

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[325] Ibid., 103.
[326] Ibid., 95.
[327] Ibid., 95.

Manikuntala's autobiography is full of references to other women and party members that she worked alongside. She referenced two close friends that she met through her work: Latika Sen and Renu Chakravarty. She met Latika Sen at an event to demand release of prisoners in the 1940s following the "Quit India" movement, and wrote, "since that day Latika became my friend, a very close friend. The word 'comrade' didn't come to me easily; I preferred the word 'friend'."[328] As a member of the Communist Party, Manikuntala's usage of 'friend' rather than 'comrade' highlights the intimacy she formed with fellow working women of the Communist Party. She similarly described Renu Chakravarty as the woman "who became my companion, intimate friend and colleague in my political life."[329] Given the fact that Manikuntala Sen barely mentioned personal occurrences in her life, her usage of 'friend' to describe these women and several other colleagues reveals the significance of their relationships in her life. She connected to these women while serving others, but they remained a part of her life even decades later. If school friendships are seen as precursors to activism, friendships made in the workplace not only made activist work possible, but are what sustained these women when many were imprisoned or forgotten by the new nation-states.

Manikuntala's relationship with Manorama Basu is also worth exploring for the connections created among and by women. Manorama Basu was known as *Mashima*, or "aunt," to others. In her memoir, Manikuntala remarked that Mashima was someone who must be mentioned when talking about women's movements and organizations in East Bengal, especially in Barisal for the work she did there in the 1940s. Manorama Basu was lauded as a mentor and source of support by women on both sides of Bengal. Noorjahan Bose—a Bangladeshi writer and activist whose autobiographical writings highlight the riots of the 1950s—named Manorama Basu as one of her greatest inspirations and mentors, especially due to Manorama's modelling of Hindu-Muslim friendship.[330] Manorama did

[328] Ibid., 53.
[329] Ibid., 54.
[330] See Noorjahan Bose, *Agunmukhar Meye* (Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 2009 (first ed).

not cross over to West Bengal after Partition even though her children moved. Manikuntala believed this is because "her deep love for her homeland and for humankind kept her in East Pakistan till the very last day of her life."[331] She was an activist whose political life began with agitation against Curzon's 1905 partition when she marched side by side with men.[332] She was well known as a busy woman who worked to uplift women. After the famine, she opened the *Matirmandir* to provide shelter for displaced women. According to Manikuntala, Manorama also "visited slums, found out who needed doctors or medicines, took the sick to the hospital on rickshaws, and sent food from her home to convalescents if they needed it."[333] Given her all-encompassing role as a social worker, she was beloved by both Muslims and Hindus. In fact, during the turmoil of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war, she was kept alive by Muslim men and women when she was targeted as a Hindu woman by the Pakistani state. In Manikuntala Sen's writing, Manorama Basu is praised for her work and character as one of many women who shaped the field of social service work through her compassion and ability to bring people together. Manorama was important enough that Manikuntala spent pages writing about her. The singling out of other activists highlighted the critical roles women played not only in shaping the new nations, but also the everyday lives of other women.

Despite the ties that women formed among their colleagues, it is worth noting that most social bonds, especially friendships, remained within the same class backgrounds. Communist women may have worked alongside women from various social classes, but their closest ties remained with those from similar backgrounds. As Ashoka and Manikuntala have shown in their autobiographies, social service work was a sphere in which women came together and gave back to the nation and the people, but it also was a space that allowed the women's movement to flourish.

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[331] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*, 83.
[332] Ibid., 84.
[333] Ibid.

The Impact of Women's Service Work on the Women's Movements in Bengal

Bengali women's visibility in the workforce increased in the 1950s and 1960s in West Bengal due to the refugee rehabilitation work that followed the riots in those decades. Although the refugee crisis caused numerous problems for the nation, it also propelled the women's movements in both West Bengal and East Bengal. In her monograph on the refugee crisis in Bengal in the aftermath of Partition and riots, Gargi Chakravartty argues that the refugee movement in West Bengal succeeded because it worked together with other socio-political groups, such as the All India Women's Conference and the Communist Party.[334] As Chakravartty, Haimanti Roy, and others have argued, and what Manikuntala Sen described, women's activism increased as many had to protest and disrupt the status quo in order to get food and shelter: the refugee crisis gave an impetus to women activists to take up the cause for social and legal reform.[335] It forced the end of the *andermahal*, or the segregation of women from the outside world. Chakravartty further argues that the East Bengal refugee women's struggle for food and shelter in West Bengal was linked to women's struggles and incorporated into mainstream women's movements.[336] These movements moved forward due to the continued agitation by women in camps until their problems were somewhat addressed.[337] This can easily be seen in the work that Manikuntala Sen and Ashoka Gupta did to ensure refugees were rehabilitated in camps.

MARS in particular was instrumental in helping refugees. Since MARS began as "self-defense" (*atmaraksha*) to protect women, especially in the aftermath of famine, they readily took up issues of shelter and survival of refugee women during the refugee crisis. Many women who arrived

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[334] Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005), 64.
[335] See Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal,* Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-1965* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey,* translated from the Bengali (Kolkata: Stree, 2001)
[336] Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition*, 37.
[337] Ibid., 51.

at stations were then shifted to camps. There, many women consolidated into *mahila samitis* in the colonies.[338] As the number of refugees increased, the struggle against eviction bought many women into the streets. The Communist Party was central to the refugee women's movement. The Communist Party in India was banned after Partition, but its members continued to work toward the same goals as they had previously. Many refugees from East Bengal had joined the Communist Party before Partition. In the aftermath of Partition, refugee issues re-energized the Left and provided a platform for mass organization. It was easy for Communist women to infiltrate camps and work with women who were much more willing to talk and listen than men who were under the influence of the communal rhetoric of the Hindu Mahasabha and anti-Communist sentiments.[339]

Other women's organizations like *Nari Seva Sangha*, *Ananda Ashram*, and All Bengal Women's Union all became instrumental in helping dispossessed women in the years after Partition. This simultaneous timing of many other women's organizations forming shows the significance of women's work in the aftermath of independence. While these organizations were not affiliated with MARS, many of their leaders still coordinated with MARS. Manikuntala Sen wrote extensively about the formation of the *Nari Seva Sangha* and many of the Communist leaders who were involved with its work.[340] The consolidation of workers allowed women in West Bengal to become politically involved with issues outside of refugee concerns. Women assumed the call for peace and women's rights. The women's movement within the peace movement took on an international dimension, as figures like Manikuntala Sen and Ashoka Gupta participated. However, while refugee women's politicization helped them to be out in the streets and fight for food and shelter, it did not challenge patriarchal leadership of the movement and they did not question gendered familial obligations.[341]

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[338] Ibid., 54.
[339] Ibid., 59.
[340] Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey.*
[341] Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition*,71.

These women continued to work alongside leaders who highlighted women's responsibilities to their families. Hence, women workers increased due to the need to provide for their families. Refugee women began to search for jobs and careers due to necessity. Even girls from dislocated families had to provide, and this inspired women to accept jobs. Some (unattached) women worked with or found work through organizations like *Nari Seva Sangha* or All Bengal Women's Union. Uneducated women worked as maidservants, washers, selling savories, etc.[342] Others often took smaller pay than West Bengal's workforce, leading to cries that East Bengal Bangals were taking all the jobs.[343] Education became linked to careers. East Bengal had deep cultural roots of education so many refugee women worked to set up schools in the refugee colonies. Through the support of numerous women's organizations, refugee women revitalized the women's movement in West Bengal, helping to form connections among women who earlier shared different political ideologies.

While the women's movement in West Bengal was rapidly changing due to the crises of the 1940s and 1950s, women in East Bengal/ East Pakistan were also leading women's movements, but with a focus on local issues. Muslim women's activism in East Bengal substantially increased after Partition. In 1948, in Mymensingh, a Left-oriented Purba Pakistan *Mahila Samiti* was formed with Sufia Kamal as President, Nibedita Nag and Juiphul Ray as secretaries, and Monorama Basu as Vice President.[344] The above leadership reveals the strong coalition of Hindu-Muslim representation in the women's organization, and in so doing it reveals the importance of communal solidarity for these women-led groups. In forming a group to advocate for changes, Hindu-Muslim ties were emphasized. Many Hindu leftist women also went back to East Bengal after the Partition with a mission under direction of the Communist Party of India. For example, Nibedita Nag reported that

[342] Ibid., 89.
[343] Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition*, 90. In West Bengal, Bengalis whose ancestral homes were in East Bengal before the Partition are called Bangals while those whose ancestors were from West Bengal are called Ghotis.
[344] Ibid., 125.

after 1947 she went to Dacca to work as an activist, camouflaged as "Muslim" to stay above suspicion; Nibedita became "Rizia" and lived with a Muslim family.[345] Many such women—including figures like Ila Mitra, Nibedita Nag, and Juiphul Roy—had to leave by mid-1950s due to repeated persecution, but these Hindu middle-class communists left their mark on the local intellectual community of East Pakistan.[346] The changing demographic of the Bengali intelligentsia in East Bengal shaped the issues that were at the forefront of women's movements. Rather than focusing on the refugee crisis, where migration flowed more from East Bengal to West Bengal, the central concerns that impacted everyday life in East Bengal were tied to the Pakistani state's repression of Bengali identity.

The women's movement in East Bengal coincided with the language movement and linguistic nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s. The declaration of Urdu as the state language by Jinnah on March 24, 1948, and again by Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin in January 1952 infuriated people. In rebellion, they began emphasizing their Bengali heritage by taking up *bindis* by women (previously considered a Hindu practice), painting *rangolis* in functions as protests, big celebrations of Bengali new year, singing Tagore songs, and other forms of cultural resistance that emphasized "Bengaliness."[347] The language movement asserted the primacy of linguistic and cultural identities for Bengalis which prompted women to come into the public domain. Many of these women protested and were arrested.[348] Cultural activities increased women's activism as they sought to resist state repression. The Begum Club, founded in December 1954, was established as a center for women's literary activity.[349] It promoted the growth of Bengali literature and language among

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[345] Ibid., 126.
[346] Ibid.
[347] See last chapter for a definition of 'Bengaliness' especially in the context of East Bengal in the 1960s and 70s.
[348] See chapter 1 and chapter 2 for the activists of the language movement and the neighborhood cultural organizations which were significant participants in the cultural movement.
[349] For more on the women's movement in East Bengal/ Bangladesh, see Maleka Begum, *Banglar Nari Andolan* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2010).

women who then could circulate news on women's issues. This created opportunities for women writers from all over East Bengal. The Begum Club's members included prominent figures like Sufia Kamal, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Mahmuda Khatoon Siddiqa, Selina Bahar Chowdhury and other well-regarded writers, many of whom had earlier worked in social service work.[350] The discourses on gender rights were held at three places: Mukul Cinema Hall, Women's Park near Sadarghat, and the Begum Club. Political protests for women's rights and access also shaped the scene. Women led protests against the Pakistani Ulema board's anti-woman stance and agenda. The nurses of Dacca Medical College wanted more female nurses as well as job security within the nursing profession. Women students agitated for a Women's Hall in 1956 for boarders and non-boarders, which gradually increased the number of occupants, and led to the creation of Rokeya Hall at Dhaka University. This led to an increase in women's enrollment in Dhaka University, from fifty students in 1949-50 to 3,692 by 1973-74.[351] Women also agitated for representation and people like Nurjahan Murshid were elected to the Assembly. Mirroring their Bengali sisters in West Bengal in their fight for Hindu Code Bills, women in East Bengal fought for Muslim Family Law. Women's work in organizing and leading social service projects provided them with tools to fight for a better society. The increase in the workforce of middle-class women can be read through the lens of the revitalization of women's movements in new independent states, as they were continuing the lessons learned through social service work in the earlier decades.

Women in the Performing Arts

The entertainment industry also saw a flourishing of women artists in the middle of the twentieth century. Women from various backgrounds negotiated and carved spaces for themselves as professional artists. A focus on the women in the performance arts reveals two things: one,

[350] Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition*, 129.
[351] Ibid., 130.

various women in this field straddled multiple social class boundaries and often had to navigate politics of respectability much more forcefully than those in social service work; and two, the first half of the twentieth century saw the rise of new innovations in theater, film/cinema, and dance, which allowed women from a range of social classes to enter these industries. The different types of entertainment venues shaped the opportunities available to the women. For instance, the stage and theater were open to a wider range of women than film and cinema. *Jatra* or folk performances were composed primarily of uneducated women and open to a greater range of social classes, until it was made into a respectable sphere in the middle of the twentieth century. The scholarship on women in the fields of dance, theatre, and film has primarily contended with the shift in how the discourses about these women changed over time. South Asian historiography has made it eminently clear that the body of the Indian woman is a symbolic site for discourses on modernity and nationalism. The Indian female performer's representation shifted from derogatory discourses of the '*nautch'* [dancing] girl to a respected and middle-class-adjacent figure of Bengali womanhood in the early twentieth century. An anti-*nautch* movement in the late nineteenth century was part of the movement to reform Hindu society, which associated dance as polluting and evil.[352] In the sphere of the performing arts, the physical body was centered and became the prime object of the gaze of the (male) audience.

The discourse on the female performer's body has also been tied to the scholarship on respectability and class politics. The consumption of the female body in the public sphere has roots in discourse tying these women to prostitution in the nineteenth century. The concept of respectability in Bengal was important in creating the *bhadramahila*, who were seen to be representative of Indian society, since these women were both modern and traditional. Those in

[352] Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2010), 215.

prostitution and sex work were seen as slipping from middle-class respectability, so until the twentieth century, most stage actresses and dancers were seen as unrespectable. The marginalization of women by labelling them as prostitutes further alienated women who performed on public stage as outside of respectable society.[353] My focus on female sociality and networks shows the limit of respectability politics in these performance fields. I examine the implications for women's sociality when many middle-class women broke out of their zones of comfort to work in performance industries. The transformation of the performing arts into a venue for middle-class women workers came at a cost to other women. In becoming a part of these industries and re-inscribing middle-class sociality and values in fields that used to belong to marginalized and lower-class people, middle-class women and respectability politics further alienated lower-class women—undoing the work of the workers for women's social reform discussed above. Class issues dominated the lives of women in the entertainment industry. The women selected as case studies in this section are by no means unknown. In fact, they are what we might call the first celebrities or pioneers in their respective fields. Many of these autobiographical writings can be read as celebrity narratives, where women crafted an image that was consistent with the public image they maintained as celebrities. Middle-class women like Reba Roy Chowdhury explicitly took part in political theater and dance and helped to bring middle-class respectability into public theater. Lower-class women like Shefali found social mobility and financial security in becoming a cabaret dancer. While Shefali may have transgressed middle-class notions of respectability, she nevertheless carved out a niche market for herself by taking advantage of the opportunities and social connections available to her. The autobiographical writings of Kanan Devi, Sadhona Bose, Reba Roy Chowdhury, and Miss Shefali expose the limits of

[353] See Sumanta Banerjee, *Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Seagull Books, 1998); Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

class mobility and the precarious nature of social relationships fostered among artists in the entertainment industry in Calcutta.

One of the growing fields of work for women was the space of theater and film. It was an arena that included women from the middle and lower classes of society. Given the history of theatres in India, the rise of Indian actresses in these spaces dovetailed with new technologies and shifts in Indian society. For many women, social class status and financial stability continued to be the most important factor in their lives, which shaped the people with whom they interacted and formed friendships. The twentieth century saw the rise of superstars in cinema as the film industry grew exponentially. The shift from silent films to talkies meant that more and more Indian women were being selected for films over Anglo-Indian women who dominated until the 1930s. The emergence of talkies in the 1930s opened up opportunities for Indian actresses such as Kanan Devi and Sadhana Bose.

Kanan Devi's Class and Economic Anxiety

Kanan Devi (1916-1992), considered the first Bengali superstar of Indian cinema, was an important figure in Calcutta's entertainment industry. She was usually characterized as a rags-to-riches story, given that she came to the industry with no lineage, pedigree, nor familial connections. In her autobiography, *Sabaray Ami Nami* [My Homage to All], published in 1973, Kanan wrote that she did not consider herself someone who should write an autobiography because she believed that is for those who attained greatness.[354] She states that she does not have anything to offer, a self-deprecating statement made by many women in their memoirs. The title of her autobiography points to Kanan's understanding of her life as indebted to many for how her life turned out.

[354] Kanan Devi, *My Homage to All*, Translated by Indranee Ghosh (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), 2.

Kanan Devi's memoir first reached the public as a series of interviews in the 1960s in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, a Bengali periodical. According to the translator of Kanan's autobiography, the editors of the periodical eventually convinced her to write her memoir, which was published in 1973 as *Shobarey Ami Nomi.* The original text was written as a continuum, but the translator changed the format of the book into chapters corresponding to different stages of Kanan's life as she describes it.[355] The translator does not say why it was translated in 2013, but does hint at the significance of women in the arts and theater. The early 2010s seems to be a time where women's place in these fields garnered fresh interest. Kanan's translated autobiography was published by Zubaan, one of India's feminist publishing houses. Kanan's text highlighted her life as a rags to riches story in some ways, in that she focuses on her struggles, and big breaks. However, the crux of the translated text is Kanan's seeking acceptance among middle-class society.

For Kanan, even though she became well-known as a singing cinema star, she stated within the first few pages that "building a house and family was the ruling passion of my existence."[356] The fact that she shared this shows the centrality of such stability for her. As someone who came from a lower social class and struggled financially, the need for stability and respectability shaped much of Kanan's life. As a young child, after the death of her father, she lived in penury and knew from early on that she needed to find work. Financial stability and control proved to be significant factors for lower-caste and lower-class women like Kanan who entered the theatre and film industry.

Given the highly competitive and male-dominated sphere of the film industry, Kanan struggled to form strong female friendships. She wrote that she was "barred from any female friendships."[357] What she means is that she felt isolated in the studio and felt that the other actresses were jealous due to the precarious nature of the industry. She was also hyper-aware of her own

[355] Ibid vii.
[356] Ibid., 4.
[357] Ibid., 61.

social background and felt that she did not belong. She recalled an incident in which an actress from an aristocratic and wealthier family would not acknowledge her, including not responding to her greeting.

> I remember meeting a fellow artiste at Firpo's. I raised my palm in *namashkar* but was ignored and the person turned away. The reason? She came from an aristocratic family and to even show common courtesy to an ordinary actress like me was not considered necessary. Such blows from all directions made me withdraw from the outside world. My bruised and battered sensitive soul seemed to seek sanctuary in my imaginary world of thoughts and ideas. I was always afraid that interaction with someone outside would lead me to sorrow. Friends, affection, love –these were not for me.[358]

Kanan's biographer, Mekhala Sengupta, mentions that it was reported that there was a feud between Kanan Devi and the actress Sadhona Bose, the granddaughter of one of Bengal's most well-known reformers, Keshub Chandra Sen. Sadhona supposedly did not return Kanan's greeting at a major event, but Sengupta is unsure as to the validity of the rumors.[359] Kanan's emphasis on the fellow artiste's background as "aristocratic" is juxtaposed with Kanan's own identity as an "ordinary" actress. By calling herself ordinary and hence, not part of the middle-class, Kanan was referring to the fact that despite her successes as an actress, she still felt that she did not belong. Kanan wanted to find solidarity among actresses as people who were in the same profession, but her own class insecurities as well as how respectable society treated her shaped her interactions. Her statement about how she feared interacting with others because she did not want to be rebuffed, points to her distrust of others in the larger industry. Class was certainly an important issue that impacted the social lives of actresses, and it was unquestionably at the forefront of Kanan's own understanding of her own life.

This is not to say that Kanan did not form close knit female friendships and other social ties through her work, despite her claim that she had no friends. Her autobiography is full of people she

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[358] Ibid.
[359] Mekhala Sengupta, *Kanan Devi: The First Superstar of Indian Cinema* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 78.

terms as friends. Since my analysis is drawn from Kanan's English translated text, I use the word 'friend' when it is utilized in the text itself, which also makes it difficult to know what other Bengali terminologies she might have used for these relationships. She mentioned a close friend, Molina, from her time at New Theatres studio in the late 1930s, with whom she stayed connected afterwards. Molina Devi was a well-known actress in the 1940s and 1950s who came from a middle-class background. Kanan described Molina as someone whose "easy friendship lifted my heavy heart with the assurance of affection."[360] Kanan felt socially isolated at New Theatres where she felt others saw her as a threat or undeserving of her success, but Molina was her one friend who eased her mind. The workspace was the site where their friendships flourished. Kanan wrote, "Molina and I shared a suitcase. In it were *moori*, *chirey bhaja*, a small *boti*, a stove, bread, butter and such other items to eat or cook. On the sprawling grounds of New Theatres, near the pond or in the mango grove, we would sit munching *moori* and peanuts. We would pour our hearts out to each other."[361] The banality and everyday nature of such friendship rituals nurtured these social connections into dependable relationships. Here, despite the social class differences in their familial backgrounds, Molina and Kanan formed social ties. Kanan formed similar social bonds with other actresses who worked on the same films or in the same studios as her. She mentioned her friendship with Jamuna, an actress who starred with her in the hit film *Shesh Uttar* (1942)—which still remains Kanan's most well-known film. Jamuna was someone Kanan was still in touch with and whose house she went to with an invitation to her son's wedding in the 1970s. She portrayed Jamuna as someone who was very warm and kind. Kanan described many other interactions similar to this, which reflect her attempts to create social bonds in the competitive field of films. Despite the difficulty of fostering sociality among actresses, Kanan did find a few women like the ones mentioned above who

[360] Kanan Devi, *My Homage to All*, 62.
[361] Ibid., 62.

accepted her, regardless of the differences between them. But these friendships and social connections did not spare her from facing societal backlash due to her background.

Kanan wrote about the societal pressures she felt due to her social class background. In both her autobiography and in writings on Kanan, her family background is not explicitly discussed, other than the people who Kanan named as those who raised her. Kanan suggested that she was born out of wedlock and left destitute with her mother at the age of five when her adopted father died. She grew up in an area of Calcutta which was associated with lower-class families and prostitution, further linking her to disreputable society.[362] Both her first and second husbands were men who came from 'respectable' families and she received barbed comments from society for daring to marry aristocratic and middle-class men. The well-known poet Rabindranath Tagore sent her an autographed photo when she married Ashok Mitra, a Brahmin, in December 1940. Kanan explained that Tagore was vilified in the press for doing so by the upper echelons of society, writing, "I have heard that there were several trunk calls made and letters and telegrams sent to the poet asking why I had been given the picture: a film actress had no right to possess an autographed picture of the poet!"[363] Kanan did not expect such treatment by society since she was legally married, but these incidents and the frequent harassment aimed at her revealed the importance of class in Bengali society. Despite working to live with "morality" as she calls it, she felt that back in those days, actresses like her were punished for daring to rise in class and station. Her self-awareness and this statement written in the 1970s show how much things have changed in the profession since the 1940s.

Kanan's social class background prompted her to create institutions that would make life better for others. Due to her background and childhood of living in penury, Kanan was particularly

[362] Sengupta, *Kanan Devi.*
[363] Kanan Devi, *My Homage to All*, 75.

aware of financial struggles and sought to help fellow actresses avoid that. She founded an organization to support others, the *Mahila Shilpi Mahal*. Kanan felt distressed after seeing an older actress begging on the streets, and wanted to do something for actresses who go into poverty. After the incident, she realized, "people think that artistes live a charmed life and they do not come under the shadow of dearth and poverty" but it was not true for most.[364] Kanan had an idea but knew she could not do anything alone. Kanan formed a team of women artists to build a shelter for impoverished and poor women artists. She reached out to friends Molina, Saraju, Sunadam Chandra, and Renuka to start this organization. They were initially worried that a group of women alone could not do this. Their first meetings were held at each other's houses since they had no other space. The actress friends staged plays to raise money and eventually bought a house on Garcha Road for the shelter. Overtime, many great artists became involved. The creation of this institution emerged out of a necessity that Kanan felt was unmet, signifying the importance of women in the industry who could cater to other women's needs. Kanan also became involved with other organizations that looked to uplift lower society and women. One such organization was the Women's Cultural Association, made up of educated working women who organized performances and used the money for social service work.[365] Over time, as she moved into the middle-class sphere financially, she was able to transgress and join organizations catered to respectable society.

The one thing that was persistent in Kanan's life history was her sense of independence and need for financial and creative control. Her biographer argues that Kanan's need to maintain control over her finances even after she retired from acting was a major cause of her separation from her second husband.[366] Kanan Devi may have risen to become a superstar of Bengali cinema, but she gained true freedom when she opened her own production company. Kanan wrote about her dream

[364] Ibid., 148.
[365] Ibid., 173.
[366] Sengupta, *Kanan Devi.*

of having her own production company, which was realized when she started Shrimati Pictures in the late 1940s. She discussed the thrill of being able to see her dream come true and the independence that came along with it. She gained the ability to make decisions regarding all aspects of a film, and that experience shaped her life. For once, she could choose the stories and the actors who collaborated with her. Although acting was lucrative for Kanan, she knew that screen heroines had a short life span and turning to productions allowed her to remain a part of the industry while providing her with new opportunities. Perhaps due to her childhood experiences with poverty, Kanan ensured throughout her life that she was in sole control of her finances. The benefit of being a superstar meant that even as her stardom faded, Kanan ensured that she grew creatively as an artist while maintaining financial control over her earnings and affairs. In constructing her own history as one of someone who grew as an artist and person, Kanan used her celebrity status to emphasize the prevailing structures of class politics and prejudices that shaped her life.

Sadhona Bose's Professional Identity

If economic anxiety was at the heart of Kanan Devi's life as a singing movie star, creative license and recognition as an artist was central to middle-class women who entered the film industry. Sadhona Bose (1914-1973), a film and theater actress and a trained dancer, was Kanan Devi's colleague in the burgeoning industry in the early twentieth century. Sadhona's life history provides a stark contrast to Kanan Devi's. Sadhona was from an established and respected upper-caste, middle-class Bengali family, a granddaughter of the famous reformer and *Brahmo Samaj* member Keshub Chandra Sen. Her life before she became a film star was one of middle-class comfort. She was educated at Victoria Institute, Loreto Convent, and Bethune College, a feat quite rare for women in the early decades of the twentieth century, but one that solidified her position as an upper middle-class woman. From early on in her life, she was exposed to the arts. Like Kanan, Sadhona also wrote an autobiography of her life in the early 1970s, titled *Shilpir Atmakatha* [Autobiography of an Artist].

Sadhona Bose's Bengali memoir utilized here has a publication date of 2012, but she passed away in 1973. Her memoir was first published in 1980s, a copy of which I could not find, and newly published again in 2012 because the publisher felt that Sadhona was not "just a celebrity" but someone whose life shows the reality of cinema-theater-dance-singing-acting in India. It is worth mentioning that although the text is in Bengali, the brief editor's note uses the English word 'celebrity' in Bengali transliteration to emphasize that Sadhona was not that. Yet, her memoir is written for an audience that must have had some familiarity with her.

Sadhona's text primarily traces her life as an artist, a term she repeats throughout. She is adamant about her professional career being central to her life, as reflected in the title of her autobiography. As a woman from a respectable family, Sadhana had to fight to be allowed to act and dance. She contended, "At that time, theater was not a praiseworthy thing in the eyes of society. Unlike today, at that time society did not see theater as a sympathetic element yet. At that time, theater was in contempt, the source of disrespect and neglect."[367] She also wrote that in the 1930s, it was not a suitable profession for women from respectable families. In fact, "it was what is considered strictly prohibited."[368] For Sadhona, the entertainment industry and the role of a professional artist was a space she sought to be a part of despite family pressures and disapproval. The sphere of theater, film, and dance were spaces that allowed Sadhona to flourish as an artist and create a name for herself as a respectable actress.

Sadhona Bose was known as the first dancing film star who also exercised unusual control over the choreography. In her autobiographical text, she writes that singing and dancing at home were common, and their home welcomed many well-known artists of the time, such as Enayat Khan, Timir Baran, and others.[369] She was also familiar with musical instruments, including the

[367] Sadhona Bose, *Shilpir Atmakatha* (Calcutta: Pratibhas, 2012), 19.
[368] Ibid., 19.
[369] Ibid., 15.

piano. In an article on Sadhona, Pritha Chakrabarti argues that the modern eclecticism of film dance in the 1930s created a unique space for Sadhona to negotiate her Bengali regional subjectivity. In fact, what Sadhona did was more than change a dance form, her entry and success in films and dance inspired many other women. As Chakrabarti writes, "her Bengali Modern Dance would go on to inspire many an urban elite woman from respectable families to take up dance as a hobby and profession."[370] While Sadhona has been hailed as a first in the film and dance industries, she also sought to be recognized as a creator. Sadhana wrote that the dances she choreographed mixed old and new styles, and that work was her life's knowledge and dream.[371] Throughout her text, Sadhona stressed the idea that she shaped the roles she took on, including the way her body moved on screen and on stage. At a time when women were seen as just following the orders of male directors and choreographers, Sadhona's insistence on taking ownership of her contributions point to her significance as a creator. As women from respectable families came to film, rather than those from dancing-girl or disreputable backgrounds, women such as Sadhona exemplified a new form of dance aesthetic. Sadhona and her director husband Modhu Bose changed the way dance was depicted on screen as not only a field for nautch girls and Anglo-Indian actresses.[372] This argument points to the dominant scholarship of how female pioneers are read though a discourse of social acceptability.[373] It is indeed true that women in South Asia had to navigate through politics of respectability. While class was a marker of respectability, the issues became murky when work and professions did not easily map onto the class identities of the women involved in performance.

[370] Pritha Chakrabarti, "Performing the region: Sadhona Bose and the modern Bengali film dance," *South Asian History and Culture*, (2017) 8:2, 167.
[371] Sadhona Bose, *Shilpir Atmakatha*, 23.
[372] See Pritha Chakrabarti, "Performing the region."
[373] See Usha Iyer, "Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema," PhD Diss., (University of Pittsburg, 2014).

Sadhona Bose's social interactions and agency in the film industry was shaped by her social class and relative privilege even as she struggled to show that dance and films were vehicles of middle-class respectability. Sharmista Gooptu has argued that Bengali cinema was an "assertion of the *bhadralok's* exclusionary politics."[374] This assertion and the fact that women like Sadhona were becoming respected as actresses in the 1940s points to the changing politics of middle-class respectability and the people that became central to their lives. While Kanan Devi sought to become a part of respectable society by settling down when she felt rebuffed by colleagues in the film industry, Sadhana did not place as much significance on friendships or female interactions. Instead, her primary relationship is the one with her husband. She married Modhu Bose, who was her director and producer for many of her stage and film productions.[375] Sadhona performed in Modhu's 1930 play *Daliya*, at age sixteen, and was married that year to him. Sadhona collaborated primarily with her husband until 1943 so she was able to deflect some of the attacks of disapproval. Many critics praised her beauty and popularity, but ultimately believed she only became a star due to her husband putting her in his productions.[376] Given such portrayals, it is no wonder that in her own writing Sadhona sought to show that she was more than just an actress; she was a creator and equal partner in shaping the films and performances she participated in. Her autobiography then, is a reclaiming of her history and agency in her work.

As a woman who transgressed the norms of middle-class respectability, Sadhona primarily focused on her artistry and work in dance and acting in her autobiographical text. She did not write about the people she interacted with as much as the people who she felt she had to win over, including the ways she landed certain roles in films. Similar to Kanan Devi, she is surprised at the

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[374] Sharmistha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema 'An Other Nation.'* (Routledge: London and New York, 2011).
[375] Modhu Bose founded the theater group "Calcutta Amatuer Players" in 1927 and was an upcoming director when they met.
[376] Usha Iyer, *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

adulation she garnered for her performances. In her memoir, she stated, "I could have never imagined that the audience and society could have regarded and accepted me as they have."[377] Her surprise at being accepted for her talent shows the obstacles that she felt she had to overcome. She further elaborated that society's support was such she could have never dreamed of. Her Bengali autobiography included the texts of reviews and praise for her performances in English. One reviewer from the *Times of India* wrote, "Sadhana Bose is an artist from the crown of her beautiful head to the soles of her hennaed feet which gives one a feeling that an Ajanta fresco or some ancient, sculptured Goddess had suddenly come to life."[378] Another review from *The Statesman* highlighted the significance of Sadhona's performance to the well-regarded Russian ballet, stating, "Sadhana Bose's ballet now at the Regal Theatre is the most lovely that has been in Delhi since Pavlova visited us. In colour composition and movement it is the equal of Russian ballet at its best."[379] These reviews were probably chosen by Sadhona to show that even if her popularity was waning by the late 1960s, at one time she had been lauded for her work as an artist. Her artistry and talent were the focus of these reviews. Like many other actresses of her time, Sadhona's last days ended with her living in obscurity. In her autobiography, she wrote, "I had enough of fame, money, ornaments, I lived like a princess! Now I am [a] poor, forgotten lady with [a] Himalayan load of scandals."[380] Sadhona's last days ended with her begging on the streets of Calcutta and being forgotten, even as she continues to be written of as the first film star from 'respectable' society.

I want to return to the incident above where Kanan wrote that she was rebuffed by a fellow artiste. We do not know for certain that it was Sadhona Bose, but if we were to take those rumors seriously, we might consider what that tells us about class and sociality in the film industry.

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[377] Sadhona Bose, *Shilpir Atmakatha*, 40.
[378] Ibid., 27.
[379] Ibid., 37.
[380] Ibid., introduction.

Sadhona's autobiography named numerous people she knew, but Kanan's text was more focused on the people who helped her get where she is. In many ways, Kanan felt beholden to the people who helped her get out of poverty, even as she was abused by the industry. Unlike Kanan, Sadhona was able to focus on her artistry rather than worry about whether she will have a place to live due to the strong support network of her middle-class family and husband. While Kanan Devi had to explicitly think about how she does not fit into 'respectable' society due to her background, Sadhona had to work to maintain respectability as a middle-class woman even as she sought to challenge middle-class expectations of what a woman should do or not do. Kanan had to fight to be seen as personally 'respectable' as Sadhona's presence worked to turn the film industry into one that was 'respectable' from its former reputation as one of disrepute. While the presence of people like Sadhona opened up opportunities for more middle-class women, it also foreclosed the sanctuary of theater and film as being one sphere where low-caste and lower-class women could make a living and own the space as theirs.

Despite the similarities they faced as young Indian women in an industry that used to be the purview of non-Indian women, their class differences shaped the lives they were able to live. Sadhona wrote about being involved in the production of the films she starred in, shaping the dance choreography. Kanan felt financially insecure and that stopped her from asking for certain things, until she opened her own production company which gave her the freedom she craved as an artist. Kanan had to create a separate organization to do that while Sadhona was able to work from within the projects she was involved in, perhaps due to the fact that she was married to Modhu Bose, whose role as director gave her more agency. Sadhona used the medium of dance to address social issues, leading Usha Iyer to coin the term "dance social[s]" for Sadhona's films and theater performances.[381] In her later days, as her popularity as an actress waned, she continued to engage

[381] Iyer, *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema.*

with the dance community. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, she held dance classes at her home in Calcutta, and just before her death, she was appointed a dance trainer at Calcutta's Star Theatre.[382] Kanan knew that actresses could end up in penury and worked to start an organization to help with that issue, while Sadhona herself came to live the life of an actress in penury in her last days. Kanan worked to form friendships because she did not have strong familial support, but Sadhona had strong familial support which gave her the space to focus on her artistry, perhaps at the expense of forming strong friendships with other female artists. Kanan lived her last days as she wanted, but Sadhona's last days were spent in poverty. These women might not have been friends despite being colleagues in the film industry, but their life histories and modes of sociality reveal the role that class has played in the professions women chose as well as the obstacles they had to overcome based on their own social backgrounds.

Theater: IPTA and Reba Roy Chowdhury

While Kanan and Sadhona primarily came to be known for their performances on film, actresses and dancing performers of stage also shifted the conversation on class and women's work by emphasizing social issues through these arts. Dance scholars have argued that the 1920s and 1930s were significant in shaping modern Indian dance and in fact, trace those decades as the period of early modernism.[383] Purkayastha argues that these early modernist dances led to the protest dances of the 1940s, as performed by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), eventually leading to feminist dances of the 1980s and 1990s.[384] Numerous scholars have argued that Indian theater was a space of anti-colonial nationalism and anti-imperialism. Nandi Bhatia has argued that the theater in India engaged with politics by developing and performing plays that taught locals

[382] Ibid.
[383] Prarthana Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9.
[384] Ibid.

about significant issues like colonial mis-governance, workers' exploitation, and international issues such as Japanese aggression during the 1940s.[385] One well-known group that combined politics and theater was IPTA. IPTA was founded as a cultural wing of the Communist Party in 1942. The goal was for the Communist Party to construct a cultural identity and reach a wider audience through performances. IPTA's creation has been helmed as the beginning of a new, more realistic style of theatre.[386] IPTA came to be known for putting on performances that highlighted social issues, such as plays on the Bengal famine in the 1940s.

In her Bengali autobiography, published in 1999, actress Reba Roy Chowdhury (1925-2007)[387] wrote about her role as one of the founders of IPTA in Calcutta and the role it had in shaping her life as an artist appealing to the masses. The 1940s saw a shift to actresses from 'respectable' families who grew up in rural villages of Bengal, and far away from the world of parlour and courtesan culture.[388] Actresses like Reba Roy Chowdhury fall into this category. Reba's autobiography, titled *Jeebaner Taney Shilper Taney* [Life's Draw and Art's Draw] emphasized the impact of theater and performance in her life and foregrounded the push and pull she felt throughout her life.[389] Reba was a dancer, actress, and a singer. In Reba's obituary, Sunish Deb wrote that "Reba had a gifted voice both bold and melodious typical of a mass-singer."[390] She was a well-known theater and film actress in Bengal, but being a part of IPTA meant that she was also a *jatra* or "folk" actress. During the first half of the twentieth century, *jatra* actresses were considered less respectable than theater and film actresses, but that view gradually changed during the middle of the century. Actresses in *jatra* were traditionally from lower classes and had less education than other actresses.

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[385] Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).
[386] Dutt and Munsi, *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*, 87.
[387] Reba Roy Chowdhury, *Jeebaner Taney Shilper Taney* (Kolkata: Tema, 1999). I have put her birthday as 1925 from her writing, but her obituary calculated her date of birth to be 1928.
[388] Dutt and Munsi, *Engendering Performance,* 88.
[389] Reba Roy Chowdhury, *Jeebaner Taney Shilper Taney*.
[390] Sunish Deb, "Letter: Reba Roychowdhury," *Frontier Weekly* 40, no. 16 (Nov 4-10, 2007).

Yet, people like Reba proved to be the exceptions, because she was a college graduate and came from a middle-class family. The theater and entertainment industry were predominately male dominated, but it nevertheless opened opportunities for women to be independent, foster social ties, and maintain a source of income. "For the IPTA actresses, theatre became a site of empowerment."[391] There were greater autonomy and roles for actresses to work within such spaces than what was previously available.

Reba Roy Chowdhury shared information about the camaraderie of women in inspiring her theater days. She wrote about an international convention she attended with other Indian women, including numerous artists. The Mothers' Congress was held in Geneva in July 1955 and there, she performed for the crowd. Being a singer for the masses gave her the opportunity to pursue larger projects and connect with other artists, inside and outside of Bengal. For Reba, IPTA was the central sphere that determined the songs she sang and the performances she participated in. While that might seem constraining, IPTA's goal of reaching the public opened Reba to multiple creative pursuits, including acting in films later in her career. The transition from stage to film was helped by her appeal to a mass audience and public.

Public theater was a space that women could use to gain both skills as an artist and give back to their society. Unlike other professions, women in theater were often given roles that equaled those of men. The writings of IPTA women like Reba Roy Chowdhury "provide a glimpse into a society of equals, one in which colonised bodies of women and men moved and worked together in choreographed protests that rejected individual artistic genius in favor of choric dissent."[392] Collaborating with men, and with other women meant that the collective became central to their work. Purkayastha also points to a significant point regarding the class politics of IPTA: the fact that

[391] Dutt and Munsi, *Engendering Performance,* 97.
[392] Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism*, 104

they have been criticized for appropriating the 'folk' style for performances embodied by middle-class women. Of course, such appropriation points to the larger politics of how women in public theatre came to seen as respectable. While lower-class women were seen as deviating from middle-class politics of respectability "the fact that it was subaltern women who ultimately enabled and empowered colonised, gendered middle-class women in India, who emboldened their bodies and taught them how to move unselfconsciously in open public spaces cannot be overlooked."[393] Similar to how film was made into a 'respectable' profession due to the influx of middle-class women who followed after Sadhona Bose, so too public theater, and *jatra* in particular became a space that gave middle-class women an opportunity to perform and be seen as giving back to the nation.

Miss Shefali and Cabaret

By the 1960s and 1970s, there were more and more Indian women performing in public spaces as part of the entertainment industry. Performances in fancy, extravagant hotels were still primarily dominated by Anglo-Indian and European women artists, until the rise of Miss Shefali in the mid-1960s and 1970s. Born Arati Das (b. 1944), but professionally known as Miss Shefali, she was considered the first Bengali cabaret dancer. Although Shefali's reign in the industry was decades after Partition and Independence, her life history points to the growing normalization of Bengali women in the field of dance. While theatre actresses were slowly becoming more societally "respectable" in the years leading to Partition, cabaret dancing was still seen as lewd and foreign. Shefali became a cabaret dancer at Firpo's Hotel, which was an establishment frequented by foreigners and wealthy Indians. At that time, Firpo's was one of the most expensive and fancy hotels in Calcutta. Shefali wrote about her life recently, in an autobiography titled *Sandhaya Raater Shefali* [Shefali of the Evenings], stating that it is her autobiography and the story of the colorful Calcutta,

[393] Ibid., 107.

and that "there was a time when I was the queen of night of Calcutta."[394] According to Shisrha Bandopadhyay, who wrote the preface, this text was written to tell the story of a misunderstood woman. Shefali was insistent from the very first paragraph of the introductory text that this autobiography is hers and written by her to tell people about her life. She also casually declared that there were things in the autobiography about her life that has not been mentioned elsewhere. In letting her audience know that the text will inform them of new information, Shefali is both drawing in readers and also alluding to it as a celebrity tell-all. At the core of Shefali's construction of her history is how an industry has changed over time, as well as the prevailing middle-class prejudices that have continued to structure how she was perceived.

Shefali's autobiography highlighted the burden of being one of the first Indian women in cabaret. In her autobiography, Shefali stated, "When I started cabaret dancing at Calcutta's Firpo Hotel, all the other dancers were foreigners or Anglo-Indians. The idea of a girl from a Bengali family dancing at night in a hotel wearing very little clothes was not seen as a good thing by anybody."[395] The policing of Bengali women's bodies and its ties to societal norms of respectability were not always apparent to young women. Shefali expressed that "the idea that I was doing a 'bad' job, that society 'hated' this work, this idea was not something that I learned until much later." Shefali began performing as a cabaret dancer at age thirteen due to financial necessity, which explains her inability to understand why polite society deemed it as low-class. Yet, she quickly became a star and a well-known figure that many flocked to see dance.

Shefali's involvement in cabaret appears to be a matter of mere chance rather than a calling, but she is insistent that if given another opportunity, she would relive her fame as a cabaret dancer. Born into a lower-class family in East Bengal that moved to West Bengal during the Partition,

[394] Miss Shefali, *Sandhaya Raater Shefali* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2014).
[395] Ibid.

Shefali's family struggled financially. She began working as a domestic worker at age eleven for an Anglo-Indian family in Calcutta's Chandni Chowk to help her family. One day, she was discovered dancing behind the curtains during a party by a *saheb*, Mr. Vivian Hansen, who was a singer at Mocambo, one of Calcutta's finest dining establishments. She was asked by Mr. Vivian to leave her job and meet him one day. He took her first to a woman who gave her a sari and blouse to wear so she did not appear so childlike. It is worth mentioning that this man wanted to ensure that her true age could be camouflaged, sexualizing a desperate young girl. He first took her to Grand Oberoi Hotel but realized that this establishment was too famous and would not give young Arati a chance. Then he took her to Firpo's and she was hired there.[396] She was only twelve years old when she took on the stage name of Miss Shefali and began performing late at night in the famous Lido Room of Firpo's. Shefali was taught English so she could speak to many of the patrons as well. She was given a place to live nearby so she could return home late. Shefali also discussed the education she received to be a better performer, saying "Then I had foreigners like Gloria coming to the bungalow to teach me dance, from Hawaiian to belly dancing to Blues, Charleston, Can-can, twist.... I had to learn all forms of western dance. I also had a Hindi teacher."[397] Although Miss Shefali has disparagingly been called "just a cabaret dancer," she was a skilled dancer and performed various types of dances to live music at the hotels where she worked. She caught the eye of the famous filmmaker Satyajit Ray and performed in his 1971 film, *Seemabaddha* [Company Limited]. She was at the height of her career and as independent as a woman in Bengal could be, whether it was in terms of her time or financial security.

Notwithstanding her status as one of the most well-known dancers, who eventually moved to the famous Grand Oberoi and worked there for seventeen years, Shefali never fit into

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[396] Ibid., 19.

[397] "Shefali to Paoli," *The Telegraph*, August 28, 2018. https://www.telegraphindia.com/entertainment/shefali-to-paoli/cid/388741 (accessed June 18, 2019).

conventional Bengali society. In a recent interview, Shefali was asked if she would do anything differently if she could go back, and she responded that she would make sure someone fell in love with her and married her.[398] She spoke of her many affairs and dates but said that no one would stick around if she mentioned marriage due to her wearing revealing clothes for her job. Shefali met many people and formed friendships, even as family ties eluded her. At one point, she was adored and lived life on her own terms as a successful artist. Nowadays, she lives in a small apartment and is forgotten by the people of Kolkata as she struggles with health issues and paying for her multiple hospitalizations. When she is mentioned, it is regarding the nostalgia and glamour of the 1970s that came to be associated with her as the Queen of cabaret. Mass exodus of the Anglo-Indian community in the 1970s and the loss of the patrons of such nightlife in Calcutta means that the era of Shefali is over and she is now woven into the fabric of Calcutta's well-known nostalgia.

Reading women's construction of their histories through sociality shows that not all women were able to successfully maintain ties that crossed boundaries of community and family. Despite their successes, the life of female artists who rose from poverty remained empty of strong friendships, primarily due to their social class backgrounds. Shefali wrote and discussed the many big names in the film and theatre industries who she became friends with, but there was a sense of loneliness in her life as constructed in her autobiography. As one of the first Bengali women in cabaret dancing, she had no other peers and succeeded at a time when Anglo-Indians were leaving en masse. Given her work, she has not fostered very many strong friendships within her occupation. Similar to Kanan Devi, both recognized that they lacked companions in their journeys to success. The lack of deep friendships, as mentioned by Kanan Devi and Shefali, is important since they worked in industries where women were aware that they cannot have close friends due to the competitive nature of this business. Sadhona might not have had the same class issues, but not

[398] Ibid.

having strong friendships and relying solely on family ties put her in a similar boat to Shefali at the end of their lives. Their awareness of the lack of significant social ties with other women speaks to the sacrifices these women knew they were making by virtue of the work they chose to do. While the glamour and excitement of the entertainment industry catapulted these women to stardom, it did so often at the expense of strong, loyal relationships. As they say, it is lonely at the top, but more so for women who already came from marginalized backgrounds.

The Necessity of Social Bonds

For many women who ventured out in the workforce, work friends and colleagues became important people who not only expanded their worlds, but also became instrumental for their survival. For women who remained single throughout their lives, female friendships fostered at work became lifelong support. For unmarried women, strong social bonds were particularly important in Bengali society. This has become more significant in the present period as more and more middle-class women are choosing to remain unmarried. Khushi Dasgupta (b. 1942) is a working woman currently living in Kolkata who has explicitly pointed to her friends as essential to her life and survival, saying "I'm alive because of my friends. They help me so much."[399] Khushi currently lives at a Working Women's Hostel, a government subsidized housing development. In her interview, Khushi stressed that she worked in "service" beginning in 1967 and retired in 2000. She has been living at the Working Women's Hostel since 1987, where she has been able to live alone and do everything herself. In her interview, she explained that being unmarried means that she relies heavily on her friends for most things other people rely on family members. For Khushi, it is important to have friends and a way to live respectfully without suffering from financial stressors. Although she herself is not very well-off, her friends provide both financial and emotional support. She spoke

[399] Khushi Dasgupta, Personal Interview, Kolkata, June 10, 2017.

fondly of Swasti, one of her friends who used to live at the hostel but now comes to visit Khushi often, once every month. Swasti pays for all of Khushi's medicines and accompanies Khushi when she wants to go anywhere, whether it is to doctors or for leisure activities. Khushi stated that she did not get married because she had to care for her younger siblings but getting a job early on gave her the financial freedom to support her family. As a result of going into the workforce, her parents also supported her freedom to travel anywhere she wanted to. She never felt the pressure to conform to societal standards of staying at home despite growing up in a middle-class family. Khushi credited her working lifestyle to the routine she maintained as she has gotten older and retired. She spends lots of her time reading books, sewing, and going swimming. She also travels with her female friends often, such as going to Puri every year with Swasti. Most of her close friends primarily worked in the 'service' industries which has allowed her to maintain long-term connections. For people like Khushi, these friendships allow her to live her life on her own terms.

As the examples above reveal, the social world of women's work sites was conditional on the industries themselves. While social work, by virtue of its collaborative nature, easily lent itself to close and intimate friendships, it was not the case for many women in the entertainment industries. In some fields, women's sociality was marked by divisiveness and competition. For women from lower social classes, the fight for recognition as both artists and respectable women dominated their everyday struggles. While major crises provided the impetus for middle-class women's participation in the workforce, women from lower classes nevertheless continued to be involved in work without much mobility. The history of women's sociality in occupational settings also show that women were building professional and charitable institutions to support the work of other women. People in service work often started with the frame of helping other women progress which was not always the prime objectives among female artists. Many, such as Kanan Devi, nevertheless worked to improve the lot of women whose fates she could have easily shared.

CHAPTER IV

The Legacy of Mentorship: Sufia Kamal's *Ekale Amader Kal*

At the heart of women's sociality lie the networks that have allowed for these relationships to flourish. Mentorship as a model has been extremely popular in recent years, but the concept of mentorship has a long history.[400] Rather than a formal conception of mentorship as practiced or discussed in business or solely professional settings, my definition of mentorship encompasses both networks of the professional and the everyday, mundane relationships that are essential to the social bonds of friendship. For many women, the intimacy of mentoring relationships shaped their lifelong philosophy, political activism, their career choices, and more. As the previous chapters have shown, the influence and support of other women have been crucial in schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

Women's networks have facilitated relationships and mentorship that extend over decades. Although the doyennes of women's movements and activism are no longer alive, their impact continues to shape the present. Mentorship is a unique relationship that allows for multiplicities of associations and connections, from those that mirror that of teacher and student to that of peers and even friends. Women's networks of mentoring in twentieth-century Bengal were cross-generational, and the chain of Bengali women's mentorship networks examined here spanned a century. Although some of these mentoring associations were intentional and formal, most of the relationships that structured women's lives were quite informal. These relationships were formed through networks of

[400] Scholars harken back to the character of Mentor in *The Odyssey*.

family, friends, co-workers, and far away admirers. I argue that mentorship is not just the physical interactive connections, but also the influences that shaped lives. Many women formed and nurtured these links throughout their lives.

One such figure who has been inspired by others and inspired and mentored many Bengali women herself in the realms of education, neighborhood and cultural organizations, and in encouraging women's social service and professional work was Sufia Kamal (1911-1999). During my fieldwork in Dhaka, many women I interviewed kept bringing up their admiration for "Khalamma" [aunty], the affectionate address for Sufia Kamal. Sufia holds an important place in Bengali history, particularly in the history of Bangladesh. In addition to her fame as one of the most well-known poets and writers of Bengal, she also lived through and shaped the history and society of twentieth-century (East) Bengal. Like the well-known Bengali feminist and education activist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1888-1932), Sufia encouraged women's education, served the community through social service work, and fought to retain and promote Bengali culture in East Bengal when it was under attack by the Pakistani government. She also served as an important figure in the Bangladeshi imagination during 1971; the Pakistani government and military refused to harm her for fear of making her a martyr, such was the popularity and respect she garnered among the people. After the independence of Bangladesh, Sufia formed and led the nation's premier women's organizations and continued to be a voice of conscience against authoritarian government. Sufia was the very first woman to be buried with full state honors in Bangladesh in November 1999, where despite her wishes for a simple funeral, over a hundred thousand people came to pay their respects.[401] The state offered to bury her in the national cemetery among honored dignitaries, but she had requested to be buried in a local burial ground, having told her family, "I am an ordinary person, I want to be buried

[401] Sajed Kamal, "Foreword" in *Mother of Pearls and other Poems* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2001), 45.

in Azimpur, among ordinary people."[402] Central to Sufia's representation of herself and in how her admirers speak of her is Sufia's commitment to ordinary, everyday women, regardless of differences in class or creed. Although Sufia insisted on the "ordinariness" of herself, she was quite remarkable, and not just for the period in which she lived.

This chapter presents mentorship across generations of women as having shaped these women as well as Bengali history, and centers on the compelling life history and autobiographical writings of Sufia Kamal, especially her 1988 autobiography *Ekale Amader Kal*. While previous chapters examined cross-sectional and snippets of life histories of various women, this chapter presents an analysis of one particularly notable woman. I argue that through her autobiographical texts and relationships with other women, Sufia modeled and taught a form of mentorship that was inclusive of the various religious communities in Bengal. The first part of this chapter will examine Sufia's memoir and the themes Sufia emphasized, and will explore her invocation of Rokeya as the ideal model of mentorship to emulate. I argue that through her focus on Rokeya's life, works, and accomplishments as well as those of her own, Sufia highlighted the significance of women from various communities, especially Muslims and Hindus, working and living together. The last section of this chapter looks at how contemporary Bangladeshi women think of and write about Sufia and her impact on their society. There, I look at the mentoring relationships that Sufia formed, and to what extent she presented herself as a mentor similar to Rokeya. This chapter highlights the intergenerational nature of mentorship and spans much of the twentieth century.

Situating Sufia Kamal's Autobiographical Text

Sufia Kamal is best known for her poetry collections, but she also penned an autobiographical text, *Ekale Amader Kal* [In this Time Our Time] (1988). The text focuses largely on

[402] Ibid.

Bengal's early twentieth century experience of colonialism and struggle for independence, with just a few lines referring to times she wrote in. The limited circulation of this text is notable given the hagiographic manner in which Sufia Kamal is spoken of and taught in Bangladesh. Though Sufia's poetry collections are easily accessible in most bookstores and libraries in Bangladesh, *Ekale Amader Kal* is not. I first came across this text in a footnote and found it only with great difficulty, in a Bangladeshi historian's personal collection. In the corpus of her non-fiction works, which includes a book on the 1971 liberation war and movement and another book on her trip to the Soviet Union, *Ekale Amader Kal* has rarely been analyzed as a historical text. Given the extensive Bengali writing on Sufia's status as the 'conscience' of Bangladesh, as well as one of the most important voices of the country, I found it surprising how little this text is referenced or even utilized in telling her history. Given her foremost identity as a poet and an activist, the limited historiography on her has been focused on her writing and her involvement in the Bengali Language Movement of the 1950s and the women's movements. Most writings on Sufia are almost hagiographical, in that they seek to praise her as a voice of progress and women's movement. Even with the limited academic scholarship on Sufia, all of which is entirely in Bengali, the exclusion of this Bengali memoir, where she wrote about her own life, seems startling. In thinking about the role Sufia played in twentieth century Bengal, it is crucial that we examine how she portrayed herself, as well as what she wanted to convey through her personal writings.

Ekale Amader Kal has commonly been translated as "In This Time, Our Time,"[403] which does not adequately capture the sense of the Bengali phrasing as much as just the literal translation of the words. *Ekale* translates to "in this time," *amader* to "our" while *kal* translates to "time." In my reading of the text, I contend that Sufia is asking that we think of the past as providing lessons for the contemporary time during which she is writing. The gist of the phrase is perhaps best translated

[403] Banglapedia translates it this way.

as "In This Time Is Our Time" which while clunky, provides a better understanding of what the text is getting at. This phrasing allows us to see the text as an innovative document that not only tells the history of the past, but also a record of Sufia teaching future Bengali women how to be. I want to focus on the significance of the "our" or the implicit "we" that Sufia is gesturing to. I suggest that this refers to the "our" or alternative women's history that she feels Bengal and Bengali women deserve. In other words, through her text on the past, Sufia models a form of mentorship that asks that contemporary Bengali women learn from women who came before them by remembering and re-thinking the past for the contemporary period.

Sufia herself is adamant that this text is not personal, but rather an account of the past. In the very beginning of *Ekale Amader Kal*, she stated, "don't let anyone think that this writing is an autobiography."[404] She elaborated that only Mahatma Gandhi wrote a successful autobiography, and everyone else's is unbearable. By bringing in Gandhi, who has an exalted status in South Asia and beyond, Sufia appears to hint that only certain people are worthy of writing about their own lives, echoing recent scholarship on autobiographies that challenge the idea that only men or people in the West are capable of writing worthwhile autobiographies. Like many other Bengali women who wrote life histories, Sufia was humble; despite all the accolades that she received, she insisted that this text was not her autobiography per se, but an account of a past time. Her daughter, Sultana Kamal, reiterated similar sentiments when I asked her about *Ekale Amader Kal*, saying that it was really a "social memoir not personal."[405] Why is there such an insistence by the author that an account of her life in the past is not autobiographical? What does it mean—beyond humility—that Sufia is interested in detailing "past time" rather than narrativizing a life? I argue that Sufia intended this text to serve as an instructive exemplar of what she wanted Bangladeshis to understand about

[404] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal* (Dhaka: Gaan Prashani, 1988), 1.
[405] Sultana Kamal, Personal Interview, Dhaka, Nov. 5, 2017.

the past. The title starkly references an attempt to look back at the past from her vantage point in the late 1980s. Yet, more than general society at large, the text reads like a life history and a personal memoir of her significant relationships, beginning with her birth and childhood. Although purportedly written as a text chronicling "those times" of the first half of the twentieth century, at the center of Sufia's memoir is Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Sufia's "social memoir" can be read through three critical themes: the significance of mentors and influences, Hindu-Muslim relationships, and finally, the importance of learning from and continuing the work of her own mentor, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

Becoming a Writer: Support and Mentorship

The scholarship on mentorship shows that women tend to have more cross-gender mentorship relationships than men, mostly due to the lack of available female mentors.[406] Such was certainly the case for Indian women in the early part of the twentieth century, as is deftly shown in most scholarship on women's social reform, particularly in the field of education.[407] Sufia's first mentors and supporters were also men, even though her main inspiration came from women who were her contemporaries. Sufia wrote extensively about her journey as a young writer and her struggle to think of herself as a writer. She wrote that she used to read the works of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) and the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Sufia valued her relationships with these two prominent men, and in fact, wrote poems for them and in honor of two of Bengal's most famous literary figures. She did not shy away from discussing the significance of male mentors in her life, relationships that were often depicted as more "formal" mentorship than

406 Schwiebert, Valerie L., Mary D. Deck, Monica L. Bradshaw, Pamela Scott, and Melanie Harper. "Women as Mentors." *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 37, no. 4 (1999): 241-253.
407 Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Karlekar, *Voices from Within*; Minault, *Secluded Scholars*; Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal*, etc. All have shown that men were the first to encourage and open schools for girls in colonial India.

the ones she shared with women. Both Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore were writers whose work she voraciously consumed, but she did not believe herself able to become an author in their image. In her autobiographical text, Sufia acknowledged people in her life who were important to her, especially well-known figures like Nazrul and Rabindranath. Both these men read her works in well-known periodicals, which were published in the 1930s. Nazrul had read her writing when she first published her poetry in a local paper and later when she published in the well-known *Saogat*. After she moved to Calcutta in 1930, while at the office of *Saogat*, Nazrul heard Sufia was in Calcutta and came over to her house one day, calling for 'Sufia.' She was shocked and did not know what to do since at that time she was home with only her mother. As someone who practiced *purdah*, or gendered seclusion, she had never been in the presence of an unknown man, but could not resist meeting the great poet. She stated that he expressed shock that she was so young and praised her writing. Before leaving, he told her he did not have any sister so she should call him 'Dadu' (older brother) and refer to him informally as *Tui* (informal you) rather than *apni* (formal you).[408] Sufia conceded that within one day he was so affectionate that she could not help but idolize him. The admiration and support she felt from Nazrul was described in her writing as she recounted their meetings and the subsequent mentoring he provided. She credited Nazrul for the relationship she fostered with Nasiruddin, the editor of *Saogat* who became a life-long mentor, when Nazrul insisted on taking her along to Nasiruddin's house.

Similarly, she traced the relationship she shared with Rabindranath Tagore where she saw herself as a mentee benefiting from Tagore's generosity. She recounted an incident where she sent him a poem on his birthday, and he wrote back with a few lines of poetry of his own, after which he invited her to his Jorasanko house in Calcutta. She went to see him and visited several times to see performances of his writings, during which he gifted her a copy of his well-known novel *Gora*. Sufia

[408] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal,* 50.

portrayed Tagore as very kind and someone who praised her writing, as well as offered support. Tagore also introduced her to many important people at his house, including Subhas Chandra Bose, the writer Maitreyi Devi, and the Tagore family women. While she did not dwell on any of those people, she recalled her time there as "such happy memories of them all."[409] Sufia wrote that she was heartbroken and in dire pain when she heard of Tagore's death, pointing to the affective nature of their bond. Her relationships with these famous male figures point to formal mentoring relationships that sustained her as a young writer, whose feedback encouraged her.

Despite this admiration and support she drew from Tagore and Nazrul, she never considered that she was similar to them, except that their encouragement and support buoyed her spirits when she first began publishing. However, her exposure to female writers helped her gain the self-confidence to begin writing when she realized that she enjoyed writing but was unsure whether she could. She recalled,

> I saw that Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote, and Begum Sara Taifur wrote. Begum Motahera Banu wrote poetry. I thought, they wrote, can I also write? Thus began my game with writing. Secretively, reluctantly and full of shame, my writing of scribbles, rhymes and stories. But none of it turned out to my liking. Who might know, who might see, fearing such I hid these writings and then would look at them in embarrassment and become ashamed.[410]

As she first began to write, Sufia did so in fear, secrecy, and shame. In Ekale *Amader Kal*, she wrote on her affective responses of reluctance and shame, echoing broader representations of how women were expected to feel. While she recognized that she found joy in writing, the larger societal restrictions made her think twice. Her shame of writing reverberates in the memoir, and also in subsequent interviews she gave regarding her early career as a writer. In an interview conducted by writer Shaheen Akhter with Sufia Kamal in September 1996, Sufia spoke at length about her

[409] Ibid., 51.
[410] Ibid., 34.

trajectory as a writer and the pressures she faced. According to Akhtar's account, Sufia narrativizes the situation as:

> I wrote despite a lot of resistance. Nobody in my family wanted me to write. Ultimately, I became detached from my family. Only my mother was with me. My mother and I became completely dissociated from our family [in the year 1933], because writing and speaking in Bengali, mingling with Bengalis and abandoning the purdah to do social service was considered demeaning to family honour. The family members, out of utter shame and disgust, did not want to see our faces ever again.[411]

In the above passages, it is noteworthy that Sufia remembered finally gaining the confidence to write, but then was filled with shame to do so. The role affect played in Sufia's statements point to the difficulties she faced as a budding writer. Even years after this interview, as she recalled her beginning as a writer, Sufia distinctly remembered the "shame and disgust" that she felt about being different from other women. Sufia was born into a conservative family that discouraged women's education and went so far as to cut off ties with Sufia and her mother when she started publishing her writing in the 1930s. They saw a girl from their family writing for the public as a matter of embarrassment.

Sufia's struggle to gain an education was typical of Muslim girls in the 1920s and 1930s and formal education was discouraged. For someone like young Sufia, writing was anathema. She insisted, "women did not get the opportunity to write. One needed to develop one's skills in the chosen area. Most women writing essays or poems at that time had social reform as their goal. This trend began with Begum Rokeya."[412] Rokeya was not only one of the writers who influenced her to believe that she could also write for the public, but also the person whom Sufia modeled herself upon. Although she appreciated the encouragement of important men like Nazrul and Tagore, none

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411 "Sufia Kamal: The Legacy of Begum Rokeya" in Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, eds., *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938* (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), 346.
412 Ibid., 347.

of their accomplishments quite inspired her as much as seeing Bengali women writers garner praise and be published in well-known magazines and periodicals.

In *Ekale Amader Kal*, Sufia stated that one of her greatest accomplishments was being recognized as a writer and as someone who could inspire and encourage women writers when she became the editor of *Begum* magazine in 1947. She freely admitted that she was only able to garner that position due to the mentorship and patronage of Mohammed Nasiruddin (1888-1994), the owner and editor of the periodical *Saogat*. When he founded the women's magazine *Begum*, he asked Sufia to be the editor. Through her relationship with Nazrul, she became a frequent visitor at Nasiruddin's house, which led to her becoming one of his mentees. Nasiruddin introduced her to numerous writers who wrote for *Saogat*, broadening her circle of literary figures. In her memoir, she recounted that these writers all showed her such affection that those memories still shone brightly some forty years later.[413] However, in her own writing of her past, she mentioned these figures only briefly and moved on. The crux of her memoir focuses on the many women with whom she worked with in various organizations and movements. In terms of influence and mentors, Sufia's writing primarily highlighted Rokeya, the woman who she considered to be crucial to Bengal's history and for its women. Despite the importance of friendships with women, most scholarship about Sufia emphasizes her relationships with the men in Nasiruddin's circle and obscures the significance of her relationships with other women.

Ekale Amader Kal begins with Sufia's birth and childhood in the 1910s in Barisal and traces her adolescence and young adulthood in Calcutta in the 1930s. But more than a third of the memoir reads as a mini-biography and homage to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). Rokeya is perhaps the most-well known early Bengali Muslim feminist, whose legacy and contributions to women's progress is celebrated every December 9th during Rokeya Day. Sufia began the last third of *Ekale*

[413] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal,* 51.

Amader Kal by writing, "When I first met Begum Rokeya, I was very young. . . Begum Rokeya has been an incredible inspiration in my life."[414] Here and later, Sufia referred to her relationship with Rokeya as one of mentorship and inspiration. This form of mentorship can best be described as one where the mentee is attuned to fulfilling the wishes of her mentor due to her admiration and tireless work in fighting for a better society for Bengal's women. Sufia informed her readers that Rokeya was distantly related to her family which is why Rokeya met Sufia's family when they went to Calcutta. After being introduced to one another, Sufia wrote that Rokeya lamented, "I made my school, there we have lots of girls studying, Hindu, Muslim, all girls study there. But none of my relatives' girls study there."[415] Rokeya asked that Sufia be sent there and Sufia's mother said she would if they lived in Calcutta, but they were only visiting for a few months. Sufia had never been to a school and desperately wanted to attend, but as she did not live in Calcutta, she could not; instead, she visited Rokeya's school. Sufia's disappointment in not having access to formal education reverberates throughout her memoir. A bit later, Sufia heard that her cousins were going to go to school and wrote, "I felt so sad that they could go to school but I could not."[416] As an adult, Sufia worked to ensure all the women she mentored had access to education.

After the discussion on Rokeya and her attempt to persuade her relatives to send their daughters to school, Sufia wrote about the social service organization that Rokeya founded, the Anjuman Khawateen-e Islam, which Sufia later joined. Sufia wrote about Rokeya as if they were contemporaries, but their lives intertwined only a few times. Sufia did not have a lot of time with Rokeya, but she was a figure to whom Sufia was closely bound. Even though *Ekale Amader Kal* is presumably a social memoir of the past times, it quickly devolved into an account of Rokeya's life. Sufia went on to include biographical information on Rokeya, including how Rokeya learned to read

[414] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal*, 36.
[415] Ibid.
[416] Ibid., 37.

and write in many languages, her writing *Sultana's Dream* in English, and essays in Bengali despite growing up speaking Urdu. She delved into Rokeya's personal life, such as her marriage and in-laws not liking her, and giving Rokeya grief when she first opened her school in Bhagalpur in her husband's name, which ultimately caused her to move to Calcutta. In describing Rokeya's most well-known accomplishment, the founding of Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls, Sufia stated that Rokeya began her school in Calcutta with girls in the slums. At that time, *bhadralok* girls did not go to school, so girls came to this *basti* to learn. She reiterated over and over that all types of girls, including Hindu and Christian girls came to learn from Rokeya.[417] Sufia was keen to highlight the appeal of Rokeya as someone who was openminded and welcoming of all, a central theme that she continued to emphasize throughout her writing.

Memories of a Community United: The Importance of Hindu-Muslim Relationships

Ekale Amader Kal may be written as 'social memoir' of her life, but in it, Sufia also foregrounded the issues faced by Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. By emphasizing these communities, Sufia was writing a history of Hindu-Muslim relations and friendship. Sufia Kamal's childhood in Shaestabad, Barisal was spent in her maternal grandparents' zamindari estate, where she described a nostalgic past of interreligious harmony. Her childhood is reminiscent of many upper middle-class Bengali families who lived in family estates on the periphery of big cities. Despite her father abandoning his family when she was a few years old, Sufia and her brother never felt the loss as their aunts and relatives provided everything from clothing to food, to love and support. They even helped her brother attend college in Calcutta while the family stayed in Barisal.[418] She places emphasis on the fact that the self-sufficient estate was enclosed, including the social relationships and networks. Sufia's playmates were her cousins and the children of the servants, from both Hindu

[417] Ibid., 40.
[418] Ibid., 17.

and Muslim backgrounds. In nostalgic tones, she wrote about her love of nature that she lamented and missed when she later moved to Calcutta.

In both her life and in her writings, Sufia Kamal underscored togetherness and harmony between Bengal's Hindus and Muslims. As the doyenne of Bangladeshi society, writing in the 1980s, long after the Partition of India, Sufia insisted upon the nostalgia of Bengali harmony between the two dominant religious communities. According to her text, during her childhood she was exposed to people from both Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. She grew up in a wealthy and religious family, and in those times the zamindari families would celebrate all festivals and occasions, from Durga Pujas to the two Eids, with many people all coming together and eating together. She invoked that "there were lots of Hindu workers" on the estate, and that "pujas and other festivals were celebrated with lots of pomp."[419] Sufia painted an idyllic life of Hindus and Muslims living and working together in Shaistabad, including how "Hindus and Muslims would cook, eat, and laugh together on the day of *punyaha* [auspicious day]."[420]It is worth highlighting incidents of commensality since even as late as the mid-twentieth century, many Muslims were not allowed to eat with their Hindu friends.

These nostalgic feelings show that, like many South Asian women who wrote towards the end of the twentieth century, Sufia was attuned to the shifting relationships between Hindus and Muslims in the region. In highlighting the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in rural Bengal, Sufia was adamant that such a time existed where religious differences were not the reason for division. Sufia was invested in creating a history of Bengal that was inclusive of Hindus and Muslims, so she drew upon a past that was part of her lived experience to show possibilities that have been foreclosed by the late twentieth century. She rendered a serene and tranquil world where everyone would wear new clothes and celebrate all evening whenever there were festivals and

[419] Ibid., 29.
[420] Ibid.

celebrations. This interreligious community and notions of Hindu-Muslim togetherness was at the forefront of much of her work later on as well.

As Sufia's memoir explained Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was her inspiration and mentor, she reiterated that Rokeya worked tirelessly to bring various communities together. This created a further genealogical link between Sufia and Rokeya. Sufia argued that an ideal Bengali society, and hence the role of today's women, should be to imagine and create an inclusive society that is welcoming of people of all backgrounds. Sufia's focus on the concept of "Tarini Bhavan," the name for the space occupied by women of all backgrounds in Rokeya's 1924 novella *Padmarag*, harkens back to her emphasis on harmony and togetherness among the various communities. In explaining Rokeya's influence on her, Sufia stated:

> I don't know if there is any other person today like her. At that time, she founded a Bengali girls' organization, the Bengali Khawateen-e Islam, where everything was in Bengali. The school she had at that time was not just a school. If you read about Begum Rokeya's life, you'll see that there's something about "Tarini Bhavan" there. She wrote a novel titled "Padmarag." In it, she wrote about Tarini Bhavan. Her school was such a Tarini Bhavan. There, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and all sorts of girls used to study. Some as teachers, some superintendents, some studying, some came to live there, some to work. I have yet to see another beautiful establishment like that. Local and foreign girls, both here and elsewhere, girls and women have such beautiful opportunities, such government support now. But at that time, she didn't have such things, and in fact, her community and religious groups would vilify her. They wrote so many letters. They tortured her in so many ways. They threw bricks at her. But she still kept her school.[421]

In this one passage, Sufia upheld Rokeya's contributions to society, as well as the sufferings she faced from her community. Rokeya's novella told the story of a group of women from various religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds who gathered at Tarini Bhavan, which could be read as a utopic space for education and philanthropy. *Padmarag* is perhaps more unusual for showing that Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Parsis could co-exist and live harmoniously because women of all backgrounds are subject to patriarchal oppression. By writing, "I have yet to see another beautiful

[421] Ibid., 38.

establishment like that," in describing Rokeya's Tarini Bhavan, Sufia reminded her readers that, for most women, patriarchy continued to be the common enemy and the reason for women's oppression.

By reminding her audience of a past where women may not have had as many rights but nevertheless espoused harmonious relationships between Bengal's religious communities, Sufia's text was a call to action for a better society, one that was previously imagined by her mentor Rokeya, who wrote during a time when tensions between Bengal's Hindu and Muslim communities ran high. In recounting what she most admired about Rokeya, Sufia sought to teach her mentees and readers of her life history that Bangladesh can imagine a future that is utopic, even during periods of crises in democracy.

This was particularly apt in 1980s' Bangladesh when a military coup led to an authoritarian military dictatorship of Hussain Mohammed Ershad (1930-2019). In 1988, Ershad passed a constitutional amendment making Islam the state religion. Established as a secular democracy in 1971, Bangladesh did not have a state religion until Ershad's regime. Like Rokeya, Sufia through her writing spoke to contemporary Bengali women and the larger Bangladeshi society. Whereas Rokeya wrote at a time when Bengalis had to choose between a communal identity of being Muslim or Hindu as well as choosing to speak Bengali or Urdu, Sufia wrote at a moment when democracy was in crisis in Bangladesh.

Rokeya's goal in the 1920s was to bring women from various communities together during a period of animosity between Bengal's Hindu and Muslim communities, as well as within the Bengali Muslim community. As scholars of Bengal have shown, the 1920s was a precarious time for communalism. Until 1924, the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity was at its peak, as the Khilafat

Movement of 1919-1924[422] bought Indians together to rally behind a cause important to Muslims, and the Bengal Pact of 1923[423] was seen as encouraging friendships among the two communities on the political stage. However, by mid-1920s, the region transitioned away from relative communal harmony, as the Bengal Pact failed by 1925, and riots permeated the province in 1924.[424] When Rokeya wrote *Padmarag* in 1924, she was aware of the efforts being made to foster Hindu-Muslim friendships, and given that moment, chose to highlight how people from various communities could live harmoniously. Rokeya was part of the debates of whether Bengal was a Hindu or Muslim region as well as debates on what constitutes a Bengali Muslim. She argued for Bengali Muslims to use Bengali as their main language as opposed to Urdu as was being argued by some.[425]

Similarly, Sufia wrote *Ekale Amader Kal* at a time when the question of religious identity was being challenged by the state of Bangladesh. Sufia was an instrumental figure in the Bengali Language Movement in 1950s, and by the time Bangladesh became an independent state in 1971, the question of whether a Bengali person can be a Muslim was no longer hotly debated. Yet, under Ershad's rule, the imposition of a state religion forced many to contend with the idea of whether or not Bangladesh should be a secular or Islamic state, a question that is still being debated today. In

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[422] The Khilafat Movement was an effort led by Indian Muslims to unite the Muslim community politically through religious and cultural symbolism, while also trying to forge Hindu-Muslim alliance. See Gail Minault, T*he Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[423] The Bengal Pact of 1923 was an effort led by C.R. Das to garner representation in Bengal Assembly on the basis of population ration rather than separate electors. It was supported by urban Muslim professionals, and earned a lot of trust in Das by Bengal's Muslims but the plan was criticized by educated Hindus. The Bengal Pact was discarded after Das's death in 1925. See Semanti Ghosh*, Different Nationalism: Bengal 1905-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984) for more on the role of Bengal Pact in the 1920s and in Bengali debates on nationalism.

[424] See Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), who argues that 1924 was when communal harmony in Bengal began to suffer. Rajat Kanta Ray however, places 1925 as the date until when Bengal was fairly cohesive and undivided, see Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[425] For more on the debates on what language Bengali Muslims should speak and write in as well as the category of Bengali Muslim, see Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); and Joya Chatterji, "The Bengali Muslim: A Contradiction in Terms? An Overview of the Debate on Bengali Muslim Identity." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 16.2 (Fall 1996): 16-24.

highlighting Hindu-Muslim relationships during the early twentieth century from her vantage point at the end of the century, Sufia sought to steer her readers to think back to when another Bengali woman, Rokeya, chose a certain path despite the communalism of the time. By emphasizing Rokeya's perspectives on Hindu-Muslim relationships, Sufia was asking contemporary Bengalis living through Bangladesh's democracy in crisis moment in the 1980s to fight for a more just society, one that worked toward better Hindu-Muslim relationships. Perhaps Sufia was imagining a futurity in the past, one that provided an alternative to the contemporary communal tensions and rising authoritarianism of present-day Bangladesh. *Ekale Amader Kal* then, can be read as a plea for women to take charge and work to bring about communal harmony, with herself as part of that genealogy.

Sufia's commitment to working with women from Bengal's various communities is best highlighted in her social service work, which she described in detail in *Ekale Amader Kal.* Like many other well-known Bengali women of the twentieth century, Sufia Kamal was an avid volunteer in numerous social service organizations. The first instance of her involvement in social work was when she was newly married and lived in Barisal with her first husband, away from any family. She was able to get involved in *samity* [associations] and social service work through Savitri Dutt, whom she called Savitri *didi.* This *samity's* meetings were held in the Barisal Girls' School. Sufia remarked that she would go with Savitri didi, wearing a burka in a closed horse cart."[426] Being involved in social work opened up new opportunities for Sufia, including giving her a chance to meet Gandhi. However, due to the fact that her family was conservative, and it was uncommon for Muslim women to be seen in public at that time, she dressed like a Hindu woman. In recounting the incident, Sufia specified that around the 1920s, Gandhi's ideals were becoming important in social and political circles.

> It was the time of Gandhiji's chakra, so I got a spinning wheel and Gandhiji came to Barisal. I was so very interested in seeing him, but being in a public setting was impossible for me.

[426] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal,* 35.

> Rojni kaki-ma, Nalini kaki-ma, even though they were not *purdahshin* (veiled), thought a lot about me being recognized, and then dressed me like them and put sindoor on me and took me with them. Because I was always protected and veiled, no one recognized me. At that time, I saw Mahatma Gandhi. Giving him my own cut cloth in his hands, I was so happy and proud that day. That day is one of my most treasured memories.[427]

Sufia acknowledged that she was the only Muslim woman in the women's organization in Barisal, where her friends and social circle were Hindu women, with whom she formed important relationships, often explained through kinship terminology. These women came to her aid and cleverly disguised her so she could meet Gandhi. This interaction with Gandhi had a long-lasting impact on Sufia, who became a Gandhian of a sort, and fought for Hindu-Muslim harmony, worked in villages of Bengal in the aftermath of the 1946 riots, and sought to dress in *khadi*. Sufia Kamal is best known today in Bangladesh for always being in a crisp white *sari* and dressing simply throughout her life. In recounting her experience with Gandhi, Sufia harkened back to the ideals of Hindu-Muslim harmony that she associated with what she was most keen to emulate from her male mentors, which included Gandhi, Tagore, Nazrul, and Nasiruddin. Yet, the fact that she connected the work done to foster Hindu-Muslim sociality with Rokeya reveals Sufia's intent to show that women were the harbingers of peace and harmony, as well as connect herself to a genealogy of Bengali women who lived a life espousing Hindu-Muslim friendship.

When writing about Rokeya, Sufia also linked her to the social service work that she became a part of. Sufia formed a deeper connection with Rokeya when she came back to Calcutta again around 1927. It was at that time that she realized that Rokeya had founded an ashram that was a safe haven for many. There Sufia came to see Rokeya's work in bringing women from different communities together. Sufia wrote about one Hindu woman whom she called Maya-di, who was kidnapped by dacoits and, when she tried to go home, neither her parents nor her in-laws would accept her back, so she stayed at the ashram. She placed Maya-di in context and informed her

[427] Ibid.

readers that "there were many such tortured Hindu and Muslim girls then."[428] She also stated that she met two Christian women at Rokeya's ashram, both of whom were foreigners in terrible marriages but were unable to get divorces due to the difficulties of the process. She remembered of the women at the ashram, "They would say, 'if there were a few more women like Begum Rokeya in Bengal, then this society would have progress very quickly."[429] By pointing to women from various communities, both local and foreign, Sufia underlined the idea that Rokeya was an extraordinary woman who changed Bengali society by keeping an open heart and mind, welcoming all.

Sufia insisted that her own interest and work in social work was due to Rokeya's influence. "Her ideals have become a part of my life. We worked in slum after slum as part of the Anjuman e-Khawateen-e Islam that she started."[430] In writing about her experiences at the Anjuman, she named many women who were part of the organization, including Shamsunnahar Mahmud, another well-known mentee of Rokeya's. Sufia's recollections of going to both Hindu and Muslim slums, as well as to slums with low caste communities reveal the central lessons she learned from her mentor. Rokeya encouraged Sufia and her other mentees to be in conversation with other women, and especially to keep low-caste Hindu women close. Rokeya also advised them to be part of organizations with Hindu women, such as the All-India Women's Association, which both Rokeya and Sufia were a part of. Sufia indicated that she and Shamsunnahar brought many other women into the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-i-Islam and then took those women to the All-India Women's Association to be a part of that as well. In upholding Rokeya's open-mindedness, Sufia wrote, "For her, there was no discrimination between Hindus and Muslims. She used to say, 'why shouldn't we work together'? We are all in Calcutta, we are all Indian, we will be living with Indian women."[431]

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[428] Ibid., 41.
[429] Ibid.
[430] Ibid.
[431] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal*, 44.

Sufia's repeated insistence that Rokeya did not differentiate or discriminate between Hindus and Muslims points to the need to harken back to a pre-partition and independence period where togetherness was seen as essential. Sufia stated that Rokeya taught everyone that no matter what creed or station someone is, it did not matter; Rokeya also insisted on teaching everyone who worked at her school, whether the sweeper, gardener, etc., saying "They are also people, why shouldn't we teach them? Knowledge is for everyone."[432] This idea that everyone should have access was profound and something that Sufia held on to later. Sufia's insistence that Rokeya was committed to girls' education and asked that society not deprive them on the basis of religion and keep them back highlighted the significance of Rokeya's contributions. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was an extraordinary woman whose accomplishments rightly deserve to be lauded, but in her homage and mini biography of Rokeya in *Ekale Amader Kal*, Sufia's main focus was on the writings and the works where Rokeya emphasized a utopic or inclusive space, further highlighting that for Sufia, Rokeya's greatest contribution and lesson to future Bengalis was to fight for a just society where no one was discriminated against.

Keeping the Memory Alive

Throughout the third section of her memoir, Sufia insisted that Rokeya was someone who was to be emulated and remembered. She wrote about wanting to have Rokeya's name and work honored in places like Pairaband, where people can see someone like that came out of that place since "without her, women would have been 50 years behind."[433] She also recounted a recent tribute she made to Rokeya's memory at Rokeya's birthplace of Pairaband.

> Right now, everything is broken in Pairaband village. But there, I left a plaque for her. If the women of our country can save her plaque and develop it, then we can save her memory. I also left a stone at her birthplace. Mrs. Ayesha Zafar, myself, and a few other women with whom we have formed the "Begum Rokeya Memorial Committee"; from that organization I

[432] Ibid., 48.
[433] Ibid., 50.

> left a stone there. Whatever that may be, now the people of the country will do. Whatever I could do, I did.[434]

By highlighting her action of trying to preserve places of significance to Rokeya, she also reminded the readers of the fact that she was a founding member of the committee to honor Rokeya. Sufia has consistently acted throughout her life to honor Rokeya's memory. In fact, Sufia also fought to have Rokeya remembered in Bangladesh in the 1960s when the first women's dormitory was created in Dhaka University. Sufia and the Begum Rokeya Memorial Committee proposed to have the dormitory named Rokeya Hall. When Mohammed Nasiruddin, the owner and editor of *Saogat* periodical started the women's magazine *Begum* in 1947, he asked Sufia to be the editor. The first issue of *Begum*, with Sufia as editor was published with a large picture of Rokeya on the cover.[435] Sufia continued to memorialize Rokeya as a role model and inspiration by writing poems about her, and dedicated a poetry anthology, *Mrttikar Ghran* [Fragrance of the Earth, 1970] to Rokeya. Sufia's poem *Amrit Kanya* [The Ambrosial Maid] was also dedicated to Rokeya, where she emphasized the obstacles the ambrosial maid had to overcome and ended the poem with, "Let the inextinguishable flame of your shining soul/ be munificent to all in all times to come."[436] The significance of Sufia mentioning "all times" in this poem to Rokeya should not be missed, as it is the same time that is referenced in *Ekale Amader Kal*. By foregrounding Rokeya's accomplishments and what Rokeya meant to her, Sufia made explicit overtures to her readers and encouraged them to emulate and learn from Rokeya, thus providing mentorship through her writing.

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[434] Ibid., 39.
[435] "Nurjahan Begum: Mohammed Nasiruddin's Daughter" in Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, eds., *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938* (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), 356.
[436] Sufia Kamal, *Mother of Pearls and Other Poems,* editor and translator Sajed Kamal (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2001), 87. My translation of the poem's title and lines are from Farida Majid's translation.

Sufia's memoir highlighted Rokeya's influence and impact on her, as well as specific advice that she received from Rokeya. According to Sufia, Rokeya used to call her "Phulkobi"/ Little Poet and said that even as a poet, she must do work for society. Sufia remembered:

> She [Rokeya] used to say, 'Look, it's not necessary to have a lot of education. Nahar passed her Matric Examinations, then she will do her BA, and then after that she will be a judge magistrate or will be something we hope. But even if we don't have that same hope for you, the fact that you became a poet, even you can do work for society. With your writing, you can awaken society.' She said that to me. (I have tears in my eyes). She said that so beautifully. She used to adore me. She used to say that we don't want that girls gaining freedom means they will break up the family. What does freedom mean? The freedom that is given to us in our Islam, that freedom will be available to girls. Being educated together, equality between boys and girls, they will have the same rights, same responsibilities –this is in Islam –that is what we want.[437]

The above passage, where Rokeya mentions both Sufia and her protégé and biographer Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964), who became one of Sufia's closest friends, revealed the goals and hopes Rokeya had for Bengal's Muslim community. Sufia's writing evoked vulnerability and a deep love that she felt for Rokeya. In writing about Rokeya as a mentor, Sufia insisted that Rokeya was an active supporter of her and Shamsunnahar Mahmud (known to them as Nahar). Sufia went on her first airplane ride around the time Nahar passed her matric examinations, one of the few Indian women to do so. Rokeya was very proud and held a celebration at her house, putting garlands around them. Sufia remembered that Rokeya said, "Phulkobi, now you have learned to go up into the sky."[438] Sufia's writing is tinged with nostalgia and pride when she writes, "She loved me and Nahar a lot," holding on to her connections and relationship with Rokeya.[439] At the celebrations, Sufia wrote that Rokeya said, "What I couldn't do in my life, you will do. That is my wish."[440]

Rokeya saw Sufia and Nahar as her legacies, those who will continue the work she started. Sufia reminisced that Rokeya also used to say, "My dreams will live on in you. That which I couldn't

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[437] Sufia Kamal, *Ekale Amader Kal,* 43-44.
[438] Ibid., 45.
[439] Ibid., 49.
[440] Ibid., 45.

do, you must do. You girls will awaken women's own freedom, their personality and their humanity. The girls in our country are very tortured and very neglected. Why should the girls stay that way? . . . you must work on these issues."[441] Rokeya went on to say more on how without brothers, husbands, and fathers, girls cannot do anything or be anything in their society, but she wants them to challenge that. Sufia further elaborated on Rokeya's views that women are also human, and it must be their responsibility to awaken that humanity. While Sufia took to heart what Rokeya has said and eventually went on to work as an activist and writer, Shamsunnahar Mahmud became a member of Parliament in East Bengal after the 1947 Partition. Even though these women took different paths, their beginnings were tied to the lessons they learned from Rokeya.

The Impact and Influences of Sufia Kamal on Bengali Women

Sufia may have been inspired by Rokeya, but she herself inspired many others in postcolonial Bangladesh. From those who worked alongside her in the Language Movement to women's movements to those who were initially her daughter's friends, 'Khalamma' has come to be widely regarded by many Bengali women as their cherished friend and mentor. Rokeya's influences were not linear in that many who were inspired by her followed a variety of paths. While Sufia Kamal never joined a political party, Shamsunnahar Mahmud became a member of Parliament in East Bengal. Similarly, Sufia influenced many women who went on to shape modern Bangladeshi society and culture in various spheres.

Sufia's role towards the end of the twentieth century was of a mentor to a new generation of women. The scholar and retired philosophy professor Hasna Begum (1935-2020) recollected that she spoke to Sufia Kamal when she was at crossroads on deciding whether to continue her PhD in Philosophy in Australia while leaving her children and husband in Dhaka in the late 1970s.

[441] Ibid., 45-46.

According to Hasna, "I went to my friend, philosopher and guide, Begum Sufia Kamal. She advised me to go and finish my work as soon as possible and return. She asked, if I died today, would all my family members also die, and as a beautiful woman if I returned without the degree my colleagues and relatives would say that I had gone to enjoy myself. She exhorted me to go and finish what I had begun."[442] Sufia herself knew the struggles of maintaining a family and having a career. Sufia had given up her position as editor of *Begum*, relinquishing control the magazine to Nurjahan Begum, Nasiruddin's daughter, because she needed to be at home caring for her young children and ailing mother.[443] Yet, her advice to Hasna was to go and complete her degree, perhaps because times had changed and in the post-colonial nation, a women's education did not need to be secondary to their family. Mentors are expected to help navigate difficult decisions, and Sufia certainly played a role in providing guidance to many women. The change over time in how society viewed women from the 1940s to the 1970s is a testament to Sufia's growth as a model for Bengali women. Having struggled and yearned for an education in her youth, she believed women in Bangladesh should pursue their educational aspirations, without giving in to societal expectations.

Another friend who relied upon Sufia's support and encouragement was Sayyada Ruby Ghuznavi (b. 1936), the founder of Aranya Fashions. Ruby, who took a risk and became interested in organic dyes in the 1980s faced discouragement from people. Handicrafts were not very popular at that time, and most people doubted that she could do much with natural dyes, but she was given encouragement by India's Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, who was a supporter and activist of handicrafts. Back home in Bangladesh, Ruby had support from Sufia Kamal. Ruby stated in her interview that Sufia "never undermined you" and was a big support when others did not believe in

[442] "From a Housewife to a Professor" *Dhaka Courier* February 2, 2018. Accessed December 2019. <http://old.dhakacourier.com.bd/from-a-housewife-to-professor/>
[443] "Nurjahan Begum: Mohammed Nasiruddin's Daughter" in Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, eds., *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938* (Kolkata: Stree, 2008).

natural dyes.[444] Like many others have said, Ruby felt that with Sufia Kamal, anyone could walk in anytime and she would talk even if she was busy. Ruby's dream career was achievable because she had the support of so many women, leading her to say her work has been "entirely instigated and inspired by women." The significance of women's mentorship has drastically shaped the lives of women hoping to start new endeavors.

Sufia Kamal's daughter Sultana (b. 1950) jokingly mentioned that her friends all became friends with her mother, since "she was a person who could relate to everyone."[445] Sultana spoke of her mother as someone she was very close to and someone whom she could talk to about anything. In their neighborhoods, all the women used to look up to Sufia, who was known for her openness and availability to all and their problems. Given that Sultana is currently a lawyer and a leading figure in Dhaka's activist scenes, her mother continues to be a big influence on her life.

Sufia Kamal was also a mentor and friend to her daughter Sultana's closest friend, Khushi Kabir (b. 1949). Khushi Kabir is a social and human rights activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 and is the coordinator of Nijera Kori since 1980, an NGO that collaborates with people in rural Bangladesh. Khushi grew up in a Bengali enclave in Karachi, but moved to Dacca in the 1960s, where she first remembered seeing Sufia Kamal at the Arts College of Dhaka University where Sultana Kamal was a student. Khushi grew close to Sufia after 1971, when Khushi was living in villages and doing refugee rehabilitation work. She went to the field after 1973-74, just after BRAC[446] started its work in villages in 1972. She lived in various villages for seven years. She was initially the only woman, but she recruited other women to join the organization.

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[444] Sayyada Ruby Ghuznavi, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 18, 2017.
[445] Sultana Kamal, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 5, 2017.
[446] BRAC is an international development organization in Bangladesh that was founded in 1972 as a relief and rehabilitation organization help refugees after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. It was initially known as the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee, although the name changed multiple times later, but retaining the same acronyms.

During my interview, I asked her to tell me about her work, and without any prompting, Khushi shared, "Sufia Kamal was so happy I decided to do that work in villages."[447] When I asked her to tell me memories of Sufia that she cherished, she told me about two incidents to show how Sufia instantly made everyone feel welcome. The first was a memory of April 1972, during Pohela Boishak, when there was a performance of a Michael Madhusudan Dutt play that some of the students were invited to in Calcutta, along with Sufia Kamal. On the journey from Dacca to Calcutta, Sufia went on the bus with the students, despite being asked to go on a plane with other senior artists because she felt that if students were going by bus, so would she. They got stuck at some point since the borders were closed, but Sufia helped keep their spirits up. In Calcutta, Sufia stayed with the students at a dorm in South Point School even though she had many offers of other places to stay. Sufia Kamal's ability to always make those with the least power feel heard and seen was something that many women mentioned. Her interactions with everyone, whether young or old, was to model a form of mentorship and way of being that was inclusive and accepting, which harkens back to the model she admired in Rokeya.

Another of Khushi's most important memories of Sufia goes back to the 1980s. When Khushi returned in 1980 to Dhaka after all her travels and work in villages, she felt like she could not adjust to her old friends because most would not understand what she had been doing. Khushi lamented that she felt she could only be open and talk to Sufia Kamal since she would understand life outside of this big city, since Sufia too had worked in smaller towns and places before. It was around then that Khushi became very close to her. Sufia was getting older by the 1980s, but for Khushi and many others, she is the "bodh gaas" [bodh tree] that every movement in Bangladesh has stemmed from.

[447] Khushi Kabir, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 20, 2017.

Khushi stated Sufia Kamal's impact was not only on her own life, but also on that of the nation. In the aftermath of Sufia's death, there have been numerous tributes and essays written about her. About eighty of Bangladesh's most prominent intellectual and social figures contributed essays to a volume titled *Sufia Kamal Smrakgranta* (2011) or *Remembrances of Sufia Kamal*. The writers of the essays hail from diverse backgrounds, as did many of Sufia's mentees and mentors. Khushi was one of the contributors, who titled her essay in this collection "*Janoni Shahoshika: Tomar Chayyai Bere Uti"* [The Courageous Woman/Mother: I Grow In Your Shadows]. The word *janoni* can be translated as a woman or a mother, but is also an epithet that signifies a figure that is larger than life, someone who is very maternal, or life sustaining. Khushi began her essay by writing that she too knew Sufia as "Khalamma" but however people knew her, Khushi does not feel like she nor anyone can ever capture the value of Sufia. Yet, she can definitively say that almost every important aspect of this country's history has been touched by Sufia Kamal.[448] According to Khushi, Sufia was "quite extraordinary" as a person and someone who has shaped and changed the region's history. [449]

Another of Sultana Kamal's friends recently wrote about her memories of Sufia for Sufia's 108th birth celebration in 2019. Zeenat Rezwana Chowdhury first met Sufia when she went to visit her friend Sultana at their house and immediately became friends. While she was a college student, she would talk about ideas and everything happening at school with Sufia, clarifying, "Most of us couldn't take any of this back home—our parents did not want to know and we did not want to tell. But Khalamma was a different story. She was ready to listen and to encourage and to applaud and to scold and to laugh." Like Sultana and Khushi, Zeenat also affirmed that Sufia was a good listener who was open to all conversations:

> We could share all this so easily with Sufia Kamal. Not only did she listen, but she also brought out Bangla poems to match the English ones we were reading, read and rated the

[448] Khushi Kabir, "Janoni Shahoshika: Tomar Chayyai Bere Uti" in *Sufia Kamal Smarkgrantha*, eds. Anisuzzaman, Ayesha Khanam, Sultana Kamal, Mofidul Hoque (Dhaka: Sufia Kamal Shompadona Parishad, 2011), 113.
[449] Ibid., 114.

> poems and articles we were writing, commented on the weekly column I wrote for the *Morning News*, was disappointed if we didn't speak out in class when we had an opinion different to the one being asserted by the lecturer or by the majority, and never, ever, not one single time did she say that our university days were only a waiting period before we would be married off to live happily ever after. Which was what many of us were hearing at home.[450]

Zeenat was writing of a time long past, yet found it necessary to highlight that Sufia was different from other adults in that she never insisted on seeing marriage as women's sole purpose. Sufia acted as both a teacher and a friend, qualities that made her an enviable mentor for young women. Sufia never forgot her love of helping and encouraging young women, especially writers, such as Zeenat who shared their works in hopes of being guided by an established writer. In trying to capture her admiration for Sufia, Zeenat ended her tribute with:

> I realise as I write that this seems to be more on me and my time then, than about Begum Sufia Kamal. But then, this was her unmatched gift, that she could make you see yourself better, examine yourself and decide that you meant something of value. She was a true embodiment of the "Spirit of the Age," showing us the best way to exist when the worst of times was upon us. There will not be a second Sufia Kamal but her lesson was not to be a second anyone, no matter how bright a star. "Be yourself and be the best of yourself" was her lesson. When young, we admire many people who lose their shine once we grow older and wiser. The truly admirable are the ones for whom the admiration remains and continues to grow. Begum Sufia Kamal is such a person for me and as I write this I am again inspired, enkindled and touched by everything she was.[451]

Zeenat was a friend of Sultana's, but she found herself drawn to Sufia's kindness, openness, and ability to bring out the best in people around her. Zeenat wrote that Sufia embodied the "Spirit of the Age" which harkens back to the title Sufia gave her memoir. It is difficult to assess whether Zeenat has read *Ekale Amader Kal*, but perhaps Zeenat was referring to the fact that Sufia has hinted in her works that this time is theirs, hence Sufia encompassed an age that is now past. Taken together, the excerpts above from Zeenat's tribute point to Sufia as a figure that was trying to bridge

[450] Zeenat Rezwana Chowdhury. "Begum Sufia Kamal, As I Knew Her," *The Daily Star*. June 20, 2019. Accessed December 2020. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/tribute/news/begum-sufia-kamalas-i-knew-her-1759429>
[451] Ibid.

the different times and generations by reminding young women to fight to have their voices heard, whether it is in the classroom, or through their writings.

One of Sufia's closest friends was Nargis Jafar (d. 2013), a librarian and social worker who was like a daughter. Nargis was twenty years younger than Sufia and a constant by her side. They lived in the same neighborhood, and Sufia used to depend on her for many things.[452] Both were also members of Mahila Parishad. In a tribute to Nargis after her death in a Bangladeshi periodical, the author highlighted Nargis's relationship with Sufia Kamal:

> Nargis Jafar had another passion besides books, and that was social work. During the early '50s she met Begum Sufia Kamal, the renowned poet, social worker, and one of the pioneers of women's emancipation in Bangladesh. To her, Begum Sufia Kamal was a guide, a friend, a confidant, and above all else her intellectual mentor and role model. To Begum Sufia Kamal, Nargis Jafar was her dearest and most affectionate disciple.[453]

Similar to how Rokeya influenced Sufia, Sufia influenced Nargis and many others to continue to work for society and give back. She acted the role of friend and mentor to Nargis and many others. In her own reminiscences of Sufia after the poet's death, Nargis wrote about Sufia as one of her most cherished relationships, writing, "Sufia Kamal will be in my heart for as long as I live."[454] She highlighted Sufia's many accomplishments, centering that Sufia's home in Dhaka was a space that birthed many organizations, such as the children's organization, Kochi Kacher Mela, and the arts institution, Chhayanaut. She wrote how, despite their age differences, they travelled together, and spent lots of time sharing meals and going on walks in the city. Nargis and Sufia's relationship exemplified the intergenerational mentorship and friendship that came to be a hallmark of Sufia's life. Nargis wrote heart wrenchingly of her last days with Sufia. She was around Sufia and was at the

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[452] Sultana Kamal, Personal Interview, Dhaka, November 5, 2017. Sultana Kamal mentioned Nargis as one of her mother's closest friends.
[453] Syed Jahangir, "Nargis Jafar: A tribute", *The Daily Star*, November 21, 2013 > https://www.thedailystar.net/news/nargis-jafar-a-tribute>
[454] Nargis Jafar "Kobi Sufia Kamal" in *Sufia Kamal Smarkgrantha*, eds. Anisuzzaman, Ayesha Khanam, Sultana Kamal, Mofidul Hoque (Dhaka: Sufia Kamal Shompadona Parishad, 2011), 167.

hospital when Sufia Kamal died. She stated that after Sufia's death, it dawned on her that no one will understand her pain, which brought her to a previous memory where she remembered Sufia telling her, "*Bouma* [daughter-in-law], when I die, many people will cry, my children will cry, the people of our country will cry, the neighbors will cry. But *bouma*, no one will understand your tears."[455]

Nargis ended the essay by writing that even in her present day, she cries and no one truly understands or ever will what Sufia Kamal meant to her. When Sufia was telling Nargis that no will understand her mourning and pain, Sufia was perhaps pointing to the liminal space given to intimate female bonds: while some kin based and blood relations are easily understood, society does not allow space for the intimacy of women's sociality and the significance it occupies in women's lives. Sufia understood that her death will be a loss to Nargis as the deaths of her mentors and friends such as Tagore and Rokeya were to her. If Sufia was drawing upon Rokeya as a part of her lineage of Bengali women, Nargis was also choosing to put herself as part of Sufia's lineage.

Sufia's *Ekale Amader Kal* was an alternative narrative of her life than one she is given by those who write about her. Sufia's legacy and life has been used by numerous people and organizations to make a claim because of her involvement in most progressive social and political movements of the twentieth century. In her text, she wrote of being a part of several movements and organizations, but that section is only a few pages and is dwarfed in comparison to the amount of time and space taken to write about Rokeya or Hindu-Muslim relationships. I argue that in her own work Sufia deliberately constructed networks and put herself into a history and genealogy not of the big men of history, but a female lineage that emphasized tolerance. Sufia's greatest impact and influence is mentioned as organizing various women's groups, which has created a liege of woman who cannot separate Bangladeshi women's progress and development from Sufia Kamal. Hena Das (1924-2009), a leader of many teachers' activist groups and a women's rights activist was Sufia's

[455] Nargis Jafar, "Kobi Sufia Kamal," 174.

friend and co-founder of the Mahila Sangram Parishad in 1969, the organization that later became known as Bangladesh Mahila Parishad in 1970.[456] Sufia Kamal served as President until her death in 1999. In 2000, Hena Das was elected President of the organization. Hena was a lifelong Communist Party Member and was a strong voice for teachers' rights. Mahila Parishad, the largest women's organization in Bangladesh, has advocated for women's rights for many decades. In her own remembrance essay on her friend, Hena reminded readers that Sufia was known by many titles, such as "conscience of Bengal" and the fierce woman of Bangladesh. She urged that they must not forget that Sufia was a political force in the region's history.[457] Hena traced Sufia's relationships and accord with figures like Nazrul Islam and the Communist leader Muzaffar Ahmed, reinstating the centrality of male figures in Sufia's life. Given the prominence Sufia played in women's movements, Hena's desire to link Sufia to the broader left movements underscored her significance as a woman of strong convictions who allied herself with various movements.

Hena connected Sufia to the "big men" of Bengal's history and of significant movements despite the fact that, in her own writings, Sufia connected herself to women, rather than these men. Ironically, those who wrote about Sufia sought to show the broader impact she had on the region by emphasizing her connections to men. Her friend and comrade Hena Das was seeking to use Sufia's life history as an example of a progressive leader, which is slightly different from how Sufia has constructed her narrative in *Ekale Amader Kal*. I argue that Sufia constructed an alternative genealogy than one that is assigned to her even by her well-wishers. Her autobiography was an explanation of herself as unattached to any party; she has famously never been a part of any of the political parties or political dynasties of Bangladesh. She was adamant in her text that she wanted to be known for

[456] Hena Das. http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Das,_Hena
[457] Hena Das, "Sufia Kamaler Rajnatik Adarsho o Shongram" [Sufia Kamal's political ideology and struggle], in *Sufia Kamal Smarkgrantha*, eds. Anisuzzaman, Ayesha Khanam, Sultana Kamal, Mofidul Hoque (Dhaka: Sufia Kamal Shompadona Parishad, 2011), 434-441.

being a certain thing, which is someone who upheld Rokeya's vision of a Bengal where women are educated, and where religious communities are able to co-exist and work together.

Sufia's contributions to women's movements and her fight for utopic women's space has not been entirely forgotten by her biographers. Maleka Begum, a Bangladeshi feminist scholar and activist, wrote a Bengali biography of Sufia, where she argued that Sufia was not just a poet, but someone critical to the Women's Movement in Bangladesh.[458] As a member of the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad herself, Maleka Begum's scholarship had examined the history of women's movements. In her biography, she writes that without Sufia Kamal's work, women's movements in Bangladesh would not have progressed as it did.[459] While Sufia worked for women's groups throughout the 1940s to 1960s, after the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, she led a path for women's movements in the nascent country. Maleka Begum argues that Sufia Kamal's dream was to create a Tarini Bhavan à la Rokeya's *Padmarag* as a safe and welcoming space, which she tried to create in her vision for the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.[460]

Legacy of Bengali Women's Mentorship Networks

Sufia Kamal enjoyed a preeminent status in Bangladesh, and lived her last days knowing that she was greatly admired and someone who had worked to make a difference. Despite all that, she still sought to be seen as an ordinary woman, and asked for a simple burial when she died. But her significance was recognized by the people and the state, so she was given a state burial. Unlike Sufia, her role model Rokeya suffered a very different fate. Rokeya was vilified in her day for wanting to educate girls, often drawing the ire of conservative Muslims. In fact, she was so disliked by some that when she died in 1932, they would not let her be buried publicly in Calcutta. Rokeya's friends

[458] Maleka Begum*, Sufia Kamal* (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashan, 2014).
[459] Ibid., 39.
[460] Ibid., 55.

and family had to secretly bury her in Sodepur, in the outskirts of Calcutta. Although Rokeya has come to be known as a prominent figure in South Asia today, her gravesite was not accessible or even known until it was discovered recently by historian Amalendu De.[461] Rokeya's extraordinariness was unnoticed during her lifetime, but she has come to occupy a revered place in history. Rokeya's place in the Bangladeshi imagination owes a lot to the work Sufia has done to keep her memory alive.

Sufia Kamal was influenced by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and was responsible for getting Rokeya Hall in Dhaka University. The first permanent Provost of Rokeya Hall was Akhtar Imam, one of the first female professors at the University and the first female head of department at Dhaka University whose time at Bethune College in the 1930s was explored in the first chapter of this dissertation. I first learned about Akhtar Imam from historian Uttara Chakraborty (1944-2020) in Kolkata who came across Akhtar Imam's memoir while doing research at Bethune College. Uttara connected me to Maleka Begum in Dhaka, who wrote a biography on Sufia Kamal and became a mentor to me during my fieldwork in Bangladesh. Maleka considers Sufia a mentor and an inspiration. The networks of mentorships and friendships among Bengali women extends beyond religions and borders and allows women to envelop even partial outsiders like myself in this web.

Mentorship as a concept allows scholars to examine the myriad intergenerational relationships created and shared by Bengali women, not just the peer-to-peer friendships highlighted in earlier chapters. What we see in these relationships to Sufia are the variety of networks and connections that she fostered between herself and others, as well as creating a model for others to emulate. Like Rokeya, Sufia was also deeply religious, but their shared approach to religiosity inspired them to be open and kind to all, regardless of who people were or their backgrounds.

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[461] Pranotosh Banerjee, translated by Garga Chatterjee, "Remembering Historian Amalendu De." *Janoswarto Barta.* May 27, 2014. Accessed March 7, 2021 < https://alalodulal.org/2014/05/27/amalendu-de/>

Sufia's insistence that she continued to live her life as Rokeya advised shows the depth of Rokeya's mentorship and influence on her life decades later. By writing of the past, Sufia constructed a history of Bengal that centered women's sociality and the bonds that intertwined women over time.

CONCLUSION

Ties that Bind: The Sites of Sociality

This dissertation has primarily focused on the ways that women's sociality and connections were fostered in numerous places as well as the ways women negotiated those relationships. It has sought to highlight the ways these ties of sociality shaped and were shaped by certain sites, whether schools, neighborhoods, or the occupational settings. Neighborhoods and schools were the first sites outside of the home that allowed young girls to mix with other women outside of the family, which not only allowed women to form social connections, but also shaped their academic, cultural, and political interests. In all these sites, women sought out others who could provide them with support and mentorship, including people across generations even as they sought to cement peer relationships. Throughout, we see the significance of peer friendships and sociality in shaping the lives of girls and women. Time spent together in educational institutions, women's work in social service work, and their involvement in neighborhood activities reconfigures our understanding of women's motivations for participating in activities, whether they are political or social activities and events.

By focusing on the various sites of sociality and interactions, I have highlighted how girls and women formed connections that crossed the boundaries of religion, language, and region in schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. They learned and honed new skills and interests, whether it was sports, or the arts; and encouraged peer activism against colonialism and state violence. They created and shaped new alternative spheres for pleasure and desire and took ownership of the physical and mental spaces given to then, whether that meant the parks in their neighborhoods, or

the chance to shape options available to women in their professions. The connections made at neighborhood levels were significant, and the ties of friendships and mentorships continued to shape their lives decades later. Women sought to both structure and work within the parameters set upon them by families and society, as they pursued environments and sites of female camaraderie. Some worked to challenge the norms of respectable society and others sought to negotiate within the politics of respectability.

Women's relationships with each other are historically significant. The research on women's sociality has implications on the broader field of South Asian history. An examination of women's 'everyday' social connections provides an alternative history to the nationalist and patriarchal historiography of the Indian subcontinent which has privileged the history of men and 'big events.' The structural continuities of women's relationships reveal that rather than just the big events of South Asian history, women's lives changed for various factors, whether it was the shift to accessible education or access to work in areas that were previously foreclosed. The repertoire of everyday life and habits that comprised social interactions provide a view into the history of the region that asks that we consider what changing relationships between women shows us about women's movements, activism, or progress in various arenas. Studying women's construction of their experiences of sociality allows us to understand Bengali women's lives over a long period of time, considering the ebbs and flows of these connections as women's roles in society were rapidly changing throughout the twentieth century.

Ties that Break?: Riots and Violence in Bengal

While the sites of sociality show how women's ties were fostered and cemented through everyday acts of 'friendship rituals' and proximity, Bengal's history of violence and riots in the latter half of the twentieth century might raise questions of whether these ties were broken. The specter of the Partition and subsequent violence haunt the experiences and narratives of people who grew up

in the subcontinent. The idea of Hindu–Muslim violence permeates much of South Asian history in the twentieth century. For the women of Bengal, this century is not only read through the lens of the 1947 Partition, but also the violence that created spasms between neighbors in the years leading to Partition and the two decades after. The Great Calcutta Killings and the riots in Noakhali in 1946 shook the region to its core, highlighting the divisiveness between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. Hindus and Muslims turned against each other, with organized attacks against anyone who seemed to be from the other community, leading to massive numbers of dead bodies scattered around the city. Women's memoirs and interviews highlighted the air of fear that surrounded Calcutta and Noakhali, and all of Bengal in general. They wrote and spoke regretfully of the violence committed against innocent people and lamented how such atrocities could be possible. These events, best described as history that happened, rather than everyday experiences, provide an opportunity to rethink the salience of sociality as an analytic.

The Riots of 1946 and the Breakdown of Neighborhoods

The Bengali women who mentioned Partition or the riots focused on the loss and shift in social relationships among people. Bela Bandyopadhyay, a teacher wrote about her memories of the 1940s in Calcutta as one of the darkest times in the city in her memoir *Alo Andharir Kolkata*.[462] She remembered the riots (or *danga* in Bengali) in Calcutta as a time when she learned how much hatred people can have and that ordinary people can kill.[463] Bela's emphasis on the fact that "ordinary" people were capable of such violence is an oft repeated sentiment of those who witnessed the horrors of the riots. Bela was living in North Calcutta at that time, so she detailed that Kumarpara, the neighborhood she was living in, changed during the 1946 riots. The laughter that was always

[462] Bela Bandyopadhyay. *Alo Andharir Kolkata* (Kolkata: Setu Prakashini, 2011).
[463] Ibid., 3.

heard in the streets were gone and many of the local stores closed down.[464] She wrote about the fears that engulfed the people of the city. Bela recounted a story of an incident during the late 1940s. While travelling, her family was accused of being Muslim by a mob because of how her father looked and dressed.[465] She emphasized that her family hails from an old Kulin Brahmin family, yet the fear caused by the mob during the riots was real. Despite being from the "right" religion, they were threatened because her father's physical appearance was read as being Muslim. The paranoia and real violence drastically altered young women's understandings of their own communities. The well-known Communist leader Manikuntala Sen's accounts of the 1946 riots also revealed the horrors of violence and the loss of an ethos of friendship and community. Sen wrote that in Barisal, a city in East Bengal, Hindus and Muslims were not living like "two separate peoples."[466] Her observations harken back to many of the anecdotes and histories shared by women across Bengal. She called the 1946 Calcutta riots a "fratricide" where the most precious thing Hindus and Muslims lost were "trust and feelings of love and responsibility that they had for each other."[467] Most of Manikuntala Sen's writings were not emotionally tinged, but the feelings behind her writing on the riots mirror emotions other women expressed. The loss of these affective ties among Hindu and Muslim communities traumatized generations.[468] Yet, the everyday, personal friendships of these women were not broken.

Many Bengali women continued to lament and nostalgically wrote or spoke about the friends who left their lives because of such trauma and violence. In her *Life and Words*, Veena Das argues that trauma and violence cannot be easily articulated.[469] In fact for Das, violence is something that is

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[464] Ibid., 4-5.
[465] Ibid., 5.
[466] Manikuntala Sen, "Riots, Partition and Independence" in Ritu Menon, ed. *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004), 55.
[467] Ibid., 57.
[468] See Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2000) for how the violence of Partition continue to structure how people speak of those from the 'other' community,
[469] Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

shown in gestures and everyday life, but not always spoken of or written. Das's monograph asks that the everyday social relations be given more attention in how events are understood and constituted. While her focus and ethnography emphasize the aftermath of two 'big' events of history, the 1947 Partition and the assassination of India Gandhi in 1984 to show the power of that which is not said or articulated, Das argues that the everyday details of these events help constitute what became ordinary violence. In shifting the focus from violence and trauma to moments of harmony and togetherness, I argue that the framework of sociality allows for an articulation of another type of histories, even as erasures and silences of violence are embedded within the very same texts that shift the focus to modes of interactions. The spaces of women's sociality, such as neighborhoods, were altered by the riots, but women's feelings and strong claims of social bonds remained intact. Even as women wrote around the events of riots and violence, they continued to stress the relationships among themselves that were critical to their lives.

While many scholars have written about the horrors of 1946 and its role as the final nail in the coffin for Partition, it is also important to look at the slow deterioration of interreligious neighborhood ties during that period. If neighborhoods previously served as spaces of harmony among various families of different religions, the riots gradually altered that. The Calcutta riots of August 16-20, 1946 were considered one of the worst communal riots in Bengal. Nariaki Nakazato argues that it changed Calcutta and the quelling of the disturbances did not mean normalcy for the city.[470] Although many people tried to protect minorities in their *para*, Nakazato argues that *para* solidarity was ambiguous. While Nakazato primarily argues that the Bengal administrative authorities were too slow and hesitant to take action that could have prevented or contained communal violence, he also points to the breakdown of three significant social bonds: the state, voluntary

[470] Nariaki Nakazato, "The Role of Colonial Administration, 'Riot Systems' and Local Networks during the Calcutta Disturbances of August 1946" in Edited by Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), 269.

associations, and neighborhoods.[471] The breakdown at the *para* level dashed the last hopes for these social bonds, since with no administrative support, *para* solidarity was short-lived. Nakazato writes that "*para* solidarity was based on traditional paternalistic social relations developed between a Hindu majority and Muslim minority in some neighborhoods and vice versa in others. It need hardly be said that such a traditional relationship was hit hard not only by the rapid growth of urban population after independence, but also by the mass migration that took place at the time of partition and thereafter and radically changed patterns of social segregation within the city."[472] The changing demographics changed the conditions for sociality among Bengal's Hindus and Muslims at the neighborhood level.

People who remembered such intimate violence and loss often did not know how to make sense of it. The horrors of neighbors turning against one another and committing acts of violence in the 1940s was not limited to South Asia. In his *Neighbors*, Jan Gross shows the difficulty of coming to terms with such intimate betrayals that highlights the destruction of the Jewish community in a small town in Poland in 1941. There, "half of the population of a small East European town murdered the other half—some 1600 men, women, and children."[473] Gross argues that in recent memory and historiography, the blame is shifted to the Nazis or another party rather than the non-Jewish Polish neighbors who murdered the Jews. It is not surprising that such traumatic history itself is contested. In the case of Bengal, the literature on the riots of the 1950s and 1960s is often attributed to non-Bengalis.[474] The trauma of 1946 greatly impacted Bengal and is seen as one of the reasons why the Bengal border did not experience mass violence during Partition. After the riots of

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[471] Ibid., 318.
[472] Ibid.
[473] Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7.
[474] See Kali Prasad Mukhopadhyay. *Partition, Bengal, and After: The Great Tragedy of India* (New Delhi: Reference Press, 2007) and others.

1946, Bengal was generally free from violence for a few years after Partition. The fears of the Muslims in West Bengal and the Hindus in East Bengal that shaped everyday life in neighborhoods in 1946 was soon revisited in the 1950s and 1960s as riots broke out throughout Bengal.

The Loss of Community Harmony: The Riots and Violence of 1950s and 1960s

Bengal erupted in communal riots in the decades after the 1947 Partition, with major riots in 1950 and 1962 until the last huge riots in 1964. Scholars agree that communal violence in South Asia has primarily been in urban centers, although towns and villages were not always exempt. After the riots of 1946, Bengal was generally free from violence for a few years after Partition. Part of this was due to the gradual migration trends between East and West Bengal as opposed to the migration trends on India's western borders. Bengalis continued to slowly move from East Bengal to West Bengal, and vice versa between 1947 and 1965. The short-lived peace after 1947 gave many hopes that perhaps they would not need to leave their homes.

However, this all changed in 1950. Scholars have argued that the 1950 riots were a turning point in Bengal.[475] The first incident of violence took place in Khulna on December 20, 1949, and it spread to nine other districts in East Bengal—Khulna, Dhaka, Chittagong, Noakhali, Rajshahi, Tipperah, Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Barisal. Generally well-to-do Hindus were targeted, so after 1950, there was a large-scale exodus of Hindus from East Bengal to West Bengal.[476] As people sought to leave, they encountered further violence. Mobs and goondas incited violence against passengers crossing via steamers, trains, and at airports.[477] There were stories of violence mixed with stories of friendships, help from Muslims in crossing, or being accompanied.[478] Haimanti Roy,

[475] See Gargi Chakravartty*, Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005) and Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-1965* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[476] Chakravartty*, Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal,* 18.
[477] Ibid., 19.
[478] Ibid., 21

among others, has argued that the Khulna-Barisal Riots of 1950 was not initially communalistic, but devolved into communal conflict.[479] Similar to the riots of 1946, the riots of 1950 took on a retaliatory nature. Muslims were attacked all over West Bengal and Hindus were attacked in East Bengal. The riots show that each side altered the narratives to suit and feed their own biases.[480] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has argued that the fates of the minorities in two Bengals remained intertwined, where neither were seen to be truly what they hoped to be and their vulnerabilities was apparent during 1950 riots.[481]

Feminist scholar Meghna Guhathakurta has written about the aftermath of Partition by using family histories as a research method. She has written several articles on her own family focusing on her mother Basanti and her grandmother Sumati, who were Hindus from Barisal, living in the vicinity of Dacca. Guhathakurta's essays on her family reveal the intricacies of violence in structuring Bengali women's lives.[482] The family's patriarchal head, Meghna's father Jotirmoy, was a follower of M.N. Roy's Radical Humanist Party and believed he should stay in East Bengal, even as other family members moved to West Bengal. His own family agreed, until an incident in 1950. Guhathakurta describes how the riots near Dacca started late January 1950. Aarti, Meghna's aunt and Jotirmoy's younger sister, was on her way back from teaching at a school when news of the riots broke, so she took shelter at a friend's house. However, that friend's house was attacked by a mob, and they escaped to a neighbor's house. Many took shelter at a Hindu police inspector's house, but Aarti could not communicate with her family for a day and night, giving rise to fears among her family members. Guhathakurta writes that this "incident had a radical effect on the family."[483]

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[479] Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan,* 164-65.
[480] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "The Minorities in Post-Partition West Bengal: The Riots of 1950", pp. 3-17, in Abhijit Dasgupta, Masahiko Togawa, Abul Barkat, *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal.* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2011).
[481] Ibid., 7.
[482] Meghna Guhathakurta, "Uprooted and Divided" *Star Weekend*, August 25, 2017. Accessed February 18, 2019. <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/uprooted-and-divided-1453000>
[483] Ibid.

Afterwards, Jotirmoy's mother, brother, and sister moved to Calcutta. Guhathakurta states that her grandmother, aunts, and uncle would pester her parents to leave East Bengal due to the trauma of 1950, but Joytirmoy and Basanti, Guhathakurta's mother, stayed in East Bengal. For the family members who moved to Calcutta, like many in West Bengal, they used Bengali and Hindu as synonymous, erasing the similarities between Bengali Muslims and Hindus. Such erasures, affected by painful events and memories, have shaped notions of Hindu-Muslim harmony.

For some women, the loss of a minority community significantly changed their social interactions and relationship to their neighborhood. One woman's life history exemplifies this loss. Noorjahan Bose (b. 1938) was born in Boro Baishdia, an island in the Bay of Bengal. In her autobiography, *Agunmukhar Meye* [The Fiery Girl], she recalled everyday events with neighboring children.[484] Her neighborhood had many Hindus, Burmese, and Rakhine people and they used to play together and celebrate *pujas*. She described sharing her favorite winter snacks, freshly made *muri* [puffed rice] with friends, writing, "eating *muri* in winter was something else. It's the tale of fairytales. Nowadays, the girls in the village do not fry *muri* the same way."[485] Noorjahan remembered celebrating Hindu *pujas* with these neighboring friends and writes that "during the pujas, we used to eat so much *muri*, *murki* [sweetened puffed rice], and *naru* [coconut snacks]!"[486] These everyday, ordinary affects were altered after the riots of 1950. Noorjahan mourned the shift: "before there was so much love, so much trust, it all shattered in the shock of the riots."[487] Noorjahan Bose's interview and autobiography highlighted the communal riots of 1950 and the admission of Muslim guilt, which was a rare attempt to grapple with the guilt of the majority in East Bengal during the chaotic

[484] Noorjahan Bose, *Agunmukhar Meye* (Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 2009 (first ed). I have chosen the translation of 'fiery' for *agunmukhar*, which literally translates to "the mouth of the fire" to read better with the second word *meye*, which means "girl." But the gist of *agunmukhar* can be best understood as one who is fiery, and fierce spirited.
[485] Noorjahan Bose, *Agunmukhar Meye, 33*.
[486] Ibid., 33.
[487] Ibid., 34.

1950s. When I asked her about her childhood, she began describing the riots of 1950 without any prompting.[488] It was an important event that affected her life. Rather than focus on her own fears, Noorjahan highlighted the exodus of Hindus and the impact of the riots on her village. She had many Hindu friends, many of whom left during and after the riots and never came back. The population of the town near her hometown was mostly Hindus and all the girls were sent to India for protection. She fondly recalled that the house next to her own had two Hindu doctors and other Hindu families whose children were her earliest playmates. In 1949, she was sent to Barisal for school, but in 1950, she was sent back to her village due to the riots and remembered that all the Hindu families had left when she returned. Noorjahan believed that the Hindus left on ships India sent after the 1950 India-Pakistan Pact with Liaqat Ali Khan that Bengali Hindus should be allowed to cross borders into India. She surmised that perhaps they were worried their neighbors would turn on them. Given the history of 1946, that would not be surprising for the region. For Noorjahan, seeing the exodus of so many families that she grew up around is remembered as one of the saddest days of her life.

Noorjahan described the exodus of not only the Hindu friends who left, but also her Burmese friends in the island. Noorjahan narrated that she was friends with many who left for Burma around 1953-54, right after the riots shook people's confidence. During her childhood, there used to be sixteen villages of Burmese living on the island. Now, there are hardly any villages composed of that population. She tearfully recounted an event of seeing an old Burmese friend in a neighboring village when she recently went to visit, nearly fifty to sixty years later. The woman, Cerame, was the mother of her friend Lata, and she called Noorjahan her "*atmar-attiyo*" [soul relative]. In explaining the exodus of the Hindu population and the Burmese, Noorjahan mentioned that many Muslims took over non-Muslim houses and forced people out. Her interview was striking

[488] Noorjahan Bose, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 14, 2017.

in that she was not afraid to describe and blame Muslims, the majority population in East Bengal, for forcing the minority religious groups out of the neighborhoods, and the nation. For Noorjahan, the transformation of the country of Bangladesh happened after 1950. She stated the fact that the majority Hindu students in her class slowly decreased until it was all Muslim within a few years showed the problems of religion in the region. The riots of 1950 profoundly affected Noorjahan's ideas of secularism and social interactions.[489] Yet, despite the fact that she was separated from her friends due to the violence of changing borders and nation, her affective ties of sociality remained. She still considered those from her past her friends, regardless of whether the ties of community between Hindus and Muslims have remained harmonious.

After the riots of 1950 and the migration of people between the two Bengals, there was a slow, if tenuous period of calm when it came to communal relationships. However, that changed again in 1964. The 1964 Riots in Bengal began due to an incident that took place in Kashmir towards the end of December 1963, where the loss of a Muslim relic ignited communal distrust in Bengal, although there was no violence in Kashmir, where Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims united in their grief over the loss of the relic.[490] According to *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, rowdy demonstration in Khulna in East Bengal against the theft of the sacred relic turned violent and non-Bengali Muslims started attacking minorities in Khulna.[491] The riots spread to Jessore, Dhaka, Comilla, Noakhali, Chandpur, Chittagong, Narayangunj, and Faridpur, leading to Hindus being attacked by non-Bengali Muslims, while Bengali-speaking Muslims who tried to protect them were assaulted by rioters.[492] Attacks on Hindu minorities resulted in counterattacks on other side of the border in West Bengal. Scenes from Khulna of January 9, 1964, made people tense and then on January 10, there were

[489] Noorjahan Bose, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 14, 2017.
[490] Chakravartty*, Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*, 146.
[491] Ibid., 147.
[492] Ibid., 148.

retaliations in Calcutta and adjoining areas. Unlike the Great Calcutta killings of 1946, Muslims were the targets there and this time, it was one-sided.[493] The Calcutta riots lasted until January 15, 1964, and while refugee colonies were attacked, slums were the main targets. Scholars argue that land grabbing was the real motive behind the attacks, which caused scared Muslims to leave their homes, which were then usurped.[494] The 1964 riots dramatically changed and increased Muslim displacement in West Bengal, altering the composition of neighborhoods. The riots turned neighbors against each other, even though there were many who tried to help. Gargi Chakravartty recounts her own memories of her father giving shelter to many Muslim families of their neighborhood on the night of January 10, 1964. The next day they were sent death threats by fellow Hindus who saw her father as a traitor. She tells us that afterwards the Muslims who left or sold their property in certain mixed neighborhoods never came back—which has led to ghettoization of the Muslim community of Calcutta. Many had to leave their ancestral home and move to Park Circus, the "safe area" for Muslims. Middle-class Muslims who did not leave after Partition now started to migrate to East Pakistan.[495] Around then, many more Hindu migrants came from East Pakistan feeling insecure there, which further fueled hatred towards Calcutta's Muslims. The events of Calcutta stirred a new wave of minority bashing in Dhaka and Narayangunj (which was shocking since the industrial town had been free of violence in 1950).[496] In writing about the riots of 1964, Chakravartty blames the West Bengal media for drumming up tensions and not mentioning the people who risked their lives to save Hindus in East Pakistan, while she argues that the East Pakistan local papers like *Ittefaq*, *Sangbad*, and *Pakistan Observer* were better.[497] While neighborly

[493] Ibid., 149.
[494] Ibid., 154.
[495] Ibid., 156.
[496] Ibid., 158.
[497] Ibid., 159-60.

actions were often excluded in reports, the violence and rumors of violence were heavily reported, creating an air of fear.

Meghna Guhathakurta has compared the situation of her own family with a family in West Bengal that decided to migrate to East Bengal after the 1964 riots.[498] She examines a Muslim family from the village of Barasat, West Bengal, not too far from Calcutta. She refers to them as "Mobarak Hossain's family." They were a land-centered and patrilineal family where most members lived in the natal village. In 1964, Barasat was affected by Hindu-Muslim riots, which led to people fleeing their homes to take shelter in the fields. Many Muslim families began sending their children away to Pakistan. Mobarak's family did not want to move after Partition due to their property and comfortable living being there. But, Mobarak and his younger, eleven-year-old sister Arjoo, were sent to join a few of his brothers in East Pakistan. The sister was sent due to security concerns: after 1964, it was considered unsafe to keep unmarried girls at home. While families made decisions based on safety, young and married girls often did not have a choice, and quickly lost all their childhood and social ties with these shifts.

Nevertheless, many women worked to maintain a sphere of harmony and worked to protect many others. Even as the communities became polarized, women's friendships did not reflect this broader polarization. According to *Mainstream* magazine, in Calcutta, Maitreyi Devi, a well-known writer, set up the Council for Promotion of Communal Harmony to mobilize men and women in the aftermath.[499] That issue of *Mainstream* also includes an article by the writer Ashapurna Devi on communal harmony where she writes that women must be the steerers of communal harmony.[500] Kali Prasad Mukhopadhyay, who wrote that the "holocaust began on the night of January 13th,

[498] Meghna Guhathakurta, "Uprooted and Divided" *Star Weekend*, August 25, 2017. Accessed February 18, 2019. <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/uprooted-and-divided-1453000>
[499] Cited in Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition*, 157. Record/archive from *Mainstream*, 11 April 1964 (II, no. 32).
[500] Ibid., 158.

1964 and continued unabated for at least 5 days" [501] also describes the efforts of women in Dacca against the violence. He narrates that Ms. Prithi Rani Saha, who was a teacher at Vidyarthi Bhavan and the Superintendent of a minority girls' hostel, heard of attacks and then described how two professors at Eden College, Sofia Khatun and Rokeya Kabir, on January 13-15 took some of the girls from the hostels to somewhere safe. Mrs. Kabir sought help from the Deputy Commissioner, Dacca and others but received none, so she took the girls to her relations' homes and eventually arranged for them to get to Calcutta.[502] Many other women in positions of power tried to protect young girls. Bengali women did not decide their friends from different communities were no longer significant. Instead, they worked together during moments of historical tensions and violence to foster Hindu-Muslim solidarity.

A narrative from East Bengal: A Case of a Disappearing Friendship

Even in the 1960s, the impact of the riots and violence of the previous decades shaped people's everyday lives, even in neighborhoods and towns deemed to be harmonious. In her interview, Hosne Ara Begum (b. 1951) recalled, for example, a harrowing tale of how she lost her best friend.[503] She was living in a village in East Bengal in the early 1960s in a mixed Hindu and Muslim neighborhood near the sea. When she was about thirteen years old, which she says was most likely in 1964, she learned that differences were not always welcomed. Her best friend in the neighborhood was Geeta, a girl from a Hindu Brahmin family, who was in her class at the neighborhood school and who lived nearby. They used to walk to and from school together. After school, they would eat snacks together and play together until dark in Geeta's family's mango garden or in the neighborhood's open courtyard.

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[501] Kali Prasad Mukhopadhyay, *Partition, Bengal, and After: The Great Tragedy of India* (New Delhi: Reference Press, 2007), 66.
[502] Ibid., 68.
[503] Hosne Ara Begum, Personal Interview, Dhaka, December 10, 2017.

One day, they returned from school and were playing together with some other neighborhood children when she and Geeta made plans for Geeta to come early next morning to Hosne Ara's house to walk to school together. The next morning, Geeta did not show up, so Hosne Ara had to go alone, which upset her. The two were always together so even the teacher asked about Geeta's whereabouts. Geeta did not come to play later that afternoon either, so their playmates went to check on her at her house. When the children got there, they saw that the house was empty and had been abandoned. The only thing left was the *thakur* [idol] in the *thakur-ghar* [shrine], a space that Hosne Ara and Geeta used to play around. Not understanding what happened, Hosne Ara kept crying for her friend. That night, Hosne Ara's father told her that Geeta's family was forced to leave. Apparently, a Muslim man wanted to buy Geeta's family's land and gardens, but Geeta's father refused as these were ancestral lands. The result was a threat to abduct Geeta. Hosne asked her father why the police could not do something, and he said there were certain things in which they will not intervene. After Geeta left, Hosne was distraught and did not have any other friends that close to her while she lived in that neighborhood. She ended her anecdote by tearfully saying that she never found Geeta again. Although unknown distance and loss of contact severed the proximity of their friendship, Hosne continued to think of Geeta as a dear friend. Their friendship was not broken by choice, but altered as the sites of their sociality changed due to historical events.

This incident is not unusual for Bengal at that time, with various families leaving for the other side due to threats from the dominant religious community in the country. Families often migrated out of a certain neighborhood when they felt their young daughters were in danger. While many families chose to leave their ancestral homes, the displacement of families affected the friendships young girls formed by creating insurmountable physical distance. The loss of childhood friends to violence and historical events often dovetailed with a jolting realization that one's religious

identity could determine intimate ties, ties that led to a breaking of neighborhood connections, but not the friendships that were formed.

The Muslims of Calcutta in the aftermath

Calcutta was always a migrants' city and until the late colonial period, a heterogenous community of Muslims formed an integral part of the city. The city was as much a Muslim as a Hindu city. Anwesha Sengupta argues that the Muslims of Calcutta were also affected in the February 1950 riots, although that riot is often forgotten by most scholars.[504] She argues that many Muslims had to flee or became internally displaced, while those who remained became marginalized. The Muslims who remained in Calcutta were gradually ghettoized in specific *mohallas* of the city, such as the aforementioned Park Circus. Both Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Sengupta have shown that the aftermath of these riots meant that the city's Hindu East Bengali refugees are remembered and valorized while its internally displaced minority is forgotten.[505] The East Bengali Hindu refugees displaced the Muslim minorities, often taking over their properties.[506] Often, refugee rehabilitation took place at the expense of Calcutta's Muslims, especially in terms of land and property. Partition left Calcutta's Muslims without their heritage, such as old names, institutions, and intellectual resources as many books were moved from libraries and Islamic institutes. They also lost many of their religio-social spaces like mosques and waqf properties.[507] More than the material loss, the Muslims of Bengal learned that Calcutta was no longer home. Hence, the numerous women who moved to East Bengal talk freely about their past neighborhoods, homes, and their childhood friends in Calcutta with lamentations and nostalgia for a time that is long gone.

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[504] Anwesha Sengupta, "Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta's Muslims After Partition" in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades,* eds. Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), 445.
[505] Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Introduction," in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades.* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), 11.
[506] Anwesha Sengupta, "Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta's Muslims After Partition," 443.
[507] Ibid., 448.

The Persistence of Bengali Women's Social Ties

Making sociality central as an analytic breaks through the events of nations, borders, and communities. This has future implications for how we understand history, especially women's history which has been subsumed in histories of the family, the community, or the state. The riots and violence of the 1950s and 1960s point to the often-forgotten reality of post-Partition Bengal. The world of women's friendships and sociality shows that these tensions were not necessarily new in the post-partition eras, but previously, other factors such as class and proximity shaped women's social interactions with others. The processes that produce the ties that bind, and break, are both simultaneously a part of women's world. They made friends and connections, many of which bound them for life, while others were changed due to the changing borders and boundaries that structured the nation states that Bengal was partitioned into. In this cycle of ties that bind and those that break, the memories remain. Sufia Kamal's autobiography was written after the years of riots but nevertheless showed and argued for social ties that have bound people. These violent events do not affect these bonds, but they do create a space where historians are forced to look at these sites, such as neighborhoods, differently. After the 1960s, the sites and context of where sociality happen change. Some are moved to an international stage, or over social media. A few women I have interviewed mentioned that they reconnected with childhood friends across borders of nation-state and religious communities on Facebook. Even if they no longer maintained their childhood or school day ties through the same friendship rituals, Bengali women wrote and spoke of their past friends affectionately. Nostalgia for social bonds is voiced often, and through a prism of what could have been had the conditions of their lived everyday not changed. While the context of their interactions may have altered, the affective ties remained intact.

This dissertation shows the ubiquity of female sociality in women's construction of their histories. The sites of sociality examined highlight spheres that allowed women to interact with

women outside of their own communities, especially for women who had until then spent much of their lives in *purdah*. My emphasis on women's intimacy in a region like Bengal asks that we think about intersecting identities of religion and class while keeping in mind how imperial and nationalist structures situate women's roles in society. While the extensive scholarship on women in Bengal has examined the roles played by women in various aspects of society, there has been little focusing on the everyday life of women's interactions. A focus on women's friendships and sociality enables us to write an alternative history and provides a different narrative of Bengal privileging women's voices. Autobiographies as sources are alternatives to the government and official sources that have been utilized in most histories. In paying attention to women's construction of histories, from women who are well-known in the region to those completely unknown, I argue that history makers do not necessarily need to be male, or significant political figures. Bengali women's autobiographies show that Bengal's history is incomplete without the voices and experiences of its women.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Autobiographies

Bengali Autobiographies

Bandyopadhyay, Bela. *Alo Andharir Kolkata.* Kolkata: Setu, 2011.

Bandyopadhyay, Karuna. *Sarbajayacharitra 1 &2: Karuna Bandyopadhyayar Rachnasamagra.* Calcutta: Tema, 2017.

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Basu, Chobi. *Fire Dekha.* Stree: Kolkata, 2004.

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Debi, Gnanadanandini. *Puratani.* Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2012.

Devi, Monoda. *Sheykaler Grihobodor Diary.* Calcutta: Sahitya Prakash, 1996.

Devi, Shanta. *Purbosmriti.* Kolkata: Tema, 2014.

Dutta, Hemangini. *Harano Gram.* Dhaka: Gonoprakashani, 2010.

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Hossain, Farida. *Noyon Tomare Payna Dekhite*. Dhaka: Utso Prokashan, 2013.

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Murshid, Noor Jehan. *Amar Kichu Katha*. Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2008.

Nasir, Beggzadi Mahmuda. *Teen Desh Teen Jibon*. Dhaka: Central Women's University, 2015.

Rahman, Jowshan Ara. *Smritikatha: Ekti Ajana Meye*. Dhaka: Nobajuga Prakashani, 2012.

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Shefali, Miss. *Sandhaya Raater Shefali*. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2014.

Sen, Ashalata. *Sheykaler Katha*. Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 1996.

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Sen, Manikuntala. *Jonjagoroney Narijagoney*. Kolkata: Tema, 2010.

English Autobiographies

Akhtar, Shaheen and Moushumi Bhowmik, eds. *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938*. Kolkata: Stree, 2008.

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Appendix II: Oral Histories Interviews Conducted by Author

India

Anjali Banerjee. Kolkata. June 9, 2017.

Anuradha Datta. Kolkata. March 4, 2017.

Bela Devi. Kolkata. May 24, 2017.

Bina Mandal. Kolkata. March 3, 2017.

Chandralekha Sinha. Kolkata. May 20, 2017.

Chitra Das. Kolkata. March 4, 2017.

Hashi Mukherjee. Kolkata. February 23, 2017.

Khushi Dasgupta. Kolkata. June 10, 2017.

Krishna Bose. Kolkata. March 30, 2017.

Kumkum Moitra. Kolkata. January 26, 2017.

Madhushree Dasgupta. Kolkata. June 13, 2017.

Mrinalini Raha. Kolkata. January 25, 2017.

Piyali Ray. Kolkata. May 20, 2017.

Sanchi Rani Kar. Sodepur. May 23, 2017.

Sujata Ray. Kolkata. March 24, 2017.

Uttara Chakraborty. Kolkata. April 23, 2017.

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