



FIRST  
HISTORY LESSONS

THE PARTITION

ANWESHA SENGUPTA

TRANSLATION  
ARUNAVA SINHA

ILLUSTRATIONS

RANJIT CHITRAKAR  
SIRAJUDAULLA CHITRAKAR



# First History Lessons: The Partition

Anwesh Sengupta

Translated from the Original Bengali by

Arunava Sinha

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Author – Anwesha Sengupta

Translator – Arunava Sinha

Editor – Anwesha Sengupta, Debarati Bagchi

Illustrations – Ranjit Chitrakar, SirajudaullaChitrakar

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Website – [www.idsk.edu.in](http://www.idsk.edu.in)

Email – [idsk@idskmail.com](mailto:idsk@idskmail.com) / [office@idsk.edu.in](mailto:office@idsk.edu.in)

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Email – [south-asia@rosalux.org](mailto:south-asia@rosalux.org)

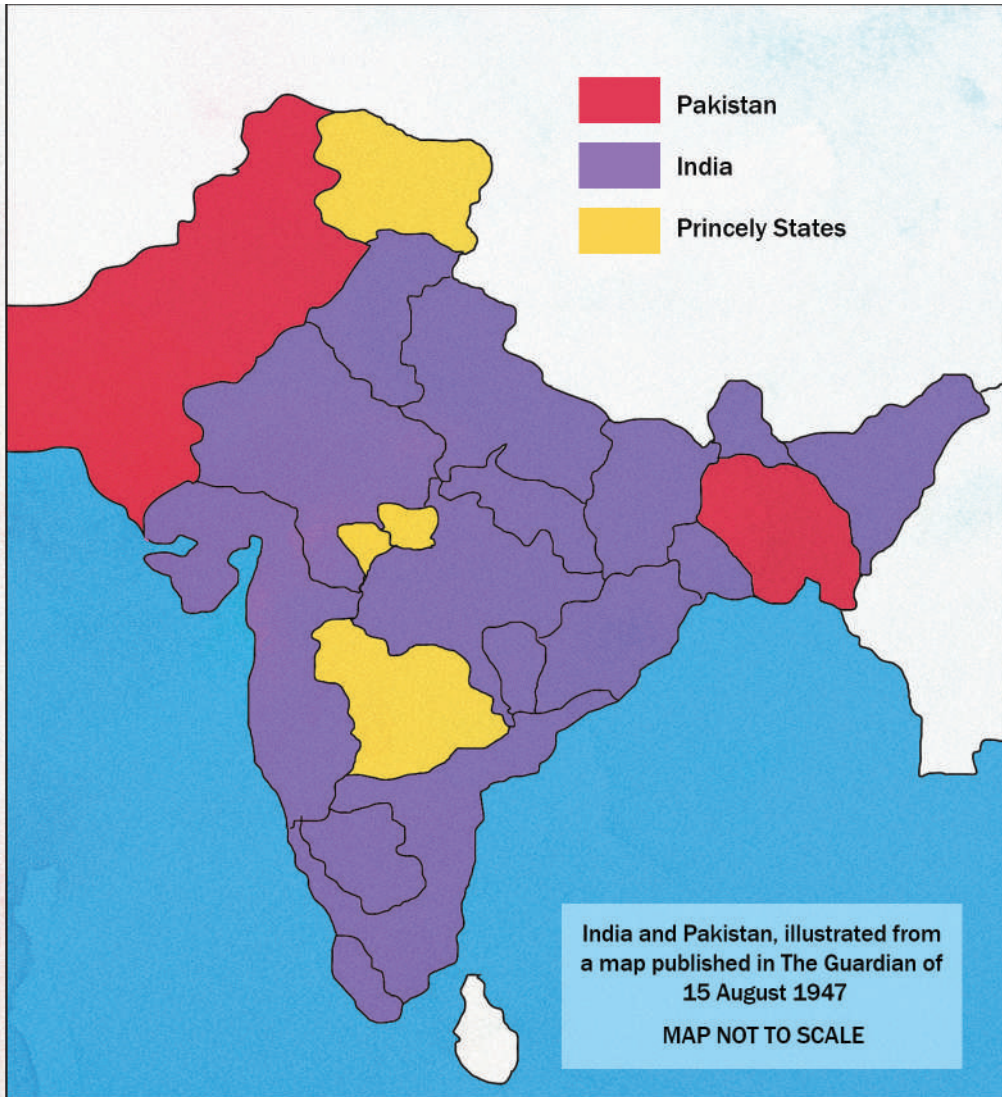
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# First History Lessons: The Partition



## 1. India, Pakistan

The month: August. The year: 1947. The 14th and the 15th—on these two dates, two independent countries were created next to each other: one named India, and the other, Pakistan. Not that the Pakistan of 1947 resembled the Pakistan of today. Pakistan then had two fragments: one on the eastern side of India, the other on the west. The part on the east is the one that separated in 1971 and became Bangladesh.

For nearly two hundred years before the formation of India and Pakistan, white men from Britain had ruled over this entire land; all of it was then known as Bharat or India. Before the British came, the most powerful people here had been the Mughal kings—Emperor Babar, his son Humayun, his grandson Akbar, his great-grandson Shah Jahan, and their descendants. Of course, by the time the British came, the power of the Mughals was greatly diminished, and in various places many local kings or land-owning zamindars had created their own little kingdoms. A Mughal king in Delhi, and minor and major kings in various parts of the country—such was the life of the common people. After the British came, they completely changed the way in which the country was governed. The kings lost their kingdoms one by one, and the Mughal emperor's reign in Delhi too was



brought to an end. The Governor-General, his deputy and their assistants took control. Above them were the King and Queen of England. They made sure to keep an eye on things here even though they never left their country.

For various reasons, the people of India were not happy with the reign of the British monarchs. They wanted India to be run by Indians—not by foreigners. For many years, they formed political parties, marched on the streets in protest, called for strikes, participated in a number of movements until finally they were freed from British rule—and the country gained independence. But why was India broken up into two countries at the time of independence?

Let me tell you that story.

Under British rule, the people of India formed several political parties to help convey their demands to the rulers and to strengthen their struggle for freedom. This was how the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, a party that still remains important in our national politics. Another party, the Muslim League, was formed in 1906. And it is in the rivalry and animosity between these two parties that the experts have found a reason for the Partition of India.

Right from the beginning, the League and the Congress were at odds with each other. While it is true that Muslim leaders like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad were a

part of the Congress, the party was composed almost entirely of Hindu workers and leaders. The Congress leaders repeatedly said that their doors were open to everyone, that they represented all their countrymen. But, whatever the reason, there remained a distance between them and the Muslim society. On the other hand, as the name must have made clear to you, the League was a party formed by Muslims.

Hindus and Muslims have lived together on the subcontinent for centuries; the love and friendship they have for one another is boundless. The Mughal emperors had been Muslim, but their subjects had included people of both religions. Although some of the emperors may have granted greater benefits to those of their own faith, the others had treated everyone equally. Still, there have always been some people, among both the Hindus and Muslims, who consider their own religion to be the best. Such people would stop the others from observing their own religious practices and rituals. During British rule, some Muslims would refer to history and claim that India needed the Mughals to rule again. On the other hand, some Hindus believed that the Mughals had been foreigners too, just like the British were, and that only Hindus were the true people of India.

There was another problem. In certain parts of British India, the people of any one of the two religions were stronger in terms of population, power and wealth.

And where they were more powerful, they often oppressed the weak in various ways: say, for example, in East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. In the British era, most of the landowners there were high-caste Hindus, while the peasants were primarily Muslims and low-caste Hindus. The landowners oppressed their subjects in various ways. They extorted money from them, made them work day and night, didn't allow them entry into their houses because they were low-caste, and refused to accept even a drop of water from them. The peasants would be furious, and often get together to protest. When the Muslim peasants fought their Hindu landowners, it was not just a feud between Hindus and Muslims but also between those who tilled the land and those who owned it. In short, there was often strife between Hindus and Muslims for various reasons, at various times, in various parts of the country.

The British rulers encouraged such strife. They knew that they would be in deep trouble if the Hindus and Muslims ever united against them. As long as the people of the country fought among themselves, they would not pay attention to getting rid of the British. And since the Hindus and Muslims fought with each other all the time, their political parties, the Congress and the League, also became rivals. But as I've said before, and I will say so again, there was no lack of love and friendship between the Hindus and Muslims either. Congress leaders

such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, or League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah, or another important leader from Bengal, Fazlul Haq, did not approve at all of this enmity and violence between the Hindus and Muslims, nor of clashes and riots on grounds of religious differences. Under their leadership, their parties did in fact often join hands to oppose the British.

But this picture began to change after 1935. That was the year when the British government introduced several new laws, collectively known as the Government of India Act 1935. Under these laws, the Indians were given much more power than ever before to govern the country. What kind of power? It is true that a handful of Indians had been allowed to vote even before the Government of India Act was implemented. But there used to be a strict selection process that decided who would or would not be granted that power. The 1935 Act, however, decreed that all Indians over twenty-one years of age, who owned a house or land or some kind of property, could vote. The elections which I am speaking of, had only Indians as candidates. But then, the power that the Indians who won in these elections had was far lower than those of the British governors of the states and of the Governor General in Delhi.

I must mention one more thing. In British India, we had something known as 'separate electorates.' Religious identity was used to create different groups of

voters. Meaning, there were separate Hindu and Muslim electorates—separate sets of Hindu and Muslim voters. So the Hindu electorate was allowed to vote for Hindu leaders only, and the Muslim electorate for Muslim leaders only. Such was the law at the time. The Congress was opposed to separate electorates while the League was in favour of it. Let me help you understand why this was so. For various reasons, under British rule, the Muslims lagged behind the Hindus with regard to education, jobs, even political power. Thus, Muhammad Ali Jinnah believed that highly regarded and articulate Muslims must win elections if these gaps were to be bridged. He felt that only Muslim leaders would care for the well-being of Muslims—no one else. And separate electorates were the only way to find out whom Muslim society wanted as its leaders.

The Congress leaders never accepted the demand for separate electorates on the basis of minority religions or backward castes. They believed that the real enemies of the Indians were the British. First, everyone had to come together and drive them out. Their own needs and demands could be addressed later. And the leaders who would address these needs should be chosen by all the people. It was not right that Hindus should be looked after by their own Hindu leaders, and Muslims, by their own Muslim leaders. It must be pointed out here that Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the greatest Dalit leader in British India, had also demanded a

separate electorate for Dalits, following the same logic as Jinnah. Those regarded as 'lowcaste' in Hindu society refer to themselves as Dalits. Gandhi used to call them Harijans, or 'people of god'. Gandhi's opposition to a separate electorate for Dalits eventually forced Ambedkar to abandon his demand.

The first election in the provinces, after the Government of India Act had come into force, took place in 1937. The Congress won everywhere; the League did not perform well at all. In many places, the Muslim electorates voted for the Muslim representatives of the Congress rather than for the League. The election results suggested that the Congress was truly a party of and for people of all religions. And that the League was not much liked, even by the Muslims themselves. Now the Congress grew rather conceited. Nehru claimed that there were only two parties in India—the Congress and the British government; the League was unimportant. Jinnah was overcome with anger and unhappiness at his words. The arrogance of the Congress also began to make Muslims fearful in different parts of India. Many of them had indeed voted for the Congress, but they were not pleased with the way their dear leader Jinnah was being treated. And as I've mentioned earlier, most Congress leaders were Hindus, with only a handful of Muslims among them. So the Muslims began to fear that they would have two masters now—the white Englishmen on the one hand, and the Hindu Congress

babus on the other. Many historians say that the reason for the Partition lies concealed in the 1937 elections—that was the moment when Jinnah realized that arriving at an understanding with the Congress was impossible. The League would have to be re-organized and strengthened, and Muslim leaders would have to occupy seats of power.

But the idea of Pakistan had not yet occurred to Jinnah or other Muslims. It took another three years for the subject of creating a separate country for Muslims to come up, at the League's Lahore conference in 1940. Not that anyone directly used the word 'Pakistan' at this conference. But the Muslims of the country were growing increasingly doubtful about whether the Congress would consider the needs, well-being and happiness of Muslim society. Many of them wanted their own country or province, governed by members of their own society. This is precisely what was discussed at the Lahore conference.

But no one knew, in 1940, that in just seven more years the British would leave India, or that the country would be split into two. In fact, many historians say that, although Jinnah repeatedly spoke of a separate country, he had been more concerned about how to govern India by sharing power with the Congress. He had, according to him, wanted the states to have more power in an independent India, with Muslim League governments in Muslim-majority states. And the

central government in Delhi would only retain responsibility for matters of the economy, the military and relations with other countries. But because the Congress did not agree to this idea, British India was finally split into two.

There are, of course, other opinion on the matter. Many say that Jinnah's greed for power and the continuously deteriorating relationship between the Hindus and Muslims is what led to the Partition. It is true that, from August 1946 onwards, the country was witness to horrifying riots between the Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs. It was as if the violence would never end. How would it, if the British government made no effort to intervene? But these riots put an end to all discussions between the Hindus and Muslims, and many became firmly convinced of the idea that there would be peace only if the country was partitioned. By then the British were in a great hurry to leave India. Who would come to power after them, on what terms and conditions and for how long—they were not interested in such complex questions. They found the idea of dividing the country into two and handing over power to the two parties to be the simplest solution. Thus, in just a year's time, two countries were formed purely on the basis of religion. Pakistan was born, where the majority were Muslims, and India, where the Hindus were the majority. Not everyone was happy to accept the Partition. Gandhi, for instance, was extremely saddened by the



divisions between the Hindus and Muslims and by the eventual split of India into two. While independence was being celebrated with joy around the country on 15 August, he spent the day in a house in Calcutta, fasting, and without speaking to anyone.

One more thing needs to be said. Many Hindus stayed back in Pakistan, especially in East Pakistan, just as a large number of Muslims stayed back in India. After the Partition, 25 out of every 100 people in West Bengal were Muslim, and 28.2 percent of the population of East Bengal was Hindu. They stayed in their respective countries out of love for their birthplace, their homes, their neighbours. Some also stayed out of the conviction that, before long, the two countries would become one again. At the same time, several Bengali leaders, both Hindu and Muslim, spent quite some time discussing whether the two Bengals could be united to form a third country. Aware of such talks, many people chose to stay where they were. You never knew—what if the map of Bengal changed again? Besides, the leaders of both countries had promised to ensure the well-being of both Hindus and Muslims. Sadly, none of them have kept their word—which is why, even today, there is still so much feuding and fighting in the name of religion.

Enough has been said about when and why the violence between the Hindus

and Muslims began. But history is not merely a list of what happened and when. History is about trying to find various ways and means of understanding what has taken place. To look for answers to how things happened, why they happened, and what the outcome was. Let us do that too. Let us see the practical reality of how British India was split into two countries once the leaders decided on the Partition.





## 2. Partition Calculations

Malda district in Bengal in those days had many powerful landowners. There was intense rivalry between them. One way of measuring who was more important and had greater influence was to count the number of elephants each one owned. Keeping elephants was expensive, beyond the means of small-time landowners. But the pecking order of landowners was determined by the size and majesty of their collections of elephants. To compete with the landowners, the British government also began to keep elephants for the use of their Malda bureaucrats. Joymoni was one such government-owned elephant. A very amiable creature indeed, all he needed to be happy was to chomp on a few tender banana plantsevery now and then. And he was very sweet with children. But this same Joymoni found himself at the heart of a great storm during the Partition.

The story begins on 3 June 1947, in Delhi, the capital of British India. Early that morning, an emergency meeting had been called at Governor General Mountbatten's residence. In attendance were all the important leaders of both the Congress and the Muslim League. After some discussions and a bit of argument, it was decided that if British India was indeed going to be partitioned into two countries, then major preparations would have to be made. It was clear from the discussions that a country could not be partitioned simply because someone said so—it was a complex affair. What were these complexities, and what preparations

were required? Let me list them, one by one.

First, one would have to sit down with a map and calmly decide where India would end and Pakistan would begin. In other words, a border would have to be drawn between the two countries. Next, the fate of those who were government employees would have to be decided. If the British government was going to be replaced by an Indian government on one side and a Pakistani one on the other, then the current employees would have to be allocated to the two new governments. Similarly, government assets and properties would need to be given and taken. This would require complicated calculations. And then the question arose: who would carry out all these tasks? The answer came some ten days after the meeting.

Senior officers from various departments were grouped in ten specialist committees. They were made responsible for every minute detail of the partition process. Above them, a two-member team, formally known as the steering committee, supervised their work. Two veteran bureaucrats, Chaudhry Muhammad Ali and Hirubhai Muljibhai Patel, were its members. Hirubhai Muljibhai Patel later became India's home minister and finance minister, while Chaudhry Muhammad Ali became Pakistan's prime minister. But neither of them had stepped onto the political stage at the time of our story. Their specific responsibility was to advise the committees of specialists from time to time, and to mediate in case of conflicts between them. In addition, Congress and Muslim League leaders kept in touch

with the committees through these two people. Not that any party leader could communicate with them directly—a Partition Council was set up with two leaders from each party. It was their responsibility to keep an eye on the entire process, and to maintain communication with the specialist committees as well as the steering committee as and when required. So much for what the government in Delhi was doing. Meanwhile, leaders in Bengal and Punjab had also decided that their states would be divided between Pakistan and India. So more committees were set up, large and medium and small, in Calcutta and in Lahore to determine the division of their populations and assets.

As I've told you earlier, Joymoni was owned by the government. So when the bureaucrats sat down with their papers and pencils to make a list of government assets, they finally arrived at Joymoni. After using up a large number of pages and a huge amount of ink, and going through extensive calculations, the authorities finally decreed that Joymoni should go to East Pakistan. But then, the question arose: how was he to do so? Really, that wasn't so hard after all. The border was a stone's throw from Malda, and East Pakistan just beyond that. Joymoni and his mahut could simply walk across to his new land. But the mahut threw a spanner in the works. Just the thought of going to Pakistan made him sick to his stomach. He had in the meantime declared that he would work under the West Bengal government after Independence. Perhaps he was afraid he wouldn't be allowed to leave Pakistan

even if he went there only for a day as Joymoni's escort. Perhaps the East Pakistan government wouldn't let him come back. What was to be done now? Joymoni was an elephant, after all! How could he be expected to find his own way to Pakistan?

Everyone was at their wits' end.

Ten months passed after Partition. It was June 1948, and Joymoni was still in Malda. The East Pakistan government had grown quite impatient for him. Finally, it sent two members of the forest department to fetch the elephant. But as soon as they arrived in Malda, a new obstacle presented itself. The District Collector told them that they would have to deposit Rs 1,900 before Joymoni could be taken away. On paper, he had been East Pakistan's property since 15 August 1947, but the West Bengal government had paid for his food for these last ten months. And feeding an elephant was no small matter. Hundreds of rupees had been spent from government funds. The Collector's demand was based on these costs. Rs 1900 was a significant sum of money back then. Those who had come to fetch Joymoni did not have so much money with them. But the Collector was adamant: he wasn't going to let Joymoni go without the dues being paid. He flew into such a rage that he even flung those two men into jail! Far from letting them return with Joymoni, the Indian government ended up harassing them terribly. Joymoni's travel to a foreign land was blocked again. He did not, in all probability, ever make it to East Pakistan.

Just like the tug of war between the two Bengals over Joymoni, there were constant clashes between India and Pakistan over many small and large issues and assets. Splitting a country into two is no child's play, after all. It needed thousands of calculations and discussions and debates to unravel the knot of British India and create two new countries. And how can we claim this to be entirely in the past? Even today, we only have to open the newspapers to read of the conflict between the two countries over Kashmir. Is the Partition only a historical event, then, or is it still underway? Let's keep this question in mind. Perhaps we'll find the answer in this very book.







### **3. Mr Radcliffe's Knife**

Speaking of Kashmir, there was a tugofwar between India and Pakistan over the city of Calcutta too. The growth of the city had been nurtured by the British from the second half of the eighteenth century. Calcutta, which had sprung up on the bank of the Ganga, had become a major centre of trade, business, politics, education, literature and culture in British India. People used to come from distant places for education or employment, some in search of work. The streets would be teeming with crowds of various religions and speaking different languages. As soon as Partition was mooted in 1947, the idea of dividing Bengal also came up, and the battle for Calcutta began. Let me tell you the entire story.

The leaders of Punjab and Bengal decided at the time of Partition to divide their states as well. Half of each state would go to Pakistan, and half would stay with India. Similarly, it was decided that a portion of Assam would go to Pakistan as well. But now the important question arose: Who would take the responsibility to examine the maps and determine where the borders should lie? On what basis would the villages and cities and districts be allotted to Pakistan and to India? After talking it over, Nehru, Jinnah and Mountbatten sent for an Englishman. His name was Cyril Radcliffe, and he was a lawyer. He, however,

had never set foot in India; he knew nothing about the country nor wanted to. This was probably why Nehru, Jinnah and Mountbatten had picked him. They believed that someone who knew nothing about the country, and was a legal expert, would keep the demands of both sides in mind and ensure justice in the way in which he proposed the division.

On 30 June 1947, two Boundary Commissions were set up, with Radcliffe at the head of both. One was supposed to draw up the border between India and East Pakistan, and the other, between West Pakistan and India. The two commissions had about a month and a half to complete their task. Both commissions had four other members each, all of them legal experts. Half of them were Hindus, picked primarily by the Congress. The other half were Muslims, the choice of the League. They had been told to draw the borders in such a way that the two segments of Pakistan, East and West, remained Muslim-majority areas. They were also told to keep 'other factors' in mind. But the governor general did not specify what these 'other factors' were, and this led to much confusion. A tussle for Calcutta began. It must be pointed out that none of these men was actually on the ground, trying to determine the division of land and people. Instead, they sat at their desks and drew lines with pencils on maps to decide which areas were to go to India and which, to Pakistan.

Starting from the British era, the population of the country was counted once every ten years. According to this census, the number of Hindus in Calcutta was slightly higher than the number of Muslims. But there were many Muslim students who had come from distant villages to study in the city. There were also Muslim labourers from North India and Bihar who used to work in the jute mills or elsewhere. Muslim sailors came from Sylhet to work as boatswains in Calcutta Port. In other words, even if Hindus slightly outnumbered the Muslims among permanent residents of the city, the city belonged as much to them as to their Muslim friends and colleagues. Of course, there wasn't always affection and amity among the Hindus and Muslims of Calcutta. Just a year before Independence, for instance, there were terrible riots.

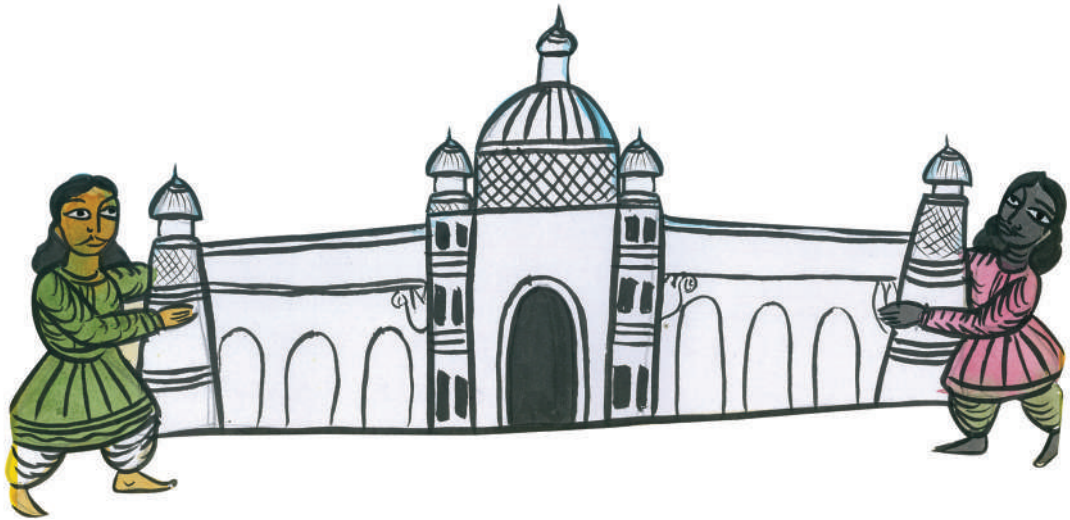
The League wanted Calcutta, the city of both Hindus and Muslims, to be part of East Pakistan, while the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha (another big political party) wanted it to be part of India. One group said that, going by the count of its permanent residents, Calcutta was a Hindu city and so it should remain in India. Another said: so what, count the number of migrants too. One group said: the lion's share of taxes collected by the Calcutta Corporation comes from Hindus, so the city belongs to them. Fuming, the other group said: what about the millions of rupees that the Calcutta Port earns from exporting

jute brought over from East Bengal – what about that, eh? Somewhere in the middle of all this quarrelling, Suhrawardy of the Muslim League had mumbled the suggestion that Calcutta should belong to both the Bengals, be home to the administrative centres of both East Pakistan and West Bengal. Nobody agreed, of course. Radcliffe had the last word. On 17 August, the Boundary Commission informed everyone where the borders had been drawn to separate West Pakistan and East Pakistan from India. As it turned out, Calcutta remained in West Bengal, that is, in India.

Although the conflict over Calcutta was resolved by Radcliffe's ruling, discussions and debates continued between the two countries over numerous other places. Actually, Radcliffe's lines had been full of discrepancies. In many places, he had used rivers like the Padma, the Mathabhanga and the Ichhamati, among others, as the border between India and West Pakistan. But the rivers of Bengal are whimsical and often change their course. Would the border also change with them? The same trouble arose over his use of the river Kushiara in Assam to mark the border. There was a battle over the Patharia forest of Assam too. These disputes continued for years, just like in Kashmir, where the dispute has not yet been resolved. And those who got into trouble as a result were the people through whose homes and fields Radcliffe had run his knife.

Ordinary people like you and me had to face so many difficulties because of the Partition. Millions had to abandon their homes and live through hard times in a new country. Of course, many found opportunities amid all the hardship to create a new life.

Let us open the bag of stories and hear more about what they found and what they lost.





#### **4. Food, and the Home Left Behind**

How old could Deshraj have been when British India was partitioned? May be thirteen or fourteen? He was in Class Seven at the time, in a village school in Punjab. His father and grandfather had spent their entire lives in that same village. But Radcliffe's design resulted in their village being part of to Pakistan. That year great trouble had erupted all across Punjab with the advent of summer. The British were leaving India, the country would be partitioned, Punjab would be split into two—this news, along with various rumours, had made the people restless and agitated. Despite living together for generations, the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims suddenly began fighting with one another. When neither the police nor the military could stop them, Jinnah and Nehru devised a peculiar solution: the Hindu and Sikh families from the villages and towns that had gone to Pakistan would be brought to India. And the Muslims living in the Indian half of Punjab would be taken to Pakistan. The armies of the two countries would jointly organize this movement across the border. There was, however, no such understanding for an exchange of people between the two Bengals. But I'll come to that later.

Following Nehru's and Jinnah's plan, the police and the military arrived one



day in Deshraj's little village. At dawn on 25 August, a sleepy Deshraj clutched his mother's and brother's hands and followed the forces to India. Thousands of others from the neighbouring villages accompanied them. The procession consisted of nearly 50,000 people, along with their cows and buffaloes and bundles of clothes and utensils. After travelling for four days on foot, they arrived at a town named Fazilka. The Radcliffe Line ran right next to it, and Fazilka was on the Indian side.

So, they had reached India. Now what? Deshraj's family had neither friends nor relatives in this country. His mother and brother were told of opportunities for work and a home in Saharanpur, in the United Provinces. So that is where they decided to go. Deshraj and his family got on the train. But luck was against them, for it began to rain torrentially soon after the train set off, and it could go no further. It was September, the rainy season, and in the middle of it all the country was being partitioned. There seemed to be no end to human suffering. Deshraj and his family spent several nights in Ambala station in Punjab while it rained incessantly. Then, suddenly, a goods train arrived. It could take everyone who had come from Pakistan, just like Deshraj and his family, to Delhi. They got on. What difference did it make to them whether they went to Delhi or to Saharanpur— both were equally unknown to them.

The goods train crawled along and eventually got to Delhi. Deshraj and his family had to take shelter in the station all over again. A team of bureaucrats arrived and told them that arrangements for food and lodging would soon be made, but till then they would have to wait at the station. The Wabel Canteen was a stone's throw away from the station. For the time being, that was where arrangements were made to feed the refugees. Rice would be cooked in enormous pots all day long, while more pots held bubbling-hot daal. Morning, noon or night, no matter when they went, everyone was given a plate of rice and a large spoonful of daal. But Deshraj and his family were from Punjab, their village was surrounded by fields of wheat, they were used to eating rotis made from wheat. How were they supposed to savour rice day after day? After a week of this existence, Deshraj's family heard that if they went to Jhansi, then their problems would be solved. There, the government was apparently giving wheat-bread twice a day to those who had come from Pakistan, like them. At once they got on to yet another train. This time, they were on their way to Jhansi in the Central Provinces.

You may be wondering why these people, in the middle of all that trouble and turmoil, couldn't be happy with their two hot meals a day. Why did they have to go off in search of wheat-bread? But that's what human beings are like. When the world is turned upside down, when everyday life changes beyond recognition, we

humans find security in familiar foods and clothes, in old toys, in the neem tree in the yard. We get great comfort in knowing that even though everything else has changed, one or two things remain the same. But Deshraj and his family got no such comfort in Jhansi either. The news had been correct, and rotis were indeed being served in the government camps in Jhansi. But alas, this was thick flatbread, made of millet—not wheat! Delhi now seemed much better in comparison. The capital of the country, after all, with many more opportunities for work. So, after staying in Jhansi for a couple of days, Deshraj and his family set off again for Delhi. Several months of their lives were lost between the Partition and their search for hot rotis. Finally, that winter, they found shelter in a Delhi camp, where they could make their own hot rotis at the clay oven. Perhaps in the taste of those rotis Deshraj finally found a trace of the village he had left behind.

Talking of food brings us to the story of the farmer, Karim Nasir. His family had lived for generations in Assam— by profession they were rice cultivators. A long time before the Partition, Nasir’s ancestors had left Mymensingh in East Bengal and come to Assam in search of farm land. Many other families of Bengali Muslim farmers had also moved to Assam before and after them. Sometimes it was floods that had forced them to do so, sometimes poverty. The Muslim League had considerable influence in Assam. They had helped and encouraged

many Bengali Muslim farmers like Nasir to stay on in the state. The party leaders had calculated that that increasing the Muslim population in Assam would strengthen the League and help them win elections. But the Congress leaders of Assam and the Hindu Assamese people didn't like Nasir and his fellow Muslims at all. They were thought of as trespassers who had grabbed much of the land, and thus reduced the opportunities for the original inhabitants of Assam. The Congress had nothing to gain electorally from their presence either. It had simply assumed that the Muslim peasants would no doubt vote for the Muslim League.

The country was partitioned in this tangled situation, and life for Nasir and his fellow Muslims became even more complex. Most of Assam remained in India, but Mymensingh went to Pakistan. As a resident of Assam for several decades, Nasir became a citizen of independent India, but Mymensingh, the land of his ancestors, became a foreign country. After the Partition, the cry went round in Assam to 'get rid of foreigners.' Who were these foreigners? The Assam Police suspected every Bengali Muslim farmer of being a foreigner who had come over from East Pakistan. The Hindus, of course, were treated entirely differently. Those of them who went to Assam—forced to leave their homes in East Pakistan by the post-Partition riots—were not considered foreigners at that time. Soon after Independence, the Congress government in Assam passed a law

and told the police to push the foreigners back over the border into Pakistan. Thousands of Muslim farmers were made to leave India, leaving behind miles upon miles of their rice fields in Assam.

Nasir, though, did manage to stay on in Assam for some more years. The summons for him finally came in 1964. One fine day, the police suddenly declared that he was a Pakistani. Nasir kept saying that his family had been living in Assam from a time long before the Partition, when there was no such thing as Pakistan. But no one would listen. Overnight, he had to abandon his beloved village and his fields and go across the border to Mymensingh. But his heart remained in Assam. For a long time afterwards, whenever he was asked about his nationality, he would answer that he was neither Indian nor Pakistani, but Assamese. Assam was his land. He had no interest in the larger identities of India and Pakistan. Nor was he bothered about the equations between Hindus and Muslims. But trapped in the battle of those very identities, Nasir had to walk away from his home and the farmland so close to his heart. Sometimes, he would stroll up to the border between the two countries. His eyes would fill with tears at the sight of the rice fields of Assam on the other side. The fragrance of the paddy would remind him of the terrible pain of being evicted from his own land.

The debate in Assam—over who is a foreigner and who isn't—has not yet ended.

The Assam government's bureaucrats and policemen often still take away poor people under the suspicion of them being foreigners. There are both Hindus and Muslims among these poor people. But you will know more about all this in the next two books. Let us meanwhile read some more stories about the Partition. We've heard tales from Punjab and Assam; let's now turn our gaze to Bengal.





## 5. Bithi's Tale

Let me tell you about Bithi. She was born in March 1933, in Mymensingh, in a rich landowner's family. They had a huge house and large swathes of land. Bithi was the eldest daughter, with several siblings. Her days passed happily in the company of her brothers, sisters and friends. The school was nearby, and her studies were progressing well. But the Partition turned her life and her family's lives upside down. That's the story I'm about to tell you now.

In 1946, when Hindus and Muslims were fighting bitterly in Calcutta and in Noakhali and in Bihar, rumours began to spread in the village where Bithi and her family lived, bringing with them fears of riots. Bithi stopped going to school, in fact, she entirely stopped wandering around at will as she used to. What if bad Muslim men abducted her? Muslim families lived in the same fear—what if Hindu men took away their girls? It was the girls everyone was worried about. For one thing, there was no knowing if they could fight off the goons, and then, if a Muslim goon took away a Hindu girl, or a Hindu goon abducted a Muslim girl, the families would lose their honour. This fear haunted everyone. Our society



has always been ruled by partiality. All the rules and admonitions are reserved for women, as though it is their duty alone to preserve the honour of the family and the neighbourhood and society, while the men can get away with anything. It was true, of course, that during the riots men of each religion terrorised women of the other faith whenever they got the chance. No wonder everyone was scared. Bithi's family, too, was anxious about her and the other women and girls in the family. So in December 1946, they despatched her to her maternal uncle's house in faraway Calcutta. Her day-to-day life changed completely.

On that occasion, Bithi spent just a few months in Calcutta. When news came from home about her uncle's grave illness, she went back to Mymensingh. She had not enjoyed being in Calcutta at all. Once she was back, she decided not to return to the city. She was in Mymensingh at the time of Independence and Partition. Their village had been calm on the whole. It wasn't just their village; very little rioting had occurred in both the Bengals at that time. So the leaders of Pakistan and India said, it's all right for Hindu and Muslims to cross over in Punjab because of the riots. But there is no need for it in Bengal. Nehru and Jinnah said, let the Hindus and Muslim live together on both sides as they are, let

no one leave their homes behind and cross the border. Like many others, Bithi's family also stayed back in their village. But in 1950 she did have to go to Calcutta again, this time permanently, with everyone else in the family.

What happened in 1950? We will have to go back a little for the answer. In December 1949, a fresh bout of rioting broke out between the Hindus and the Muslims. The trouble began in a village in the Khulna district of East Pakistan, then spread very quickly to various places in both the Bengals and Assam. Now the Muslims began to leave India for East Pakistan in droves. They realized that the Partition had not ended in 1947. On the contrary, they felt its significance all over again in 1949–50. Bithi, her parents and her siblings moved to Calcutta. The family rented a house to live in, and the children joined a school in the city.

But Bithi's family was then plunged into a crisis in Calcutta. Her father fell severely ill, and their savings dwindled. Bithi's brothers and sisters were still young. To save money, they moved house. But it was not really a house, only a cowshed. There was neither water nor windows. A tiny cramped room, and barely anything to eat, yet Bithi never gave up on her studies. And as soon as she graduated from

college, she got a job in a school as a teacher. She shouldered full responsibility for the family.

Had it not been for the Partition, Bithi's life would perhaps have been completely different. Not just Bithi, many other women too would have had completely different lives. Very few women used to have jobs before the Partition. Working for a living was considered the duty of men, while women were supposed to manage the household. But the Partition changed this line of thinking. Strapped for money after moving to a new country, barely able to make ends meet, everyone realized that it was essential for women to work too. So, despite their poverty, the elders of the families migrating from East Pakistan to India emphasized on education for women. It was these same women who went on to become nurses and teachers and telephone operators and helped steer their families through financial difficulties.

Despite all the adversity and suffering it ushered in, the Partition also brought a ray of sunshine to the lives of women. It was in a sense the Partition that took many women from villages to cities, from the inner chambers of their homes

to offices and workplaces. Had it not been for the Partition, families like Bithi's might never have realized that there is no difference between men and women, that everyone can be good at studies, work for a living, and support their families.





## 6. Sailing the Seas

To the west of India is the Arabian Sea, and to the east, the Bay of Bengal. And to the south is the Indian Ocean. And a cluster of islands lying in the Bay of Bengal is collectively referred to as the Andaman-Nicobar archipelago. There are many legends and rumours surrounding these islands. It seems the jungles are dense here, full of fierce humans and dangerous beasts. Some of you may have been to the Andamans on holiday, and seen how beautiful it is over there. There's the blue sea, clear sky, forests, hills. And you may have read about the Cellular Jail in your history books. Prominent freedom fighters were imprisoned there in the British era. But did you know that the history of some of these islands is connected to the history of the Partition?

When many Hindu families left East Pakistan during Partition and gathered in West Bengal, the state government grew very worried. Where would so many people live? What would they eat? Of course, many of these people ended up making their own arrangements. Some of them put up at their relatives' houses. Others got together in groups to occupy unused land in and around Calcutta, dividing up the plots among themselves. They built makeshift homes with bamboo slips, and set up schools, markets and dispensaries. These people were

known as refugees, and their settlements were called refugee colonies. A refugee is someone who has been evicted or forcibly removed from their home. Since the Partition led to people being forced to leave their homes, they earned the label of refugee.

But there were many refugees who did not get admission to these settlements – they knew no one, had no money or jobs. Government support was their only recourse. For months on end, they had to live in government camps around the state, in Sealdah Station, and even in the open air, on the pavements. All they hoped for was that the state government would find a place for them to live in, work to earn a living from, and food to eat. And it was not an unreasonable expectation. They were not the ones who had partitioned the country—it had been the political leaders who had decided to do so. And it had then led to all the strife and violence and rioting. It was because the governments of the two countries could not have been able to stop the rioting that these people had to escape. Naturally, the government should have taken the responsibility to look after them, to ensure they had food and homes and livelihoods.

Dr Bidhanchandra Roy was the head of the West Bengal government at the time. He couldn't stop worrying about the refugees. Taking care of so many people's needs was no easy matter. It meant enormous expenses, and needed people as

well as land. Bidhan Roy believed that all the states should share this enormous responsibility, and the Indian government should help the states with money. But the Indian government was at its wits' end with the refugees in Punjab and had no time to think of Bengal. That was when Bidhan Roy had a brainwave. He suggested sending some of the refugees from East Pakistan to the Andamans. The islands were sparsely populated, and there was plenty of unoccupied land, canals and rivers for water, and the ocean. The refugees could live happily here, fishing and farming. The Indian government in Delhi gave its assent. They knew that more farming in the Andamans could only be good for the rest of the country. Bidhan Roy was a man of action, who always implemented his ideas immediately. On his encouragement, the first group of refugees from Calcutta reached the Andamans by ship in early 1949. All of them were farmers, who used to cultivate jute for a living in East Bengal. In the Andamans, they were given land, ploughs, oxen for tilling the land, and seeds. After this, the West Bengal government began sending small groups of refugees every year to the Andamans. Farmers, fishermen, and, sometimes, workmen would be handpicked for the trip. Only those people who had the opportunity for work there would be sent.

We might conclude that Bidhanchandra Roy had come up with a good plan



indeed. Those who were sent off benefited, farming increased in the Andamans, and West Bengal had fewer people to deal with. These are all true. But the whole thing can be thought about in another way too. As soon as these people reached a new country, they were told there was no room for them there. The government had made arrangements for them on a distant, unknown island, far away across the sea. An island filled with dense forests, wild animals, and strangers. The only way to travel to and fro was by government ships. So, there was no way to escape even if you didn't like the place. It was a kind of imprisonment. But this imprisonment was not for everyone. No doctors or teachers or businessmen or landowners were sent to the Andamans. Only those who lived off their labour, like farmers, fishermen, blacksmiths and other workmen, were made to go. Almost all of these poor refugees were Dalits, while nearly every one of the rich refugees was considered 'high caste' by society. You can well understand that everyone had their own specific experience of the Partition. Women had one kind, and the poor, another. It was different in Punjab from Bengal. And when caste was considered, it was unique for each group.

Let me point out a few more things. The West Bengal government sent working-class Dalit refugees not just to the Andamans but also to various other places in India. As I said, Bidhan Roy believed that everyone was responsible for refugees,

and not West Bengal alone. From Odisha and Bihar to distant north India, Gujarat, the Central Provinces and south India, no place was left out. It wasn't as though the refugees were happy wherever they went. Many of them suffered in these new places with their unfamiliar languages and no opportunity for work. Some of them ran away to return to West Bengal, spending their nights on the streets or in railway stations. Many even escaped back to East Pakistan. This was how the Partition pushed these people around from one place to another, then to yet another. It took many years for them to settle down. The Partition may have begun in 1947 for all of them, but it ended at different times for different people. Yet their will power was extraordinary, they never gave up. They kept looking for a place where they would get work, a place to stay, two square meals a day.

When we read history we see the names of kings and leaders. But it is equally important to remember the daily struggles, hardships and joys of the nameless. If someone asks about the history of the Partition you must mention Radcliffe, you must mention Jinnah and Nehru too. But don't forget to talk about Deshraj or Nasir or Bithi or those who were sent to the Andamans. Not to mention Joymoni. It is in their stories that fragments of Partition history are to be found.



## 7. And Finally

You may be wondering how I got to know all these stories. What if I made them all up? In fact, these are all true stories. I found them by examining official documents and reading books by history experts. I read about Joymoni the elephant in the Bangladesh government's archives. Government archives are an office where all the old documents of various administrative departments are stored in files. Those who carry out deep historical research to write their books are allowed to read these files. Let me tell you the file number: F. No. 3c1-6/1949; Political, Branch—Confidential Report (CR), 'B' Proceedings, Bundle No. 2, List number 119. If you ever happen to be studying history, and find yourself rummaging through the documents in the Bangladesh government's archives, you can read this file to check on Joymoni's story.

I learnt about Deshraj from a different kind of archive, titled '1947: Partition Archive'. It contains interviews with more than 10,000 people who witnessed the Partition, who migrated from one place to another because of the Partition to set up new lives. You can read some of these interviews on your computers at this website: <https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/>. But to listen to or read the whole thing you'll have to be a little older, you'll have to go through college and university.

I read about Bithi and Nasir in two different places. There's a historian named Gargi Chakraborty. You will find Bithi's story in her book *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women in Bengal*. And there's a sociologist named Malini Sur, whose research has to do with those who live near the India–Bangladesh border. If you read her 2016 article 'Battles for the Golden Grain: Paddy Soldiers and the Making of the Northeast India–East Pakistan border, 1930–1970', you'll learn more about Nasir.

I had to read some more books, let me list some of them here:

- (a) Haimanti Roy, *The Partition of India: Oxford India Short Introduction* (2018)
- (b) Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Nation after Partition* (2018)
- (c) Abul Mansur Ahmed's autobiography: *Amar Dekha Raajneetir Ponchash Bochhor* (Politics As I Have Seen It For Fifty Years) (1969)
- (d) Ashok Mitra's autobiography: *Tin Kuri Dosb* (Three Scores and Ten) (1959)

Many people have helped me write this book. They have pointed out mistakes and suggested better ways to write it. I must specially mention Achin Chakraborty, Subhash Ranjan Chakraborty, Manabi Majumdar, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Semanti Ghosh, Sabir Ahamed, Krittika Sengupta, Tanika Sarkar, Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, Nandini Ghosh, Priyankar De, Uponita Mukherjee, Asokendu Sengupta, Arpita Sengupta, Supurna Banerjee, Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, Amitava Gupta, Shouvik Bandyopadhyay, Paramita Chakraborty, Madhumita Basu, Malini Mukherjee, Aishik Chatterjee, Subrata Mukherjee, Arshi Parveen Gupta, Raisha Mahmood, Mohar Sengupta, Aishi Dutta, Rupkatha, Tista Das and Debarati Bagchi. I am grateful to all of them.

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## About the Author, Translator and the Artists

Anwasha Sengupta has written this book. She teaches history at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK).

Arunava Sinha has translated this book into English. He is a literary translator and co-director of the Ashoka Centre for Translation at Ashoka University.

Wasim Helal has done the art direction, cover and maps for this book. He is a graphic designer by profession. Wasim does illustrations, covers, and art direction for many Indian and foreign publishers.

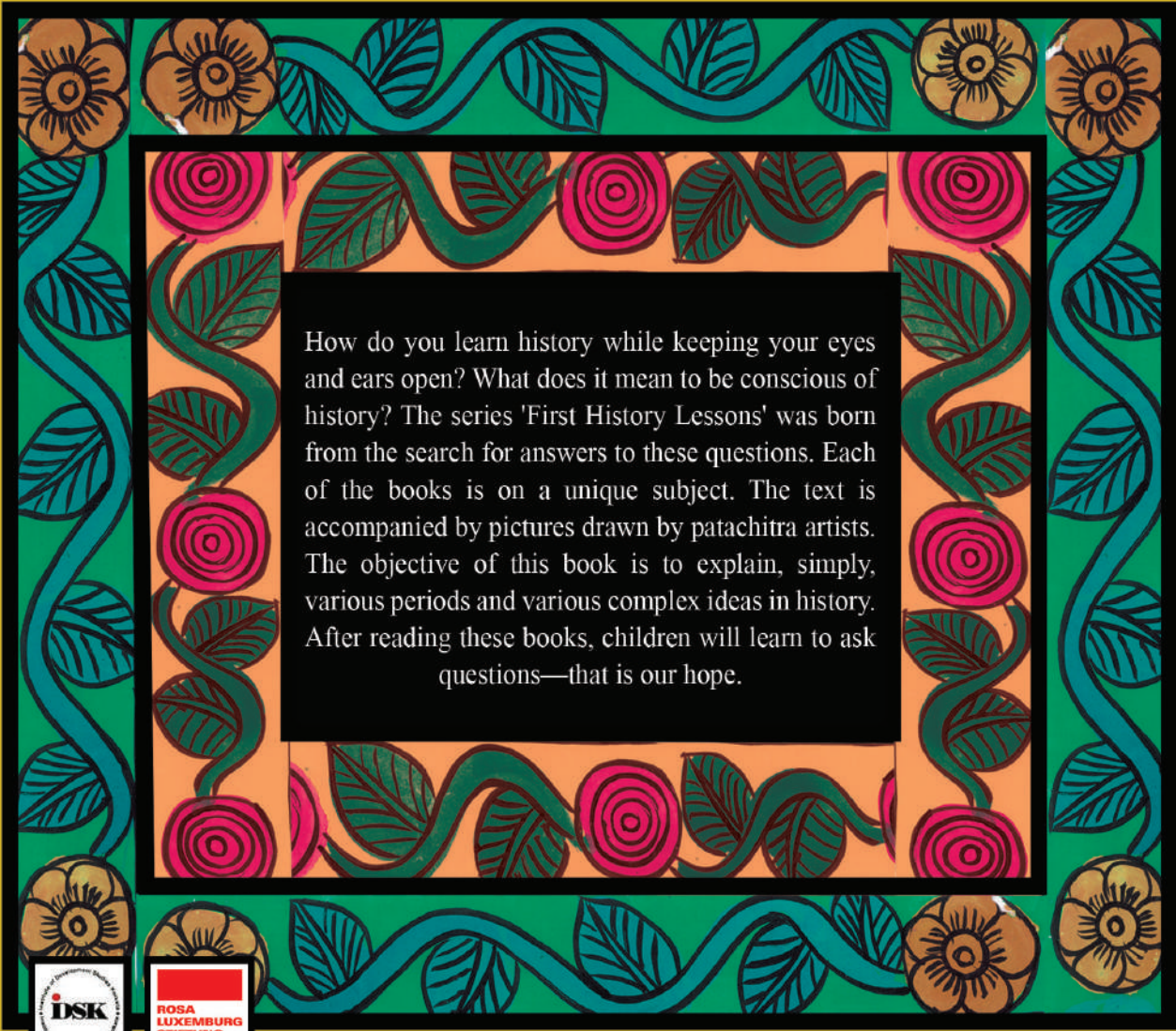
The illustrations in this book are by Ranjit Chitrakar and SirajudaullaChitrakar. By family tradition they are pata artists—those who make art on fabric. Ranjit and Shiraz work in the village of Naya, which is under the jurisdiction of Pingla police station in the West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Following the tradition of pata art, they primarily paint narratives and compose songs about Hindu gods and goddesses. But these days their art covers other themes too. Pata art is an example of the tradition of religious harmony in Bengal. Although the artists are often Muslims, their art and lyrics are usually centred on stories of Hinduism. What's more, according to their own social narrative, they are descendants of the Hindu god Viswakarma. This is how Islam and Hinduism are blended in their lives and work.



The **Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK)** was set up in 2002 by the Government of West Bengal as an autonomous centre of excellence in social sciences. It is a society with an autonomous governing body with eminent scholars and Government's nominees. IDSK is recognized for its advanced academic research and informed policy advice in the areas of literacy, education, health, gender, employment, technology, communication, human sciences and economic development. The academic programmes at IDSK include MPhil (2006-2022) and PhD in social sciences and short training courses for research scholars. It offers state-of-the-art IT and library facilities to its students and research scholars. It is fully funded by the Government of West Bengal. IDSK has been recognized by the ICSSR under the category of "ICSSR Recognized Research Institutes".

The **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS)** is a German political foundation that is part of the democratic socialist movement. True to the legacy of its namesake Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), it stands in solidarity with the workers' and women's rights movements. The organization serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as research centre for social development. The RLS has close ties to the German party DIE LINKE. RLS provides political education and a centre for advanced social research in both Germany and throughout the world. RLS is one of six party-affiliated political foundations in Germany; it supports partners in over 80 countries striving for social justice, strengthening public participation, and social ecological development.





How do you learn history while keeping your eyes and ears open? What does it mean to be conscious of history? The series 'First History Lessons' was born from the search for answers to these questions. Each of the books is on a unique subject. The text is accompanied by pictures drawn by patachitra artists. The objective of this book is to explain, simply, various periods and various complex ideas in history. After reading these books, children will learn to ask questions—that is our hope.

