



# Migration and Refugee Crisis in Poetry: Birth of Bangladesh

Arunav Das

Department of English & Humanities, University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh

Received: 12 Feb 2023; Received in revised form: 08 Mar 2023; Accepted: 15 Mar 2023; Available online: 24 Mar 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— *This study will focus on the refugee crisis and migration due to the idea of nationalism in the poetry of Jibanananda Das's "1946-47" and Allen Ginsberg's "September on Jessore Road."* There is an affinity between the experiences of the two poets. Das's "1946-47" theme focuses on the refugee crisis and communal violence during the subcontinent's partition in 1947. On the other hand, Ginsberg experienced the refugee crisis on his travels to India during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. His famous poem "September on Jessore Road" describes the suffering of the refugees due to the genocidal attack by the Pakistani Army. Both poems are instrumental in poetic form and content regarding the contemporary refugee crisis in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). Das and Ginsberg also witnessed and acknowledged the social and political turmoil on both sides of the Bengal delta due to the uprising of extreme nationalism and religious identity in the subcontinent. So, this study will follow Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" as the critical evidence. This paper will conceptualize and analyze how the paradoxes of nation and nationalism enable both poets to portray the complexities of migration, calamities of refugees, and humanitarian crises in these two historical poems.

**Keywords**— *Migration, refugee crisis, nationalism, imagined community, liberation war, and traveling.*

The terms 'migration' and 'refugee' are closely related to each other. Migration means to move from one place to another, and refugee stands for those who are forced to move to new places. Though being close to each other, the word 'forced' makes a huge distinction between them. Migration is a process of human mobility, a function of aspiration and capabilities within the sets of geographical opportunities. Migration defines the human capacity to choose where to live, where they get freedom and liberty to stay by their own will. In this modern time, most of the city dwellers are migrants in a sense, but it has a broader context based on global societal change and transformation. The etymology of the word 'migration' and 'migrant' comes from Latin, but it becomes popular in the English language due to the political upheavals during the twentieth century and onwards.

The twentieth century is the age of political upheavals across the world due to colonial rule by the European powers. Great Britain ruled India, some parts of

Africa, and Oceania. The Dutch, the French, the Spanish, and the Belgians do so in other parts of the world. They not only diminished the local cultures but also imposed anglicization and Christianity. In the name of modernization, the colonizers ruined the native societies and culture; they created political turmoil and religious and cultural divisions among the locals. In the case of India, it is truer than others. In 1947, during the collapse of the British regime, the subcontinent had been divided into two individual nations based on religion. Hindus and Muslims are the two dominant religious groups involved politically in demand for their separate lands. For this reason, before collapsing the British regime they created two distinct countries, India for the Hindus and Pakistan for the Muslims. This allocation of land, based on religion created the partition of Bengal again. The eastern side of the Bengal chose to remain with Pakistan and the west side remained with India. This created another problem, there was a 3200-kilometer distance from East to West Pakistan.

As a result, this partition of the subcontinent based on religious conflict created one of the biggest migrations in world history.

The Hindu community of East Bengal migrated to West Bengal in India, west Pakistani Hindus were transmitted to India in Gujarat, Punjab, and Delhi. On the other hand, the Muslim communities of India are also transmitted to both parts of Pakistan. Millions of people were forced to transform geographically due to riots, communal violence, and religious clash during the partition of India in 1947. As these consequences, after 1947, the Eastern part of Pakistan was repressed by the West Pakistani rulers. Theoretically, East Pakistan or east Bengal turned into the colony of West Pakistan. Jinnah and his government tried to impose Pakistani systems and laws; and repressed linguistically, culturally, politically, and economically. This is the reason the people of East Pakistan revolted against the repression. Later, the brutal Pakistani rulers started a genocide in 1971. This genocidal attack led to the biggest refugee crisis in the world and another communal migration from East Bengal to West Bengal.

These two remarkable migration and refugee crises of Bengal in 1947 and 1971 happened due to the rise of the ideas of nation and nationalism, which aroused extensively in the second half of the twentieth century. In the book *Imagined Communities*, the author Benedict Anderson proposed a definition of nation. Anderson defined the nation as “an imagined political community, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). He also argued that “communities are to be distinguished, not by the falsity or genuineness but by the style they are imagined” (Anderson 6). So, it is clear that India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh become individual nations based on the idea of nation and nationalism. The Pakistani national orientation comes from religious supremacy. Later on, while the religious orientation of nationalist loops became failed due to economic discrimination and repression then the idea of Bangladeshi national identity and consciousness started to grow. Sheikh Mujib, the East Pakistani leader, declared the independence of East Pakistan and ordered the mass people to achieve it. Later, the genocidal attack by the Pakistani army created one of the most fatal and notorious refugee crises in history.

These two events in 1947 and 1971 are evident in works of literature, poems, novels, essay, and short stories. But nothing comes closer to portraying the migration and refugee crisis than the poems “1946-47” by Jibanananda Das, and “September on Jessore Road” by American poet Allan Ginsberg. There is an affinity between the experiences of the two poets. Das’s “1946-47” theme focuses on the refugee crisis and communal violence

during the subcontinent's partition in 1947. On the other hand, Ginsberg experienced the refugee crisis on his travels to India during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Ginsberg describes the suffering of the refugees due to the genocidal attack by the Pakistani Army. Both poems are instrumental in poetic form and content regarding the contemporary refugee crisis in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). Das and Ginsberg also witnessed and acknowledged the social and political turmoil on both sides of the Bengal delta due to the uprising of extreme nationalism and religious identity in the subcontinent. So, this paper aims to conceptualize and analyze how Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities and the paradoxes of nation and nationalism enables both poets to portray the complexities of migration, calamities of refugees, and humanitarian crises in these two historical poems.

The Introduction of the poem “1946-47” by Jibanananda Das, establishes a promising tone for the rest of the book. Despite its distinctively melancholy tone, the poem, as the poet dissects it, is nevertheless filled with a particular type of tension. This conflict between the pulls of the past and the necessities of the present would enslave partition refugees for the rest of their lives. Das's agonizing depiction of partition's loss of innocence, with young men murdering fellow villagers on religious grounds. “1946-47” is the longest poem by Das, it is one of his most impressive meditations on contemporary history. As Alam comments on this poem while he translates it,

“Das broods on the communal strife, chaos, and diasporas that accompanied the partition of India in general and Bengal in particular. Das himself has been uprooted by the historical events and had moved from the Muslim majority district of Barishal to Calcutta, where Hindus were in majority. But Calcutta too was in tumult and riven by religious riots; the names and places mentioned in the poem represent Hindus and Muslims and localities associated with these communities” (Alam 115).

Jibanananda Das grew up in Bengal during a period characterized by excessive political upheaval, massive unemployment, financial troubles, and rising communal strife. In his poem “1946-47”, Jibanananda Das expresses a strong love for Bengal, and his strong feelings for the country. The depiction of Bengal's nature is possibly the most appealing to him. Despite getting comprehensive criticism upon many dimensions of admiration for natural beauty, Das's poetry only receives inadequate criticism of nature and nationalism. As a result, the question arises as to whether Das' poetry demonstrates any relationship between Bengali nature and nationalism.

Bengali nationalism is represented by his strong feelings for Bengal's natural environment. So, surely this poem is not indifferent to his other poetry. Nature and nationalism are profound in Das's poetry. For this reason, he could not stop worshipping nature while writing poetry on partition and refugee crisis, but negatively. He sought the darkness of nature to portray the uncertainties of the refugees and his dream of a unified Bengal territory. As he writes,

“The rest of mankind, like profuse leaves of late autumn in darkness,

Wish to fly off toward a river somewhere” (Alam 115).

This kind of metaphor and allegory is evident in Das's poetry. He personifies mankind with the leaves of trees, which wish to fly toward a river. Here, the river is a symbol of time. The word 'profuse leaves' is a metaphor for the millions of people who are on the way to migrate.

In Bengal, the population exchange took place over a longer period. In reality, following the partition in 1947, the Bengal migratory movement lasted for another 30 years. One of the main causes for the migration was concerns about Hindus' safety in Pakistan and Muslims' safety in India. As a result, East Bengal's upper-caste Hindus opted to go first. Traders, artisans, and businessmen, as well as the educated and those from affluent and middle-class families, went to India without much difficulty. Poorer families and those from lower Hindu castes, on the other hand, found it nearly impossible to leave. As Das writes in “1946-47”

“A lot of people move about breathlessly, yet

Only one or two can buy houses and furniture actioned off-

Or even stuff which haven't been put up for sale-” (Alam 115)

Again, when Das writes, “Thousands of Bengali villages, drowned in disillusionment and benighted, have become silenced” (Alam 116). The reason for this silence is that people already left their homeland for another country, and gotten refugee status. Das, himself was a refugee in Calcutta. His family had migrated from Barishal, and he had observed and suffered the complexities of migration, and calamities of the refugee crisis. He witnessed the humanitarian crises while his frequent journey from Calcutta to Barishal to Calcutta during the partition period. “1946-47” states the ultimate suffering of people, their grief, and hunger as Das writes, “they allocate those damn bones to the dogs, budgeting their wagons of meat” (Seely 197). Das also writes,

“high reaching factory after factory—

anxious progress, along with the bank,

remains wide awake. Do you feel sleepy?” (Seely 197).

Das not only captures the human crisis and nature, but he also criticizes the rapid industrialization and colonial culture, human values, and ideas, which causes the partition and migration from both sides of the Radcliff line.

Personally, Das was in opposition to the partition of Bengal. He wants a unified Bengal. Not only “1946-47”, but also his poetry volume *Beautiful Bengal* has acclaimed the reputation for his ideas of nationalism by worshipping nature in poetry. This is the reason; he earns the reputation as a “poet of beautiful Bengal”. However, the poem “1946-47” is a documentation of the colonial division of the subcontinent by the British. In this poem, he portrays the refuge life of millions of people who are going to be migrated and their life at that time with his poetic brilliance, metaphor, and allegory.

After the independence of the two communal states India and Pakistan, the communal complexities remain on both sides of the Radcliffe line. The next 24 years from 1947 was the period of Pakistani colonialism in East Pakistan. Linguistic, cultural, social, economic, and political repression by West Pakistan pushed the people of East Bengal to fight for their rights and independence. On 7 March 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in Dhaka declared the independence of Bangladesh. Then, on 25 March 1971, the Pakistani military started a genocidal attack “operation searchlight” on the civilians and natives. So, after that millions of people from all parts of Bangladesh started to move to India to save their life. In 1971, more than ten million people took shelter in India as refugees and many of them migrated to India as they never come back again after the independence. It created the biggest refugee crisis in world history. “September on Jessore Road” is kind of a poem by Allen Ginsberg, which portrays the refugee crisis at that time.

Jessore, a city in Bangladesh, has shared a border with India's West Bengal. The refugees in 1971 used the Jessore road highway for moving into India, especially people from southern and western parts of Bangladesh. This is the reason the Jessore road got significance in the Liberation war history. This significance has been spread to all by the poem of Allen Ginsberg, an American poet, and founder of the Beat literary movement, who had come to visit India at that time and observed the refugee crisis in Jessore and Calcutta with fellow Indian poet Sunil Ganguly. The month name in the poem's title is significant, because September was an extremely difficult month, with the region facing both a late monsoon rainfall

and a wave of atrocities and misfortunes perpetrated by Pakistani occupying troops. As a result, Jessore Road became the site of many untold stories of millions of migrating refugees and is considered to be a wartime and refugee transit hub. "September on Jessore Road" is an illustration of the calamities of the refugees and their humanitarian crises, and unlimited sufferings. Ginsberg's observation, realization, and poetic diction also criticized the role of the United Nations, the US government, and people from all over the world. Ginsberg, as a foreign traveler realizes the sufferings of millions of people, he also criticized extreme nationalism, fundamentalism, and racism and sings a similar song to his friend Jhon Lenon, "Imagine there is no country..., and no religion too."

In "September on Jessore Road", from the very first line, Ginsberg is more interested in portraying the refugee crisis than talking about the political issues. He vividly shows the sufferings and calamities of the Bangladeshi people, who do not know their destiny and carry their fates of uncertainties. There was a lack of food, medication, and shelter. As Ginsberg writes,

"Millions of babies watching the skies  
Bellies swollen, with big round eyes  
On Jessore Road--long bamboo huts  
Noplace to shit but sand channel ruts" (Ginsberg,  
PoemHunter).

In the next few stanzas, he puts a vivid description of the sufferings of the Bangladeshi people. Millions of fathers, mothers, daughters, and sisters were walking in the mud, they commit vomited and groan. They did not have food, or water to drink, as they were homeless and mad, they had nowhere to go. At that time every day, millions of people come from East Pakistan to the refugee camps. This is a total disaster for humanity, a man-made crisis, a genocidal attack for Pakistani political interest, and a time of mass and ethnic cleansing for invading. So, Ginsberg writes,

"Millions of souls nineteen seventy-one  
homeless on Jessore road under the grey sun  
A million are dead, the million who can  
Walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan"  
(Ginsberg, PoemHunter).

Ginsberg visited those camps and excruciated his experiences in words such as "September on Jessore Road". He briefly portrays his traumatic and horrifying experiences. Furthermore, the unclean circumstances in the refugee camps, and even a lack of basic facilities, merely added to this misery. The tents were packed and lacked basic medical amenities. As a result, individuals became more sensitive to ailments like diarrhea, rheumatism,

gastritis, septicemia, and so on, and cholera outbreaks constantly boosted the percentages. Newborn children were the most vulnerable to the disorder. The newborns became sick because they were so weak. The rate of child mortality increased dramatically within months of the refugee camps' establishment. It was as if the angel of death had visited the area, taking the lives of children, teenagers, and the old. Ginsberg portrays this situation as

"Refugee camps in hospital shacks  
Newborn lay naked on mother's thin laps  
Monkey sized week old Rheumatic babe eye  
Gastroenteritis Blood Poison thousands must die"  
(Ginsberg, PoemHunter).

In "September on Jessore Road" Ginsberg portrays the ultimate sufferings of refugees for an independent and sovereign nation.

The two poems by Das and Ginsberg are the best portrayals of the birth of a nation, more specifically Bangladesh. In "1946-47", Das portrays his traumatic experiences of the partition of the subcontinent. Das's idea of nationalism is evident here because he always wants a unified Bengal as an independent and sovereign nation. But the reality is that the idea of making an individual nation was worked differently in the subcontinent. Religion is the main component of nationalism. That is the reason, the subcontinent was partitioned based on religious orientation. The origin of national consciousness had grown up in the subcontinent during colonial rule. The British regime used the religious division and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims as tools for their political and colonial interests. This is how two dominant religious traditions become the superstructure of the national consciousness. As Benedict Anderson states,

"Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (Anderson 6).

According to Anderson, "nations are emotional and cultural phenomena," (Anderson 6), not concrete ones. Anderson defines a nation as:

"an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Like any group larger than a small village, a nation is "imagined" because most citizens will never meet one another face-to-face, and yet see themselves as being part of a "political community" that is like a family, with shared origins, mutual interests, and "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 6).

Similar to Anderson's definition of national identity, the national consciousness had become evident through religion. This is the reason millions of people both in 1947 and 1971 got refugee status in East and West Bengal. So, they faced indescribable suffering on their way to migration from one to another.

Finally, "1946-47" by Jibanananda Das and "September on Jessore Road" by Allen Ginsberg are the two most reliable poetic documents on the migration and refugee crisis in Bengal. The refugee crisis is the most common inhuman phenomenon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bangladesh also sheltered the Rohingya refugees; Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and African migrants, and refugees are also sheltered by Europeans and Americans. But any refugee crisis and mass migration could not come closer to the situation in Bengal. Such brutalities, religious riots, communal attacks, mass killings, ethnic cleansing, and genocide took place in Bengal. In this way, the Indian subcontinent has been divided into two nations state India and Pakistan based on religious identity in 1947. Later in 1971, the eastern part of Pakistan became independent, and the Bangladeshi nation-state and national consciousness were established.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Shohana Manzoor, who inspired and supervised me for writing this paper.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Afroz, Nahid. "The Inescapable Association between Nature and Bengali Nationalism in Jibanananda Das' Ruposhi Bangla." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, Sheikh Shareeful Islam, vol 7, no. 2. 2019, pp. 10-14. *Research Gate*, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0702002>
- [2] Alam, Fakrul, translator. *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems*. By Jibanananda Das. The University Press Ltd., 2010.
- [3] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 2006.
- [4] Ginsberg, Allen. "September on Jessore Road," *All Poetry*, 3 Mar. 2003, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/september-on-jessore-road/>
- [5] Islam, Md. Mohiul. "September on Jessore Road: A Museum of Sufferings." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, vol 21, no. 4. 2016, pp. 28-32. *Google*, <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%2021%20Issue4/Version-2/E2104022832.pdf>
- [6] Seely, Clinton B. *A Poet Apart*. Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1990.
- [7] Suchi, Israt Jahan. "Reading Allen Ginsberg's September on Jessore Road: An Attempt to Ruminant over the Horrific Reminiscences of the Liberation War of Bangladesh."