JHSR Journal of Historical Studies and ResearchISSN:2583-0198
Volume 6, Number 1 (January - April,2026),PP.240-249.
Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal
Website:www.jhsr.in
Email:jhsr.editor@gmail.com

The 'Yehudi' Metaphor in the context of Post-Partition Influx of Refugees in West Bengal

Dr. Pallavi Chakravarty[1]

[1]Assistant Professor
School of Liberal Studies
Dr B R Ambedkar University
Delhi,India
Email:pallavi@aud.ac.in

Abstract:*This article discusses two popular texts, Notun Yehudi and Anya Yehudi, which have used the metaphor Yehudi to explain the plight of the refugees coming from East Pakistan into India. The applicability of this metaphor as well as other Jewish metaphors (Jews-in-exile, holocaust, exile) used in the context of the Bengali partition-refugee are also discussed in this article. And it is observed that while there are qualifications to be applied in their use, yet their common use in the Bengali refugee context perhaps solved the purpose in bringing to light the immense suffering and ignorance of the State and host society towards these refugees.*
Keywords:*Bengal,Holocaust,Hindu,Partition,Refujees, Yehudi etc.*

Date of Submission:28.02.2026 Date of Acceptance: 08.03.2026

Introduction

The Jewish Holocaust refers to one of the most horrific examples of mass atrocities against a subject population. At the same time this dreadful experience of the Jews (also referred to as Yehudi in Hindi and Bangla) has become a dominant metaphor used often in the context of describing experiences of exile, forced displacement and longing for the lost home. Hence, when almost coterminous to the holocaust the independence and partition of India took place, this metaphor proved to be handy for the displaced Bengali Hindu refugees to best describe their plight.

In academia too, scholars working on the partition of the Indian subcontinent have sometimes borrowed the term 'holocaust' to describe partition violence in India. And while

this can be questioned, yet with some qualifications the use of the term remains quite popular hereto.

However, this paper looks at the use of the metaphor 'Yehudi' in the narratives of the refugees themselves. This is noted specifically in the narratives of the Bengali Hindu refugees coming from East Pakistan into West Bengal post partition. Two works especially stand out and are in fact in a stark contrast to each other when placed together: a play written by Salil Sen *Notun Yehudi (The New Jews)*[1] and the other a short story by Kapil Krishna Thakur *Anya Yehudi* (*The Other Jew*).[2] Both are refugee-authors but from different castes. Consequently, their works represent a different treatment of the metaphor.

Two factors perhaps explain why we see the use of this metaphor more in the Bengali Hindu refugee context only: Bengali Hindus identified themselves akin to the highly successful and elite European Jewish community, see for example Partha Chatterjee's observations on this line of thought:

> Sometime in my childhood, I came to hear the phrase *notun ihudi* – the new Jews. It was probably the title of a movie. It referred, I was told, to people like us, thrown out of our homes in the eastern half of Bengal which had now become part of another country called Pakistan…
> I also discovered why our elders among the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan so loved the analogy with European Jews. The latter represented, they pointed out endlessly, the cream of European intellectual and cultural life. Some of the greatest scientists, writers, musicians and artists of our time had been driven into exile by European racists who hated Jews. They were, of course, quick to add that the same thing had happened to the Hindus who were the intellectual elite of East Bengal: they had been expropriated and expelled by an ignorant Muslim peasantry and its bigoted leaders. It didn't take me long to recognize in this comparison the signs of class prejudice tinged with religious animosity.[3]

The second reason could be that these refugees apart from having a strong sense of longing for the lost home also nursed a feeling of being marginalized/unaccepted in the adopted home.[4]

The next section gives a brief introduction of the refugee-making process in post-partition India alongwith a description of the Jewish notions of exile and longing/belonging. Thereafter the paper critically analyses the use of the metaphors 'Yehudi' and 'exile' by the Bengali Hindu refugees in describing their plight before ending with some concluding observations.

The Making of the 'partition-refugee'

As is known, independence in the Indian subcontinent was accompanied by its partition on its western and eastern borders to create the two states of India and (West and East) Pakistan on

15th August 1947. This was marked by unprecedented violence and forced migration across the two borders. While the presence of Mahatma Gandhi in Bengal on the eve of independence had prevented the mass violence in the east, yet this had a very direct impact on the pattern of migration across the two sides. Migration across the western borders (Punjab and later whole of West Pakistan) was very violent and also a one-time affair therefore forcing a State sponsored evacuation programme. While migration across the eastern border (East Pakistan, present day Bangladesh) was piecemeal and hence often discouraged by the State. This varied migration pattern in turn decided the varied attitude of the Indian state towards the two groups of refugees—while the cause of Hindu and Sikh refugees coming from West Pakistan was treated as urgent and immediate, that of Hindu refugees coming from East Pakistan was kept more adhoc, additionally, the last to cross over from here were the so-called lower caste refugees and consequently their rehabilitation was even more delayed and problematic.

This explains perhaps how those coming from East Pakistan became the 'lesser' refugees. Be it concerns arising out of the economics of rehabilitation or the strategic and political concerns around allowing continuous inflow of refugees from the neighbouring state, the refugees from East Pakistan were constantly discouraged from migrating to the Indian side. This made the struggle of these refugees even more difficult for their problems did not end with the difficult journey from their erstwhile homes to a new land. They were to encounter a reluctant host State and host people in the new land. It is in this context that Jewish metaphors of exile gained ground exclusively in Bengal apart from the more familiar tropes of 'supreme sacrifice' and 'sense of betrayal'.[5]

Exile and Abandonment in the Jewish Context

The Jewish holocaust saw an almost complete annihilation of the Jews in Europe under Nazi Germany forcing many Jews to move out of their homes and homeland in search of safety in near and distant areas in Asia and Americas. What remains, however, is a perennial desire among most of these émigrés to come back to that promised homeland of the Jews, today represented in the State of Israel. This sentiment represents among the diaspora Jews the concept of 'Jews-in-exile'.

The Hebrew term, *Galut,* implies exile and it is this concept of exile which is commonly borrowed in Bengali refugee narratives. The definition as understood by the Jews is given below:

> The Hebrew term galut expresses the Jewish conception of the condition and feelings of a nation uprooted from its homeland and subject to alien rule… The sense of exile was expressed by the feeling of alienation in the countries of Diaspora, the yearning for the national and political past, and persistent questioning of the causes, meaning, and purpose of the exile.[6]

This sense of being forcibly uprooted from the homeland and at the same time not really being accepted in the adopted land is a dominant theme in the literary imaginations of the Bengali refugees. The Bengali refugees believed that they shared with their Jewish counterparts similar notion of exile, experience of violent persecution and uprooting from their homeland, and a sense of longing for that lost homeland alongwith a sense of not having been totally assimilated in the adopted land. They felt that in the new adopted land they were being seen with either ignorance, suspicion or were in general unwelcome by the State and its people. The next part of the article draws evidences from refugee narratives to show how these metaphors were used by them to explain their plight in a new land, away from home.

The Metaphor of 'Exile' in the Bengali Refugee Context

In Salil Sen's famous play *Notun Yehudi* (1951/53) the protagonist is a *bhadralok* (upper caste) refugee and it is his narrative of forced migration and violent persecution at the hands of the 'other' alongwith a constant wish and hope of returning back someday to the original homeland. Many decades later (2000?), prominent Dalit leader and author Kapil Krishna Thakur wrote a short story, again invoking the metaphor of the Jew in his *Anya Yehudi* (The Other Jew), this time the protagonist was a lower caste refugee from East Pakistan and it is his perspective of violence and uprootedness from East Pakistan which is described.

Notun Yehudi was first staged in 1951 at the Kalika theatre in Kolkata and performed primarily by refugee actors themselves (Sabitri Chatterjee and Bhanu Bandyopadhyay). The story is about a Bengali Brahmin family headed by a schoolmaster father (Manmohan Bhattacharya); his wife (Annapurna); their two sons (Dukhyo and Mohan) and daughter (Pari). They were a fairly well settled family in a village in East Bengal. However, the reality of partition strikes and Bhattacharya realizes that for the safety of his family and self he must leave his home and homeland for an uncertain future in an alien land among aliens:

> 'ekta pagol, ekta polapon, boyoshthe mein—eii shob niye amra boodo-boodi ki je korum kichu-I bujhina. Matron dui mash-er mayne niye ekta bideshe achena jayega jayite pari?'
>
> [is it possible for us old husband and wife to go to a foreign and unknown land with a mad son, a young boy, a young daughter and just two months salary?][7]

The cause for leaving is not clearly mentioned but it can be assumed that a decisive reason was that their Muslim friends were no longer able to defend them and hence they would now have to leave. There is also a mention in these opening scenes that several other Hindu families had sold off their belongings at dirt-cheap rates to the Muslims and left the village and gone to Kolkata (West Bengal, India). Visuals of homes with the customary Tulsi plants not being tendered to any longer (it was a plant pious for the Hindus) are also hinted at. All this was with the effect to show that Hindus were being pushed or nudged out of their homes in East Bengal into West Bengal.

This set in their mind the notion of exile, of banishment, of similarities with the Jews who too had been similarly exiled from their homelands and forced to take shelter in unknown and foreign lands.

Quite a few short stories and novels have dwelled in this theme of exile—of longing for the lost homeland and of a feeling of not being accepted in the adopted land.[8] In all of these works of fiction at some point one comes across questions asked by the protagonist—Where am I? Is this not my home? Where is my home? And it is in this context that the Jews-in-exile metaphor is employed so often in the context of the Bengali refugees (Hindu or Muslim).

Anasua Basu Ray Chowdhury's conversation with an old refugee-woman in Kolkata, shows this sense of alienation vis-à-vis the host state (West Bengal, India) where the lady has been staying for now 51 years and also been voting in the general and state elections. Yet it is the memories of her original homeland (Barishal in present day Bangladesh) which she cherishes the most and identifies as 'home':

> "Tumi etodin dhore ekhane achho, vote dao, tahole tomar ki ekhon etai desh hoe gyache?"
> (You are here for so many years; you have a voting right here; is it your desh now?)
> She retorted:
> "Na na, eta ki koira desh hoibo? Ekhane thaki, sharanarthee ami, amar desh to Barishale tomare koilamna gramer nam. Koto kishu chhilo amago oikhane. Jakhan desh barir katha, jomijomar kotha mone pore, tokhon mone hoina je ar baicha thaki."
> (No, no, how can it be my desh? I live here; I am a refugee; my desh is in Barishal; didn't I tell you the name of my village? We had so many things there. When I remember my desh, our house, our landed property, I don't feel like living any more.)[9]

In his memoir, very aptly titled *Udvastu (The Uprooted),* Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, Rehabilitation Commissioner in West Bengal, too woefully remembers his last journey from Dhaka to Kolkata as a painful experience realizing that he may never be coming back.[10]

It is noteworthy that the two great and most venerated epics in India, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*, too have the concept of exile as a major premise in their narrative. Yet strangely, the refugees did not borrow the notion of exile from here. It may be because unlike the Jewish metaphor, the notion of exile in both these epics do not entail violent persecution as a cause of the exile. Here the exile was more of a punishment being meted out to the most righteous characters in the epics, and taken all so willingly. Additionally those exiles came to an end eventually. Thus perhaps there was a sense of closure there which is missing in the Jewish and the refugee case where the return back home remains an unfulfilled dream.

The Metaphor of Violent Persecution

In state records, the partition violence has been mentioned as 'communal riots', 'ethnic cleansing', 'ethnic clashes' et al. A rare term used is 'genocidal violence', again borrowing from the Jewish experience. It is reflective of a systematic and clinical persecution of a community simply based on ethnic differences. This analogy has thereafter been used to describe all such contemporary genocidal forms of violence. The persecution of the Hindus in East Pakistan has now overwhelmingly been likened to this genocide, especially the war-time mass killings during the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971).

While Punjab saw unprecedented scenes of mass violence, Bengal saw what Veena Das refers to as 'routine violence', a violence in the everyday, a violence which need not be direct yet violence nonetheless.[11] However, there were atleast two episodes of direct violence (1950 and 1964) and then reaching its apogee in 1971 (Bangladesh Liberation War) here too. In the last case, almost every newspaper, and later on official publications and private memoirs, spelt out loud and clear: 'Genocide of Hindus in East Pakistan!' In fact, a very contemporary web archive curating documents related to the violence in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) preceding and during 1971 has titled itself as *Bangladesh Genocide Archive.*[12]

Propoganda literature issued by political parties and various self-help groups before 1971 also publicized the idea of Hindus facing 'genocidal violence' in East Pakistan and thus constantly demanded the Union Government to aid in the process of bringing them over to India.[13]

In hindsight, however, it needs to be noted that while the scale of violence can be compared to the idea of genocidal violence as in the Jewish Holocaust, yet, there are certainly glaring differences as well. Perhaps 'popular genocide', the term used by Mahmood Mamdani while arguing against the use of genocide to explain the Rwandan ethnic violence, is better suited in the case of partition violence too.[14]

In the play *Notun Yehudi,* as mentioned before, real violence may not have been described, however, hints towards a subtle nudge/push can be observed in some of the scenes for eg: the scenes in which both the women of the house, Annapurna (wife of Manmohan) and Ashalata (wife of Keshto, the househelp of Manmohan), are ruing even the idea of selling off their home and land respectively because for them it represented *Lokhi* (Goddess Lakshmi) and it was a customary belief that Goddess Lakshmi should not be sold, it brings a bad omen to the family. Then there is another scene which depicts the humiliation of the schoolmaster Manmohan by the Muslim school-principal; and another where Dukhya, his son, is being threatened by the Muslim boys of the village; and finally one where a Hindu family is seen to be selling-off their home at dirt-cheap rate to the Muslims as the last option. Thus both indirect and direct forms of violent persecution have been hinted at in this play.

Anya Yehudi, by contrast, describes such persecution vividly. In fact, here it is shown that this persecution occurs in the homeland and in the adopted land pointing to the fact that the lower caste refugee never really got assimilated unlike his Bhadralok counterpart, hence the title *Anya Yehudi (The Other Jew)*. Thus, this story is representative of persecution on two ends: one based on religion and the other on caste. Bishtucharan (also a school teacher and the protagonist) flees East Pakistan when his daughter (Jhunnu) is gang-raped by the local Muslims of the village. He realizes that while he has no one to seek help from across the border and also nowhere to go on that side[15], yet he decides to cross the border to save his younger daughter (Runnu) as now she is all he has. Once on this side of the border he is compelled to take up a lowly street vending job and live a deprived life on the outskirts of the Sealdah railway station thinking atleast his daughter is safe on this side of the border and among other fellow refugees. But he is proved wrong and Runnu is gangraped, this time by the upper caste men in their refugee colony. Out of a grave sense of disillusionment, he shouts out aloud towards the end of the story, 'Where do we belong?' 'Where is my home?'

Just like in these two stories, violent persecution at the hands of the other is depicted in many such short and long narratives, oral testimonies. Caste violence is off-late being

discussed in similar terms. Ultimately leading to the common sentiment of not having been accepted in the new land.

This brings us to the third metaphor borrowed from the Jewish experience: the strong sense of longing and belonging for the home left behind.

Longing and Belonging: Yearning for one's *Bhite Mati* (Ancestral Home)

Atleast thrice in the play, *Notun Yehudi,* the desire to go back 'home' is expressed by the characters. So whether it is Pari who in a utter state of helplessness asks Mohan is it not possible to go back 'home' or Ashalata and Annapruna who too ask the same question to their respective husbands, the desire to go back is expressed either in clear terms or as subtly in the thoughts of the male characters—Mohan, Keshto and Manmohan himself. The idea of the 'home' is recounted in pleasant memories as well: of the rivers, the fields, the school, the village et al. Thus one sees a strong sense of longing for and belonging to the 'home' which is now a distant land. As Manmohan tells his wife, 'It is Pakistan, we cannot go there.'

Even in *Anya Yehudi,* we find Bishtu also thinking of going back to his home upon hearing the murder of Feru (the Muslim boy who had raped and murdered his elder daughter Jhunu).

When refugees from East Pakistan crossed over to the Indian side, many of them voiced this sense of longing for the lost homeland through articles published in newspapers. Dakshinaranjan Basu, an editor of one such newspaper, collected and categorized these nearly 67 articles district-wise and published it as a book, *Chede Asha Gram (The Village Left Behind)*. A common thread in all these articles is the description of the beautiful village left behind and often in a subtle or direct manner a desire to go back is also underlined. A few examples from these memoirs would be self-explanatory in this direction:

> I wonder, will it not ever be possible to go back to the lap of the mother we have left behind? Mother—my motherland—is she truly of somebody else's now? The mind does not want to understand.
>
> For seven generations we have been reared on the affection and grace of this land, perhaps our yet-to-arrive progenies would have one day made this land their own. But that hope can only feel like a dream today. [16]

In his critical analysis of these memoirs, Dipesh Chakrabarty noted that memories have a life and purpose of their own. He noted that all these memories were positive and cleansed of conflict or even mention of the 'other'. This, according to Chakrabarty, was not without a purpose which could be to garner public sympathy in the course of demanding rehabilitation aid from the State as part of the refugee movement in Bengal.

For our purpose here, this is yet another example of borrowing a metaphor commonly ascribed to the Jews. At the same time, in the Bengali refugee context it is even more widely used, perhaps to also show that they were never fully assimilated by the State in its rehabilitation programme or by the host people who too looked down upon these refugees.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the metaphors common to Jewish and Bengali refugee experience in the hope to understand why there may have been such borrowings. The experience of the Jews captured all imagination in the context of forced migration and displacement. Consequently, this group of refugees was able to garner international support of an unprecedented nature and several international organizations on refugee care came up: the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) 1943; the United Nations Relief Work Agency (UNRWA), 1949; and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) 1950, apart from the UN Refugee Convention (1951) and Protocol (1967). Thus, it can be said that the Jewish refugees' lived experience played a major role in bringing up the refugee cause at the international level.

The borrowing of Jewish metaphors by the Bengali refugees then to explain partition related violence or forced displacement in terms of 'holocaust'; 'genocide'; '*Notun Yehudi', 'Anya Yehudi'*; 'Jews-in-exile' too may be seen in a similar vein. It helped them to highlight their deplorable plight in the eyes of the host State and its people, and perhaps an international audience as well. Alternatively, it can also be seen as empathizing with a similar but distant case which they could now understand better. Thus, the figure of the *Notun Yehudi* or *Anya Yehudi* became an iconic form of representation of the pathetic condition for the Bengali refugees from East Pakistan.

Notes and References

1 Sen, Salil. Notun Yehudi (The New Jews), a play published by Kolkata: Indiana (1953).
2 "The Other Jew" (translation of a Bengali story of Kapilkrishna Thakur) Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation ed. Singha. S.P. and Indranil Acharya. Delhi: Orient Blackswan (2012)
3Chatterjee, Partha. 'Why I Support the Boycott of Israeli Institutions', https://savageminds.org/2015/09/09/partha-chatterjee-why-i-support-the-boycott-of-israeli-institutions/ (last accessed 8th February 2026).
4 Chakrabarti, Prafulla. Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal Kalyani: Lumeire Books (1990); see also, Chatterji, Joya. 'Rights or charity? Government and refugees: the debate over relief and rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-1950', in Suvir Kaul (ed.), Partition of memory, (Delhi: Permanent Black Press, 2001), Chakravarty, Pallavi. Boundaries and Belonging: Rehabilitating Refugees in India, 1947–71 (Delhi: Primus Books, 2022).
5 'Refugee' was seen as a humiliating term by migrants from both West and East Pakistan. They believed they had not come to seek refuge, rather the country had been divided with their homes falling on the wrong side of the border. They believed that it was their sacrifice of their homes and homeland which enabled the independence of the country. The metaphors of 'sacrifice' and 'betrayal' (by the State in going back on their words) was used alongside 'Jews in Exile' metaphor. See Ghosal Chakravarty, Pallavi. 'Redefining the Refugee' in Indian History Congress Proceedings, Vol 75, pp. 546-558, 2014.
6 https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/galut last accessed 2nd February 2026.
7 Sen, Salil. Notun Yehudi, p.22.
8 Hasan Azizul Haque, Nirbashito (The Exiled), Amiya Bhushan Majumdar, Nirbash (1959) among others
9 Basu Roy Chaudhary, Anasua. Nostalgia of 'Desh', Memories of Partition. Economic and Political Weekly, 5653-5660, 2004. 47, 2004.
10 Bandyopadhyay, Hiranmoy. Udvastu. Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad (1970)
11 Das, Veena. Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary. Univ of California Press (2006)
12 http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/ (last accessed 8th February 2026).
13 Here I am referring to reports and pamphlets published under the aegis of the Hindu Mahasabha, Hindu Mahasabha Papers, New Delhi: PMML.
14 Mamdani, Mahmood. When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda, Princeton: Princeton University Press (2001).
15 What has been observed is that while the upper caste (Bhadralok) refugees had the required 'social capital' to put them upon their feet again when they migrated out of East Pakistan; the lower caste (nimnobarga) refugees neither had connections nor money to start their lives again. They were completely dependent upon the State aid. Hence this category of the refugees had a dual suffering: based on religion and on caste. Chatterji, Joya Dispositions and Destinations: Refugee Agency and "Mobility Capital" in the Bengal Diaspora, 1947–2007. Comparative Studies in Society and History. 2013;55(2):273-304.
16 Cited in Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 'Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition' p.324-25 https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/sj6/chakrabartyrememberedvillage.pdf. [last accessed on 8th February 2026]