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Udbastu Bangalir Sangram written by Santanu Thakur: Negotiating Displacement and Belonging Memory, Matua Identity, and Refugee Struggle

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Abstract

Shantanu Thakur's *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram*, Boibondhu Publication Private Limited, Kolkata(2025), ISBN-9788199141001,Page-303, Hardcover, Rs-600₹ is an ambitious contribution to the study of Partition, displacement, Matua identity, and the politics of citizenship in postcolonial Bengal. The book traces a longue durée historical trajectory from the socio-political context of pre-Partition Bengal and the emergence of the Matua movement to the experiences of refugeehood, rehabilitation, political mobilization, cultural memory, and contemporary citizenship debates. Its central strength lies in humanising the history of Partition by foregrounding the experiences of those who lived through displacement and subsequently reconstructed their homes, communities, institutions, and identities. The book is particularly significant for its engagement with the historical legacy of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, and Binapani Devi, while extending the intergenerational memory preserved in Atmacharita ba Purba Smriti into a broader social and political narrative. At the same time, the work has methodological limitations, especially the inadequate citation of several historical and political assertions, which makes evidentiary verification difficult. Linguistic and editorial imperfections also affect its accessibility to international scholarship. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish its archival and intellectual value. Rather, the book should be read as a significant document of historical memory in the making, illuminating how displacement continues to shape identity, belonging, community consciousness, and citizenship in contemporary Bengal.

Keywords: Partition, Refugees, Matua Movement, Namasudra, Displacement, Citizenship, Citizenship Amendment Act, Social Memory, Caste, Postcolonial Bengal, Refugee Politics

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Introduction

Partition is often remembered as an event: a date, a boundary, a transfer of territory, and a movement of populations across a newly created international border. For the people who experienced it, however, Partition was rarely a single event. It was a prolonged historical condition. The journey did not end when a refugee crossed the border. It continued through camps and colonies, searches for employment, struggles over land, questions of citizenship, the rebuilding of religious and cultural institutions, political mobilization, and the difficult process of making a new home while remembering an old one. It is within this larger history of displacement and reconstruction that Shantanu Thakur's *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* (*The Struggle of Displaced Bengalis*) deserves to be read. The book is an unusual contribution to the literature of Partition because its author is simultaneously a political actor, a member of the Thakur family, a descendant of Harichand Thakur, and a participant in a contemporary political discourse in which refugee identity and citizenship remain important subjects. The book consequently stands at the intersection of history, sociology, political memory, community history and contemporary citizenship discourse.

The structure of the book, as revealed by its table of contents, is itself revealing. It begins not with Partition but with the social and political context of pre-Partition Bengal and the emergence of the Matua movement. It then moves through Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, the historical background of Partition, the Mountbatten Plan and Radcliffe Line, the role attributed to Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the refugee crisis, camps and colonies, rehabilitation policies, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and refugee politics, the Marichjhapi episode, Binapani Devi and the citizenship question, cultural memory, and finally the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 and the Citizenship Amendment Rules of 2024. The volume concludes with detailed citizenship-application guidance and a bibliography. That chronological and thematic movement from Matua social history to Partition, from Partition to displacement, from displacement to political mobilization, and from political mobilization to contemporary citizenship is arguably the book's central intellectual architecture. It is also what makes *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* important for social history.

The book is not simply asking what happened to refugees. It is asking how a displaced population became a social and political community. At the same time, the book has important limitations. The most significant is its inadequate citation of the sources behind many of the historical and research-based claims. The book contains considerable information, but the reader is not always given sufficient documentary guidance to determine where particular figures, assertions and historical details originate. There are also linguistic and editorial imperfections. These shortcomings matter, especially if the book is to be used by researchers outside the immediate community. Yet they do not erase the book's value. Rather, they point towards the need for a more critically edited and fully documented edition.

A book situated between family memory and public history

The significance of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* becomes clearer when it is placed within the intellectual history of the Thakur family.[1] Shantanu Thakur is a descendant of Harichand Thakur, the nineteenth-century religious and social reformer around whom the Matua movement developed. He is also the son of Manjul Krishna Thakur and the grandson of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. His family history is therefore inseparable from the development of Matua institutions and from the post-Partition history of displaced Namasudra and Matua communities in West Bengal. The publication of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* is particularly notable because it extends a tradition of family-based historical writing. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, Shantanu Thakur's grandfather, wrote *Atmacharita ba Purba Smriti*, an autobiographical work that has subsequently acquired importance as a source for understanding the history and

[1]Thakur, Ranjan Pramatha, Attma Charit ba Purbosmriti, Binapani Press,Thakurnagar, 1995

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self-representation of the Matua community. Scholarly work on Matua identity has used *Purba Smriti* as one of the sources through which the community's historical memory and hagiographical traditions can be examined.

Pramatha Ranjan Thakur's *Atmacharit ba Purba Smriti* (*Autobiography or Memories of the Past*) appeared in the 1990s and has subsequently been used by scholars studying Matua history and identity.[2] Sipra Mukherjee, for example, cites the work as an important source in her study of Matua hagiography and collective identity.[3] A recent scholarly discussion likewise treats *Purba Smriti* as a significant source for understanding the social and political dimensions of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur's life. The two works, however, belong to different genres. *Purba Smriti* is fundamentally autobiographical and memorial. Its historical importance emerges from the fact that the author's life intersected with larger developments in Matua society and postcolonial Bengal. *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* is much more explicitly historical and sociological in ambition. It seeks to tell the story not simply of a family or an individual but of displaced Bengalis as a social formation.

A family autobiography says, in effect, this is what I remember and experienced. A social history asks, what happened to a larger community, and how did that community respond? Shantanu Thakur's book attempts to move from the first category towards the second. The transition is intellectually significant because it demonstrates how private memory can become public history.

The table of contents as an intellectual map

The table of contents provides perhaps the clearest indication of the book's ambitions.

The opening chapter, *"Pre-Partition Bengal: Socio-Political Context and the Emergence of the Matua Movement,"* begins the story before 1947. This is an important methodological decision. Refugee history cannot be adequately understood if refugees appear only after they cross the border. Their identities, social institutions and political consciousness were formed before displacement.

The next chapters on Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur reinforce this point. The book presents Harichand as a symbol of social transformation and Guruchand as a major figure in social reform. In doing so, it places the Matua community's later refugee politics within a longer history of social assertion.

The book then turns to the historical background of Partition and the "seeds" of Bengal's division under British rule. The transition from Matua social history to Partition history is analytically logical: it suggests that the refugee experience was not an isolated consequence of 1947 but the product of political and social processes with deeper roots.

The following chapter, dealing with the Mountbatten Plan and the Radcliffe Line, brings the reader to the actual territorial division. From there the book changes register. It becomes increasingly concerned with the consequences of Partition: refugee crisis, refugee camps and colonies, rehabilitation programme, refugee leadership and political mobilization. This structure makes the book resemble a social biography of displacement. Its subject is not merely "the refugee." Its subject is the making of the refugee community.

Partition therefore did not create the Matua community. Rather, it reconfigured the geographical and political circumstances in which the community existed. This distinction is sociologically crucial. A refugee population is often described in administrative language as numbers, migrants, displaced persons,

[2]Mukherjee, Sipra. "In Opposition and Allegiance to Hinduism: Exploring the Bengali Matua Hagiography of Harichand Thakur." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41 (2), 2018. pp 437-438. doi:10.1080/00856401.2018.1445400.
[3]Pandey, Arpita. Harichand Thakur and the Chandals: Godhood and Socio-religious Reforms in 19th century Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly (Engage),* Vol. 58, Issue No. 8, 2023. ISSN (Online): 2349-8846, 25 Feb, p 11

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beneficiaries or claimants. Such terminology can obscure the social identities that people carried with them. The first part of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* corrects this tendency by placing the refugee experience within a longer social history.

Mookerjee's role in the politics surrounding Bengal's partition is well established as an important subject of historical study. For a scholarly reader, this section raises an important methodological issue, how should political leadership be evaluated in a history written from the perspective of refugees? The answer requires distinguishing documented political actions from subsequent community memory. The refugee community may remember a political figure as a protector, adversary, negotiator or representative. Such memories are historically significant even when they are not identical to academic interpretations. The book would have been strengthened by explicit references to parliamentary records, contemporary newspapers, political correspondence and archival materials in this section. Nevertheless, the chapter has an important place within the book because it demonstrates that refugee history cannot be separated from the history of West Bengal's political formation.

The relationship with *Purba Smriti*

The comparison with Pramatha Ranjan Thakur's *Purba Smriti* is especially revealing. The two works can be viewed as two moments in a continuing family archive. *Purba Smriti* records the experience of an earlier generation whose life was directly shaped by the transformation of the Matua movement, the politics of colonial and late-colonial Bengal, Partition and the establishment of Thakurnagar. The work is autobiographical, but its value extends beyond the individual author. Scholars have drawn on it precisely because the personal narrative illuminates wider social and political developments. [4]

Udbastu Bangalir Sangram, by contrast, is written from a later historical position. Its author inherited the consequences of Partition rather than experiencing all of its formative events in the same way as the previous generation. The book therefore represents a transition from lived memory to inherited memory. That transition is itself historically significant. The first generation asks- What happened to us? The second generation increasingly asks- What happened to our people, and how should that history be remembered? The third generation may ask- What does that history mean for our identity today? Shantanu Thakur's book belongs to this second and third stage of memory-making. It is concerned not only with what happened but with the preservation and interpretation of what happened.

The strengths of the book

Several strengths deserve particular recognition. The book covers an unusually broad chronological field, from pre-Partition Bengal to the contemporary citizenship question. It places displaced Bengalis, and especially the Matua-related social experience, at the Centre rather than treating them as a marginal footnote to elite political history. Religion, caste, displacement, refugee rehabilitation and citizenship are treated as interconnected rather than isolated subjects. The book records a form of historical memory that deserves preservation irrespective of whether every interpretation is ultimately accepted by academic historians. The volume incorporates considerable research-based material. This distinguishes it from a purely autobiographical or commemorative publication. The final sections connect historical displacement to current citizenship debates, giving the book relevance beyond Partition studies.

The Absence of Detailed Citations: A Major Academic Limitation:

One of the most significant weaknesses of the book is the lack of sufficiently detailed citations supporting many of its historical and political assertions. In scholarly research, presenting information is not enough;

[4]Pandey, Arpita. Harichand Thakur and the Chandals: Godhood and Socio-religious Reforms in 19th century Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly (Engage),* Vol. 58, Issue No. 8, 2023. ISSN (Online): 2349-8846, 25 Feb, p 11

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establishing its authenticity through verifiable evidence is equally essential. Historical writing requires a transparent research methodology that enables readers to trace the origins of facts, figures, and interpretations. For instance, when a book presents population statistics or makes claims about political developments, it is necessary to identify the original sources, whether census reports, government publications, newspapers, archival documents, previous scholarly works, or oral testimonies. Such references allow readers to evaluate the reliability of the information, examine possible contradictions, and explore alternative interpretations.

This concern becomes particularly important when a book covers different historical periods. Nineteenth-century historical claims require appropriate archival and contemporary documentary evidence, whereas modern political and legal assertions may need legislative records, official statistics, court documents, and recent reports.

The absence of detailed citations does not necessarily invalidate the author's arguments or suggest that the information is inaccurate. However, it significantly restricts the reader's ability to verify the evidence and reconstruct the research process. Therefore, comprehensive referencing and transparent documentation would substantially strengthen the book's academic credibility, methodological rigor, and contribution to historical scholarship.

Linguistic and Editorial Limitations: The Need for Scholarly Revision

Another important limitation of the book lies in its linguistic inaccuracies and occasional problems of expression. Although these issues may not significantly affect comprehension among general Bengali readers, they become more consequential when the work is intended for an international academic audience. Language is not merely a medium of communication in historical writing; it is also an essential instrument for presenting evidence, interpreting events, and conveying complex ideas with clarity and precision. The consistency of historical terminology, the standardisation of personal names, the accurate spelling of geographical locations, and the verification of dates are particularly important in scholarly publications. Similarly, legal terminology must be used with precision, while English transliterations should follow a consistent system. Such editorial details are essential because they influence the accuracy, accessibility, and credibility of a historical text, especially when it is cited in academic research.

However, these shortcomings should not overshadow the historical value and distinctive character of the book. Rather than viewing them as reasons to dismiss the work, they should be considered opportunities for improvement. A carefully revised edition, supported by professional language editing and historical fact-checking, could preserve the author's original voice and community perspective while correcting grammatical, typographical, and terminological inconsistencies. Such a revision would considerably enhance the book's scholarly accessibility and strengthen its contribution to historical literature. And clarify the intended international readership Reduce repetition of editorial concerns.

Insider History and the Question of Objectivity

The relationship between historical knowledge and the historian's personal position is an important methodological concern in *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram*. The author's close association with the Thakur family and his involvement in contemporary politics offer him a distinctive perspective on the history of the refugee Bengali community. This insider position provides access to collective memories, family experiences, and community narratives that may be difficult for an external researcher to recover. In this sense, the author's proximity to the subject is a valuable historical resource.

However, such proximity also raises questions about interpretation, selection, and historical objectivity. An outsider may maintain greater analytical distance and identify broader social and political patterns that an

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insider might overlook. Conversely, an insider may understand the emotional, cultural, and political complexities of a community more deeply. Neither perspective, however, can claim an exclusive understanding of historical truth. It is therefore appropriate to approach *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* as a work of situated history, shaped by the author's social location, political experiences, and intellectual commitments. This does not undermine the book's historical importance. Rather, it encourages a more critical engagement with its arguments and interpretations. The objective of historical scholarship is not to eliminate the historian's standpoint but to make the research process transparent. Clearer citations, systematic documentation, and a distinction between personal memory and verifiable evidence would significantly strengthen the book's academic credibility and historiographical contribution.

The Sociological Significance of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram*

The significance of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* extends beyond its contribution to refugee history. The book can also be read as an important sociological document that explores the complex relationship between displacement, collective identity, social transformation, and political mobilization. Its themes resonate with major sociological concerns, including caste, religion, migration, social mobility, community formation, citizenship, collective memory, and state-society relations. One of the book's most valuable sociological dimensions lies in its portrayal of how displacement generates new forms of collective identity. The experience of losing one's homeland does not simply produce economic insecurity or geographical dislocation; it also reshapes social relationships, cultural practices, and political consciousness. Refugees gradually establish new institutions, develop networks of mutual support, and construct shared narratives around their experiences of suffering, resistance, and survival.

In this context, the formation of refugee communities represents a broader process of social reconstruction. The transmission of collective memories and identity across generations further demonstrates how historical experiences continue to influence contemporary social and political life. These processes also raise important questions about caste relations, religious belonging, political representation, and the pursuit of citizenship. Viewed sociologically, *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* offers an opportunity to understand refugees not merely as victims of historical circumstances but as active participants in reshaping society. Its greatest contribution lies in highlighting displacement as a transformative force in community formation, collective consciousness, and political identity.

The Book as a Bridge Between Generations: Memory, Heritage, and Historical Continuity

One of the most meaningful aspects of Shantanu Thakur's *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* is its role in connecting generations through collective memory and historical experience. The experience of displacement does not remain confined to the generation that directly witnessed it. For elderly refugees, East Bengal represents a lived landscape associated with childhood, family, culture, and the painful experience of migration. For their children, this lost homeland gradually becomes a family narrative, while for their grandchildren, it often survives as an important element of cultural heritage and collective identity.

In this context, the book serves as more than a historical account. It becomes a medium through which memories, struggles, and community experiences are transmitted across generations. By documenting the refugee experience, Shantanu Thakur contributes to the preservation of a collective past that might otherwise gradually disappear from public memory.A particularly meaningful comparison can be drawn between *Purba Smriti* by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* by his grandson. While the former reflects an earlier generation's engagement with memory and the past, the latter places greater emphasis on collective struggle, displacement, and political experience. Together, these works represent two generations of historical reflection within the same broad community tradition.

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Their relationship illustrates how historical writing can preserve cultural continuity while responding to changing social and political circumstances. In this sense, the book becomes a bridge between personal memory, collective history, and the identity of future generations. The historical significance of Shantanu Thakur's *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* lies not in presenting a definitive history of displaced Bengalis but in opening new avenues for scholarly investigation. Rather than treating the book as a final and comprehensive account, it is more productive to approach it as an important foundation for future historical and sociological research. Its narratives, interpretations, and historical claims provide researchers with valuable opportunities to formulate new questions and critically examine neglected dimensions of refugee history.

The book's arguments can be further investigated through government archives, census reports, contemporary newspapers, and oral history interviews. Comparative research could also examine how refugee politics evolved over time and how the experiences of displacement shaped the collective memory of the Matua community across generations. Equally important are questions concerning the social and economic development of refugee colonies, changing patterns of community leadership, and the growing significance of citizenship in contemporary political discourse. Such investigations would not merely verify the author's claims; they could also reveal alternative perspectives and broader historical patterns that extend beyond the scope of the book.Ultimately, the value of a historical work should not be measured solely by the completeness of its conclusions. Its ability to stimulate debate, encourage critical inquiry, and bring neglected historical experiences into academic discussion is equally important. From this perspective, *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* represents a meaningful contribution to refugee historiography and a promising starting point for future scholarship.

Towards a Critical Edition: Strengthening the Scholarly Value of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram*

A revised critical edition of Shantanu Thakur's *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* could significantly enhance its historical and academic contribution. While the book offers valuable insights into the experiences and struggles of displaced Bengalis, a stronger scholarly framework would make it more accessible to researchers and future generations. The most important improvement would be the inclusion of detailed footnotes and properly documented archival sources, such as government rehabilitation reports, census publications, parliamentary debates, and administrative records. An oral-history framework identifying interviewees, dates, and sources of community memories would further strengthen its evidentiary foundation. An expanded bibliography distinguishing primary and secondary sources would also provide a clearer research pathway.

A comprehensive chronology tracing the Matua movement, Partition, refugee rehabilitation, and contemporary citizenship debates would help readers understand the historical continuity of these developments. Similarly, maps of Orakandi, Thakurnagar, refugee settlements, and migration routes, together with properly captioned historical photographs, would add considerable documentary value. A detailed index of people, places, institutions, and concepts would improve its usefulness as a reference work. Equally necessary are careful linguistic editing and an updated, legally verified citizenship section that distinguishes historical developments from current administrative procedures. Such a critical edition would preserve the author's distinctive narrative voice while strengthening historical accuracy, methodological transparency, and academic credibility. It could thereby reach beyond its immediate readership and become a valuable resource for scholars of Partition, migration, caste, citizenship, and South Asian social history.

History and Memory: Bridging Personal Experience and Historical Evidence

One of the significant contributions of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* is its implicit recognition that history

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and memory need not be understood as opposing forms of knowledge. Memory, by itself, is not equivalent to history; nevertheless, it constitutes an important source of historical evidence. The recollections of refugees who experienced displacement may not establish every factual detail of an event, but they offer valuable insights into the emotional, social and cultural consequences of migration. Memories of lost homes, disrupted livelihoods and fractured communities reveal dimensions of displacement that official records often overlook. Conversely, government documents and administrative reports provide essential information about state policies, rehabilitation measures and the official recording of refugee movements. Yet such records rarely capture the personal suffering, anxieties and aspirations of displaced families. A more comprehensive historical understanding therefore emerges when documentary evidence is examined alongside oral testimony and collective memory.

In this respect, *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* creates an important space for dialogue between institutional records and community experience. Its scholarly value lies not merely in preserving memories but also in encouraging their critical examination. Future research should focus on verification, comparison and historical contextualization, transforming remembered experiences into a more rigorous and inclusive account of refugee history.

Conclusion

Shantanu Thakur's *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* deserves serious scholarly attention for its ambitious attempt to reconstruct the long historical trajectory of displaced Bengalis—from the social and political world of pre-Partition Bengal to the contemporary question of citizenship. Its significance lies particularly in its refusal to treat Partition as a single historical event confined to 1947. Instead, the book presents displacement as a continuing social process that unfolded through refugee camps, colonies, struggles over land and employment, rehabilitation programme, political mobilization, community reconstruction, cultural memory, and the subsequent politics of citizenship. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from Partition as a geopolitical rupture to Partition as a lived and continuing experience. One of the book's most valuable contributions is its emphasis on the agency of refugees. The displaced appear not simply as passive victims of historical circumstances but as social actors who rebuilt homes, communities, institutions, religious networks and political identities under difficult conditions. This perspective is particularly significant in relation to the Matua and Namasudra communities, for whom Partition involved not merely territorial displacement but also the disruption and reconstruction of a deeply rooted social, religious and cultural geography. The book therefore opens an important space for connecting Partition studies with caste studies, migration studies, sociology of religion, memory studies and the study of citizenship and belonging.

The relationship between *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* and Pramatha Ranjan Thakur's *Purba Smriti* further enhances its historical significance. While *Purba Smriti* preserved an earlier generation's personal and community memory, Shantanu Thakur's work expands that inherited memory into a broader historical and political narrative. Read together, the two works constitute a significant intergenerational archive of Matua and refugee memory. They demonstrate how historical consciousness can be transmitted, reconstructed and reinterpreted across generations. At the same time, the book should not be treated as an uncontested historical authority. Its principal weakness is methodological. The absence of systematic and sufficiently detailed citations makes it difficult for readers to distinguish archival evidence, statistical documentation, inherited community knowledge, personal memory and the author's own interpretation. This limitation is particularly important in a work dealing with multiple historical periods and politically contested questions. Greater engagement with primary sources, archival materials, oral histories and alternative scholarly interpretations would substantially strengthen its evidentiary foundation. Linguistic and editorial imperfections also require attention if the work is to reach a wider international academic readership.

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These limitations, however, do not diminish the book's potential importance. Rather, they indicate the possibilities for future scholarship. A revised edition incorporating comprehensive footnotes, archival references, statistical sources, oral-history documentation, maps, chronology, bibliography and an index could transform the work into an even more valuable research resource. Ultimately, *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* is best understood neither merely as a political text nor simply as a commemorative community history. It is a document of historical memory in the making. Its importance lies in preserving the voices, experiences and interpretations of a community whose history has often remained dispersed across family narratives, refugee colonies, religious institutions, political movements, newspapers and state archives.

The book consequently reminds us that displacement is not simply the movement of people from one geographical territory to another. It is a profound process of social reconstruction in which people negotiate home, identity, memory, dignity, community and citizenship. For this reason, the enduring value of *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* may lie less in its claim to provide the final interpretation of Bengali refugee history than in its insistence that the displaced themselves must remain part of that history. Its greatest contribution, therefore, is archival as well as intellectual: it records how refugee memory, Matua identity and the politics of belonging are being articulated in contemporary India. Future historians may verify, challenge, reinterpret or expand its arguments, but they will find it difficult to ignore the historical memory that the book seeks to preserve. In this sense, *Udbastu Bangalir Sangram* constitutes an important primary document for understanding the continuing afterlife of Partition and the unfinished history of displaced Bengalis.

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