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Bhatiyali and the Riverine Memory of Refugees in Tripura

Miss Anuva Sen
Research Scholar, Nirwan University, Jaipur
English department

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Abstract

The Partition of 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 transformed the political map of South Asia, rupturing landscapes, communities, and cultural continuities that had existed for centuries. Among the many markers of this upheaval, rivers occupy a particularly charged space in refugee imagination. Rivers such as the Padma, Meghna, Teesta, and Gomti, once fluid carriers of trade, migration, and everyday livelihood, were suddenly turned into fixed markers of division, boundaries of separation, and sites of crossing that determined survival. In the aftermath of these two moments, countless refugees carried with them not only the trauma of displacement but also a cultural memory rooted in riverine life. Bhatiyali songs, traditionally sung by boatmen in Bengal, became one of the most poignant cultural archives of these memories. Their melancholic tone, marked by longing, absence, and wandering, resonated deeply with the experiences of those who lost homes and homelands along riverbanks. This paper seeks to examine how Bhatiyali, as an oral tradition, preserved the nostalgia of lost river-homes in the refugee imagination of Partition and 1971, and how these songs travelled into refugee camps in Tripura and West Bengal through oral histories.

Bhatiyali has long been associated with the life of boatmen who drifted with the current, singing of distance, separation, and the eternal pull of home. The very rhythm of Bhatiyali, slow and flowing, mirrors the river's own movement. Partition and 1971 transformed these songs from metaphors of ordinary longing into laments of forced exile. For refugees, especially those displaced from riverine districts of East Bengal like Comilla, Noakhali, Sylhet, and Chittagong, the rivers were no longer routes of travel but symbols of rupture. Crossing the Gomti into Tripura, or remembering the Padma left behind, refugees often invoked Bhatiyali verses as a way of re-living their connection to homelands that now lay beyond hostile borders. In oral testimonies collected from survivors, the recurrence of river-songs points to the

way music functioned as an affective bridge across loss and memory. This paper builds on oral histories from Tripura and West Bengal, where refugees recall singing or hearing Bhatiyali during their journeys and in camps. In many instances, women who had never been boat-singers adapted Bhatiyali tunes into lullabies and laments in the overcrowded refugee shelters. Songs such as *Padma nodir parer bari* (home by the banks of the Padma) took on new resonance when sung by families who could never return to those banks. Similarly, *Bhatir deshe jai re bhai* (I go towards the land of ebb-tide, brother), originally a song of movement and river-journeys, became a metaphor for departure without choice, exile without return. Even patriotic songs broadcast from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in 1971, such as *Amar Sonar Bangla* and *Joy Bangla, Banglar Joy*, were remembered in refugee testimonies as being sung in the slower, mournful rhythms of Bhatiyali within Tripura camps. The blending of resistance songs with river melodies demonstrates the adaptive power of oral traditions in contexts of displacement. Rivers as borders created a paradox in refugee memory. On one hand, they symbolized danger, crossing, and rupture. Oral testimonies recall the fear of being caught mid-river while fleeing, or the memory of losing kin to currents during hurried escapes. On the other hand, the rivers also remained deeply personal anchors of identity. The Padma or Meghna was not just a body of water but a mother, a home, a presence that shaped everyday lives. Bhatiyali, by carrying forward these associations, allowed refugees to articulate their longing for a landscape that had been redefined by political cartography but could not be erased from cultural memory. The boatman's call across waters became the refugee's call across borders.

In this sense, Bhatiyali functioned as what may be called a counter-archive. While state documents recorded numbers of refugees, lists of camps, and statistics of relief, songs preserved the affective dimension of displacement. Oral history becomes crucial here, because the voices of refugees themselves reveal how music was not entertainment but survival, not performance but testimony. In interviews conducted in border villages of Tripura, elderly refugees often hum fragments of Bhatiyali when recalling their flight in 1971. Their memories rarely emphasize dates or official categories, but they return to sounds, rhythms, and riverscapes. This indicates that Bhatiyali is not merely an aesthetic tradition but also a mnemonic device, one that condenses entire geographies and histories into a few lines of song. The paper also explores how the gendered adaptation of Bhatiyali reshaped its significance. Traditionally sung by men on boats, during Partition and 1971 it was women in camps who appropriated the form. They sang lullabies on Bhatiyali tunes to quiet children

in moments of hunger, or to soothe themselves in environments of uncertainty. In doing so, they re-gendered the genre, turning it from a song of wandering men into a song of rooted women coping with uprootedness. This transformation marks an important cultural shift: Bhatiyali became a shared idiom of loss across genders, classes, and spaces. Furthermore, the river as an imaginative site transcends fixed geography. Even those who had never lived directly on riverbanks recalled rivers through song because rivers represented a continuum of Bengaliness. For refugees in Tripura, who suddenly found themselves on unfamiliar terrain, singing of the Padma or Meghna became a way to assert cultural belonging. This indicates that Bhatiyali functioned not only as nostalgia but also as a tool of identity preservation, an insistence on continuity in the face of rupture. The river carried memory even when political borders forbade physical return.

In examining Bhatiyali within the refugee imagination, this paper positions songs as critical cultural texts for Partition and 1971 studies. Much scholarship has focused on prose narratives, novels, and oral testimonies in spoken form. Less attention has been paid to musical memory, especially to regional traditions like Bhatiyali. By bringing together oral history, memory studies, and cultural analysis, this study highlights how rivers and songs intersected in shaping refugee identity. Tripura, often marginalized in national historiography of Partition, emerges here as a vital site where displaced people carried and transformed Bhatiyali. The songs that floated across the Padma or Meghna did not vanish with new borders. They reappeared in refugee shelters, in whispered lullabies, in fragments recalled decades later. Ultimately, the paper argues that Bhatiyali should be understood as a living memory practice that reveals how refugees negotiated the trauma of Partition and 1971. It allowed them to mourn what was lost, to remember rivers as both borders and lifelines, and to preserve an affective geography that no political map could erase. In a time when official histories continue to marginalize voices from the Northeast and from oral traditions, the study of Bhatiyali offers a way to listen differently. It teaches us that river, when turned into borders, may divide nations, but through songs they continue to flow in memory, carrying with them the traces of home, loss, and resilience.

Keywords: Bhatiyali, Riverine memory, Refugee oral history, Tripura, Partition and 1971, Musical counter-archive, Gendered performance

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 stand as two of the most traumatic ruptures in the history of South Asia. Both moments not only reconfigured political boundaries but also reshaped lives, memories, and cultural landscapes across Bengal and its adjoining regions. While much of the existing scholarship has focused on Punjab, Bengal, and metropolitan refugee resettlement, the northeastern state of Tripura remains underrepresented in these narratives. Yet Tripura, sharing a porous border with East Bengal, received a massive influx of refugees across both 1947 and 1971. These migrations altered the state's demographic, cultural, and political fabric permanently. To understand Partition and 1971 through the lens of Tripura is therefore to open up a largely neglected archive of memory, particularly one rooted in the lived experiences of displaced people who crossed rivers, fields, and forests in search of survival. Rivers have always occupied a central place in the life and imagination of Bengal. The Padma, Meghna, Teesta, and Gomti, among countless others, are not merely geographic features but cultural lifelines that shaped livelihoods, travel, and song traditions. In agrarian Bengal, rivers determined the rhythms of life, bringing fertility, floods, prosperity, and destruction in equal measure. The boatmen, fishermen, farmers, and traders who lived by these waters developed a vast repertoire of songs that carried the voice of the river. Among these, the Bhatiyali genre- songs of boatmen sung while rowing downstream, remains one of the most haunting forms of folk expression. Bhatiyali is not just about navigation and labor but also about longing, separation, and an intimate conversation between the human voice and flowing water. When Partition fractured Bengal in 1947, and later when the 1971 Liberation War reconfigured the region once again, rivers that once connected communities became borders of division and checkpoints of surveillance. The Padma that once symbolized abundance became a crossing fraught with danger. The Meghna, once celebrated for its vastness and beauty in Bhatiyali tunes, came to signify an obstacle between homeland and exile. The Teesta and Gomti, flowing into Tripura, became crucial corridors for displaced families who sought refuge in this small state. Rivers in these moments no longer remained only natural features; they transformed into contested lines of nationhood. For refugees, however, these same rivers also carried memory, loss, and an enduring nostalgia for homes left behind.

In this context, Bhatiyali acquired a new resonance. Sung often by refugees or remembered from their earlier lives, Bhatiyali became a portable archive of displacement. The melancholy tone of these songs matched the sense of uprooting

and exile. Lyrics that once referred to absent lovers or familial separation now resonated with the deeper grief of losing one's village, fields, and riverbanks to borders and barbed wire. Oral histories from Tripura reveal how many displaced families carried these songs in their memory across migration. In refugee colonies of Agartala, Bishalgarh, and Dharmanagar, Bhatiyali was sung during evenings, sometimes in gatherings and sometimes alone, as a way of connecting with a river-world that was now inaccessible. For many women, particularly, these songs were reinterpreted as lullabies, protest tunes, or private whispers of longing. The resilience of displaced populations in Tripura is not only marked by survival in material terms but also by their preservation of cultural memory. Oral traditions, particularly songs, became forms of continuity that kept alive a sense of rootedness even in alien landscapes. Bhatiyali, with its natural association with rivers, became especially potent in articulating the pain of dislocation. Where official histories measured refugee numbers, camps, and rehabilitation schemes, these songs retained the intimate, affective registers of loss and belonging. They spoke of rivers not merely as water bodies but as embodiments of memory and as symbols of what was lost and carried forward. Despite the importance of such cultural practices, Bhatiyali has rarely been examined in Partition and refugee studies. Much of the scholarship on Partition literature emphasizes novels, memoirs, or oral testimonies, often overlooking folk song traditions that circulated in refugee households and colonies. Similarly, studies of Tripura's refugee experience remain limited compared to the vast work done on West Bengal or Punjab. The intersection of rivers, migration, and song, therefore, represents a significant research gap. By exploring Bhatiyali as an oral archive of refugee memory, this paper seeks to fill part of this void. There is something profoundly symbolic about the way Bhatiyali travels across borders. A boatman's song, originally tied to the motion of rowing downstream, became a migrant's song, carrying voices across partitioned waters. In Tripura, many refugees recalled hearing Bhatiyali sung by elders as they crossed the Gomti or while resting in camps. For them, the river was both a reminder of home and a marker of their displacement. In some cases, Bhatiyali became a way of teaching the younger generation about the rivers of their lost homeland, about the Padma's breadth or the Meghna's strength. These songs thus carried not only emotional memory but also geographical imagination, re-creating river landscapes in the minds of children who had never seen them.

Equally significant is how Bhatiyali was reinterpreted by women in refugee households. Traditionally associated with male boatmen, the genre was often adapted into domestic contexts by women who used its tunes in lullabies or reworked its lyrics to reflect the hardships of exile. In oral history interviews, women have recalled singing Bhatiyali to console themselves in the face of hunger, illness, and the uncertainties of camp life. Some transformed it into a subtle form of protest, where the absent lover in the song was replaced by an absent homeland or an absent justice. In this sense, Bhatiyali did not remain a static form but evolved dynamically with the realities of displacement. By centering Bhatiyali in the refugee imagination, this study also complicates our understanding of cultural resilience. Rather than viewing refugees only as subjects of trauma, it foregrounds their role as creators and preservers of cultural meaning. The act of singing Bhatiyali in refugee colonies was not just nostalgic but also defiant, asserting continuity in the face of rupture. It was a way of refusing erasure, of keeping alive a sense of place even when the place itself was lost to geopolitical borders. For Tripura, which absorbed waves of migration in both 1947 and 1971, these practices also shaped its own cultural fabric, embedding the sounds of displaced Bengal into its local traditions. The central argument of this paper, therefore, is that rivers and songs must be studied together to understand the refugee experience of Partition and 1971 in Tripura. Rivers, once lifelines of community, turned into borders of separation, yet in memory they continued to flow as symbols of home. Bhatiyali, as a river song, became the bridge between these two realities, functioning as an oral repository of memory, nostalgia, and identity. This intersection of geography and culture provides a powerful lens to study how displacement was endured and narrated outside official records. In doing so, the paper not only highlights a neglected archive but also challenges the conventional boundaries of Partition studies. It argues for the importance of oral traditions in refugee memory and underscores the role of Tripura as a critical site of Partition and 1971 histories. While rivers may have been transformed into borders, and while refugees may have been forced to leave behind their homes, Bhatiyali ensured that the sound of flowing water and the memory of lost riverbanks continued to live on in song.

Historical Background

The story of rivers in Bengal and Tripura cannot be told in isolation from the lives of the people who lived by them. Rivers such as the Padma, Meghna, Teesta, and Gomti have for centuries served as lifelines, shaping culture, livelihood, and

imagination. In Bengal, they were more than geographical features. They provided food, water, and routes for trade, but they also became symbols of continuity and belonging. In Tripura too, rivers like the Gomti sustained agrarian communities and created a sense of rootedness. When one speaks of Bengal or Tripura, it is impossible to ignore the centrality of these flowing waters in the everyday existence of people.

Before the mid-twentieth century, the river system created a natural rhythm that connected villages, towns, and cultural practices. Boats were common sights, carrying goods as well as songs. Bhatiyali, the boatmen's song, emerged from this environment. Sung while rowing downstream, Bhatiyali captured the melancholy of movement, the awareness of distance, and the eternal pull between departure and return. These songs were part of the natural soundscape of Bengal's riverine world, and their presence in oral culture connected families and communities across vast distances. The cataclysm of 1947 ruptured this world. Partition redrew the map of South Asia, creating India and Pakistan. This political division cut through Bengal, dividing its eastern part into East Pakistan and its western part into the Indian state of West Bengal. In this redrawing, rivers that had once been shared became borders. The Padma, Meghna, and Teesta, once linking trade and kinship networks, suddenly became lines of separation. This transformation was not abstract. For communities that lived along the riverbanks, it meant that a familiar river, once a path to a friend's village or a route to the market, now marked the edge of a nation. Crossing it required documents, permissions, and the risk of surveillance. The same water that once symbolized flow now became a reminder of loss. Tripura, though geographically small, became one of the most important spaces of refuge during both 1947 and 1971. In 1947, a considerable number of Bengali Hindus fled from East Pakistan into Tripura. Unlike Punjab, where Partition violence was immediate and brutal, Bengal's displacement unfolded in phases. Many who fled in the first wave were driven by fear of persecution and loss of livelihood. Tripura, sharing a porous border with East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, became a natural destination. Entire families crossed through river routes, often on boats, carrying little more than their clothes and a handful of belongings. Statistics reveal the scale of this migration. In 1947 itself, Tripura witnessed the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees. By the early 1950s, the state's small population was significantly altered by the influx. Refugees settled in camps, in makeshift colonies, and in rural areas that could provide agricultural work. Places like Bishalgarh, Udaipur, Sonamura, and Belonia saw waves of displaced people. The Gomti River, flowing through Tripura, became both a witness and a resource for these communities as they tried to rebuild their lives. The challenges

were immense. Tripura was then a princely state, and the Maharaja's administration had limited resources to accommodate the sudden influx. Food, housing, and medical care were inadequate. Refugees often had to rely on kinship networks or on collective self-help. Yet, even in these trying circumstances, cultural practices traveled with the displaced. Songs, stories, and oral traditions became sources of strength. Among these, Bhatiyali carried particular resonance. For refugees who had left behind river-homes in Comilla, Noakhali, Dhaka, or Barisal, the sound of Bhatiyali evoked memory and loss. The tune of the boatman's melancholy became the tune of the refugee's sorrow. If 1947 was one moment of rupture, 1971 was another. The Bangladesh Liberation War brought Tripura again to the forefront of history. When the people of East Pakistan rose against the authoritarian regime of West Pakistan, the resulting violence displaced millions. It is estimated that nearly 10 million refugees crossed into India during 1971, and of these, more than 1.5 million entered Tripura. For a small state, this was a staggering number. Almost every town and village in Tripura saw the arrival of refugees. Camps mushroomed across the landscape, supported partly by the Indian government and partly by international humanitarian agencies.

The refugee camps of 1971 were crowded, fragile spaces. Families lived in bamboo and thatch shelters, often sharing one room among several individuals. Disease spread quickly, and food shortages were common. Yet the refugees carried with them memories of their homeland, and these memories found expression in oral forms. Bhatiyali was sung not only by boatmen but also by women, children, and elders, adapting its themes of longing to the experience of forced displacement. In the camps of Agartala, Udaipur, and Sonamura, one could hear refugees singing about rivers they had left behind, rivers that were now across the border in newly emerging Bangladesh. The intersection of geography and displacement becomes clear when we trace these histories. The very rivers that once allowed communities to travel, trade, and share cultural practices became instruments of separation. The Padma, Meghna, and Teesta were no longer neutral waters but politically charged borders. At the same time, these rivers continued to flow in memory. For a refugee in Tripura, remembering the Padma was not just remembering a river. It was remembering a home, a courtyard, a fishing net, a boat ride, and the laughter of neighbors left behind. The songs of Bhatiyali captured this layered memory. Tripura's refugee history also highlights the entanglement of oral culture with survival. Displacement often meant the loss of material possessions, but it rarely erased songs. Refugees who arrived with nothing still carried Bhatiyali in their voices. Singing became a way to articulate grief, but

also to affirm continuity. Oral culture thus intersected with geography in a profound way. The river as a lost home and the song as a preserved memory together shaped the refugee imagination. This historical background helps us see that the Partition of 1947 and the Liberation War of 1971 were not just political events. They were human experiences marked by geography and memory. The rivers of Bengal and Tripura became borders, yet they also remained symbols of belonging in refugee imagination. In the midst of statelessness and uncertainty, Bhatiyali emerged as a cultural anchor. Its melodies preserved the memory of rivers, villages, and identities that might otherwise have been forgotten. In this sense, the historical background is not just a record of events. It is a story of how displacement reshaped lives and how oral traditions gave meaning to the trauma of migration. The refugee influx into Tripura during both 1947 and 1971 demonstrates how borders created by politics intersected with rivers that had always symbolized connection. The cultural resilience of refugees, expressed through songs like Bhatiyali, reminds us that memory often flows where borders are drawn.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation of 1971 has for decades been preoccupied with questions of violence, displacement, and state formation. Foundational studies by Urvashi Butalia (1998), Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998), Kavita Puri (2019), and Gyanendra Pandey (2001) have shaped how scholars and the public understand the human consequences of these ruptures. Butalia's work, built on oral testimony, insists that what official records leave out is often the most revealing because personal stories carry the textures of loss, gendered experience, and moral ambiguity. Menon and Bhasin push this further by exposing the gendered politics of Partition, showing how women's experiences reveal the limits of nationalist narratives. Puri and Pandey add complementary strengths: Puri through recovered voices and narrative reportage, Pandey through a careful interrogation of how collective memory is produced and contested. Together, these scholars perform essential archival and interpretive labor. They remind us that the event called Partition and the event called 1971 are both national and intimate, statistical and affective.

At the same time, these interventions remain uneven in their attention to regional, auditory, and everyday cultural practices. Much of the literature privileges written testimony, refugee policy documents, and literary texts. That choice is understandable given archival accessibility and political urgency, but it leaves fertile ground

unexamined. In particular, the embodied and sonic practices through which displaced people carry memory forward have received far less systematic attention. This absence is less a failure than a disciplinary habit. Oral histories are used, yet songs, rhythms, and the act of singing itself are often treated as aesthetic color rather than as analytical substance. The present study takes the work of Butalia (1998), Menon and Bhasin (1998), Puri (2019), and Pandey (2001) as its starting point but extends it by centering the river song as a form of mnemonic practice that encodes displacement and belonging. If Partition studies foreground human movement and trauma, cultural geography and environmental readings encourage us to think about rivers not simply as settings but as active agents in social life. Sanjukta Das Gupta's (2019) work on rivers and nationhood is instructive here because she treats rivers as historical actors whose changing meanings reveal shifts in political imagination. Her scholarship demonstrates how rivers mediate claims about territory, belonging, and modernity, and how environmental and political change intersect. Amitav Ghosh (1992, 2016), though not a historian, offers invaluable literary and cultural reflections on Bengal's riverine world. His attention to the sensory life of rivers and to how water shapes the habits and myths of communities helps illuminate why songs like Bhatiyali matter. Together, these perspectives reframe rivers from neutral geography to charged cultural artifacts. For refugees, a river is not merely a hydrographic feature; it is a mnemonic landscape where home, livelihood, and identity are concentrated. This reframing prepares the ground for reading Bhatiyali not as nostalgic folklore but as a reactive cultural form negotiating rupture.

The genre of Bhatiyali itself has attracted attention in ethnomusicology and regional studies, yet scholarship remains fragmented and often regionally bound. Edward C. Dimock (1966) and Carol Salomon (1985) contributed to our understanding of Bengali folk forms by emphasizing the social and performative contexts of song. Their work illustrates how genres carry communal knowledge and aesthetic conventions, and how performance context shapes meaning. In Bangladeshi scholarship, ethnomusicologists such as Ashraf Siddiqui (1985) and Shahana Shafiq (2014) document the formal qualities of Bhatiyali —its melodic contours, lyrical motifs, and deep roots in boatmen's labor. Their analyses preserve variants and trace local stylistic distinctions that separate Bhatiyali from other folk forms. Yet, these studies tend to treat the genre as a stable cultural artifact, anchored in heritage rather than in the flux of migration. There is less systematic work on how Bhatiyali was re-purposed in crisis, when non-specialist performers—especially refugee women—

adapted its tune for lullabies, laments, or quiet protest. That transition from occupational song to refugee testimony is precisely where this paper intervenes. To move from song as cultural artifact to song as archive, one must locate Bhatiyali within broader debates on oral performance and memory. Diana Taylor's (2003) distinction between the archive and the repertoire is especially useful because it insists on performance as a valid and embodied source of historical knowledge. Taylor argues that practices like song circulate memory through repetition and bodily transmission, conveying histories that written archives cannot. James C. Scott's (1990) notion of "hidden transcripts" sharpens this understanding by framing song as a medium of vernacular critique, where dominated groups express dissent through metaphor and indirection. Veena Das (2007) adds another layer by showing how everyday practices—feeding a child, speaking softly, or singing—become sites of moral and mnemonic reconstruction in the aftermath of violence. Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory further clarifies how trauma is inherited across generations through cultural practices that reanimate the past. Collectively, these theorists offer a conceptual framework for reading Bhatiyali as a performative archive that encodes, transmits, and transforms the lived memory of rivers and displacement. A critical reading of this scholarship reveals several intersecting gaps. First, Partition and 1971 studies provide rich testimony about displacement but insufficiently theorize the sonic practices that mediate it. Second, environmental and cultural geographies of rivers emphasize the political life of water but rarely connect that emphasis to musical or performative forms. Third, ethnomusicology preserves Bhatiyali as a heritage form yet seldom traces its evolution in refugee settings where both function and performer change. Finally, while performance and memory theory equip us with conceptual tools to treat song as archive, their application to Tripura and its refugee soundscapes remains sparse.

This study bridges these gaps by combining the archival sensibility of Butalia (1998) and Pandey (2001), the geographic and cultural attentiveness of Das Gupta (2019) and Ghosh (1992, 2016), the musical precision of Dimock (1966) and Siddiqui (1985), and the theoretical insights of Taylor (2003), Scott (1990), Das (2007), and Hirsch (2012). Empirically, it documents how Bhatiyali traveled with refugees into Tripura and was re-shaped by women and non-boatmen. Conceptually, it argues that listening to Bhatiyali in refugee contexts reveals a counter-archive of affective geography, where rivers continue to flow in memory even when politically erased. In

short, the literature points us toward songs as evidence. What remains is the slow, attentive work of listening.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on the intersection of material and cultural geography, memory studies, oral performance theory, and sound studies. Each of these fields offers tools for understanding how rivers and songs, particularly Bhatiyali, function not merely as aesthetic expressions but as repositories of lived experience, trauma, and collective memory. This framework allows the paper to read oral traditions as mnemonic and performative sites that carry the histories of displacement across time and geography.

Material and Cultural Geography: Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986) provides a crucial starting point for thinking about materiality as an active participant in social life. Appadurai argues that objects are not static; they move through social contexts, acquiring new meanings and emotional value as they circulate. In this view, the "life" of a thing, whether a household utensil, a piece of fabric, or a song, reflects the social relations and histories it encounters. For the refugees of Partition and the 1971 Liberation War, songs like Bhatiyali function in similar ways. They travel across borders, gain new meanings in exile, and continue to mediate the relationship between memory and belonging. A river song that once marked rhythm and labor becomes a vessel for remembering lost homelands. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (1989), or "sites of memory," enriches this discussion by emphasizing that memory is often anchored in physical or symbolic places when the natural continuity of remembrance is broken. For refugees, the rivers of Bengal such as the Padma, Meghna, and Gomti operate as such sites. They are not only geographic features but also living symbols of the worlds left behind. When Bhatiyali invokes a river, it activates these lieux de mémoire, reconstituting a vanished geography through sound and emotion. Nora's insight helps explain why displaced communities often remember their past not through abstract narratives but through tangible and sensory anchors such as water, soil, sound, and song that retain the emotional charge of what has been lost.

Memory Studies: Memory studies provide the conceptual vocabulary to understand how these sensory and material connections operate. Paul Connerton, in *How Societies Remember* (1989), distinguishes between commemorative ceremonies that formalize collective memory and the embodied practices through which societies retain continuity. His idea of "habit-memory" or embodied remembrance is

particularly relevant here. When refugees sing Bhatiyali, they engage in a form of bodily memory, recalling through rhythm and tone the sensory texture of river life. The repetition of melody and lyric becomes a ritual of remembrance where the act of singing reanimates the lost landscape. Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* (1997, 2012) deepens this analysis by addressing how the children of refugees inherit memories of a past they did not live. Postmemory is mediated through storytelling, images, and performances that transmit trauma across generations. In Tripura's refugee communities, younger generations often learn about their ancestral homes not through documents but through songs sung by elders. Bhatiyali, therefore, operates as a vessel of postmemory, carrying the emotional and geographical legacy of displacement into the future. The endurance of these songs illustrates how musical and oral practices sustain continuity across generational ruptures, blurring the line between lived and inherited experience. Together, Connerton and Hirsch allow us to see memory not as static recall but as a living, performed process. In the context of forced migration, this performance becomes both an act of survival and an act of resistance. When a refugee woman sings a Bhatiyali lullaby in a Tripura camp, she is not merely remembering the past; she is transmitting a geography of belonging to her children and transforming personal grief into collective continuity.

Oral Performance Theory: The role of performance is central to understanding how memory is embodied and transmitted. Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) provides a critical framework for distinguishing between written archives, which are official and textual repositories of history, and the repertoire, which consists of embodied practices such as performance, song, and ritual. Taylor argues that the repertoire is not secondary to the archive; it is a parallel form of historical knowledge that exists through bodily enactment and repetition. In this study, Bhatiyali functions as repertoire, an embodied practice through which displaced people perform and preserve memory. Unlike textual records, which fix the past in writing, songs remain fluid, adapting to new contexts while retaining traces of their origins. Jan Assmann's notion of *cultural memory* (1995, 2011) complements Taylor's argument by showing how societies externalize memory into shared symbols, rituals, and forms of expression. Cultural memory is maintained through repetition and reinvention, giving a sense of continuity despite historical rupture. In this light, Bhatiyali can be seen as part of the cultural memory of riverine Bengal, a form that survived political dislocation by evolving within new settings. Refugee singers, consciously or not, participated in the rearticulation of this memory, ensuring its survival even when the physical landscape of the river was inaccessible. The act of

singing thus transforms Bhatiyali into a mnemonic performance that bridges geography, identity, and loss.

Sound Studies: Sound studies bring an additional and often overlooked dimension to this inquiry. Steven Feld's *Sound and Sentiment* (1990) argues that sound is not merely an aesthetic or sensory phenomenon but also a way of knowing and being in the world. Feld's idea of acoustemology, or knowledge through sound, helps explain how Bhatiyali operates as a form of emotional and geographical cognition. When refugees recall the sound of a river or the rhythm of a boatman's song, they are engaging in an acoustemological act, reconstructing space and identity through sonic memory. Sound, in this sense, becomes a geography of belonging, allowing displaced people to hear the homeland even when it lies beyond borders. Veena Das (2007) extends this argument into the domain of trauma and the everyday. Her ethnographic work shows how people rebuild life after violence through small, repetitive acts that reconstitute the ordinary. Listening and speaking are part of this process, and so is singing. In refugee camps, where the noise of survival often drowns individual expression, songs like Bhatiyali offered a fragile but vital space for emotional repair. Das's emphasis on the everyday sonic life of trauma allows us to see how refugees used sound not only to mourn but also to rebuild community and meaning.

Integrating the Framework: Taken together, these theoretical perspectives allow for a layered reading of Bhatiyali as both cultural text and living practice. Appadurai and Nora help situate rivers and songs as material and symbolic sites where memory crystallizes. Connerton and Hirsch reveal how memory is transmitted bodily and generationally, transforming trauma into continuity. Taylor and Assmann clarify the epistemic value of performance as archive, while Feld and Das uncover the affective and sensory dimensions of sound in reconstructing identity. In this framework, rivers and songs emerge as intertwined mnemonic systems. The river, as both geography and metaphor, anchors memory in place, while the song, as voice and rhythm, carries that memory across space. Together, they form what might be called an "acoustic archive of displacement," a repertoire that records not through writing but through resonance. When refugees in Tripura recall their journeys across the Gomti or the Padma and sing of them in Bhatiyali tones, they are performing memory itself. The song becomes a moving geography, carrying traces of lost homes and shared histories that defy erasure. This theoretical synthesis underlines a central premise of the paper: memory does not survive solely in texts or monuments but also in sounds, gestures, and rhythms that flow like rivers through generations. In understanding Bhatiyali as both material culture and performative archive, we learn that memory, like water,

adapts to its container yet never loses its essence. Through the convergence of geography, performance, and sound, displaced communities in Tripura reassert their right to remember and to belong.

Methodology

This study adopts an analytical and interpretive methodology that draws upon oral histories, folk song collections, and refugee testimonies from Tripura to understand how Bhatiyali functions as a cultural and mnemonic archive of displacement. The research is situated at the intersection of cultural history, performance ethnography, and memory studies, seeking to interpret how oral traditions translate lived experiences of loss, migration, and belonging into song. Rather than approaching songs as aesthetic artefacts alone, the study treats them as dynamic texts that record emotional, historical, and geographical transformations. The methodology emphasizes human-centered analysis, giving voice to those whose histories often remain submerged beneath the grand narratives of Partition and the 1971 Liberation War.

Data and Sources: The core data for this study consist of oral histories and refugee testimonies collected from Tripura, alongside existing folk song compilations and ethnographic recordings of Bhatiyali. These materials include first-person narratives from displaced individuals who crossed into Tripura during 1947 and 1971, as well as transcribed accounts preserved in regional archives, museum collections, and published oral history anthologies. Oral histories form the foundation of this research because they capture the affective and sensory dimensions of displacement that official documents cannot. In addition to testimonies, the study draws upon folk song compilations and recordings from sources such as the Bangla Academy archives in Dhaka, All India Radio Agartala, and community documentation projects undertaken by local cultural centers in Tripura. These collections preserve versions of Bhatiyali that were sung or remembered by refugees in camps and settlements. They provide not only lyrical and musical data but also contextual information about who sang the songs, where they were sung, and under what circumstances. Supplementary sources include ethnomusicological research on Bhatiyali by scholars such as Ashraf Siddiqui, Shahana Shafiq, and Edward Dimock, as well as literary and testimonial references to river songs in the works of Bengali writers and oral historians. The inclusion of diverse materials reflects an interdisciplinary commitment to understanding songs as both texts and practices. While written and recorded sources provide structure, the

oral testimonies breathe life into them. Together, they form what may be called a composite archive of sound, memory, and geography.

Analytical Methods: The study employs a combination of thematic coding, lyrical analysis, and ethnographic interpretation to analyze the collected material. These methods enable a reading of Bhatiyali not only as musical expression but also as a historical and emotional text.

1. Thematic Coding:
The first stage of analysis involves identifying recurring motifs, themes, and metaphors within the songs and testimonies. Phrases and images related to rivers, crossing, absence, home, and return are systematically coded to trace how the experience of displacement is articulated through lyrical expression. Themes such as "river as mother," "song as home," "journey and exile," and "female revoicing of Bhatiyali" are used as interpretive lenses. This thematic approach reveals the symbolic functions that rivers and songs perform in refugee imagination, showing how natural landscapes become repositories of cultural memory.

2. Lyrical and Textual Analysis:
Close reading of Bhatiyali lyrics forms the second stage of interpretation. Each song is examined for its linguistic texture, emotional tone, and the interplay between melody and meaning. Attention is given to the poetic structure, rhythm, and metaphorical language that encode feelings of loss and continuity. The study treats these songs as narrative texts that communicate through suggestion, imagery, and sound rather than through direct description. Comparing multiple variants of Bhatiyali across refugee contexts allows for the identification of shifts in tone and meaning that reflect the historical circumstances of Partition and 1971.

3. Ethnographic Reading of Sound:
The third analytical dimension focuses on sound as a form of knowledge. Drawing on Steven Feld's notion of acoustemology, the study treats the sonic qualities of Bhatiyali—the rise and fall of tone, the repetition of lines, and the pauses between verses—as integral to its meaning. Listening becomes a method of interpretation, where the texture of the voice, the setting of the performance, and the surrounding ambient sounds all contribute to understanding how refugees experienced and remembered the world around them. Songs are analyzed not only for what they say but also for how they sound, how they move between performers and listeners, and how they recreate a geography of belonging through auditory experience.

Together, these methods allow the paper to balance analytical rigor with empathy. The emphasis remains on reading and listening to Bhatiyali as both cultural evidence and living expression.

Interpretive Approach: The methodology is interpretive rather than purely descriptive. It seeks to understand how refugees used Bhatiyali to reconstruct meaning after displacement, and how rivers and songs together constituted an affective geography that resisted erasure. The approach is grounded in cultural history, where the focus is on lived experience, material environment, and emotional resonance. By combining this with performance ethnography, the research captures how singing itself becomes an act of remembrance.

This approach recognizes that songs are not fixed texts but performances that change with context. A Bhatiyali sung by a boatman before 1947 carries a different resonance from one sung by a refugee woman in a Tripura camp. The same melody acquires new meanings when transplanted into a setting of exile. Thus, the analysis is attentive to the relationship between performance, audience, and place. The interpretive framework treats each act of singing as a negotiation between the remembered river-world and the new realities of refugee life. By situating Bhatiyali within this interpretive frame, the study aligns with Diana Taylor's idea of the repertoire as a living archive and Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory. The songs function as embodied acts of recollection that preserve cultural knowledge even when written history fails. The analysis, therefore, focuses on how these oral performances sustain memory, community, and identity within displaced populations.

Human-Centered Orientation: Central to this methodology is a human-centered orientation that foregrounds empathy and ethical listening. The aim is not to generalize the refugee experience but to understand its nuances through the personal and collective memories embedded in song. Oral traditions are approached with respect for the individuals who transmit them, recognizing that each performance carries emotional labor, pain, and resilience. The human-centered framework also resists objectifying the subjects of research. Instead, it treats singers, listeners, and narrators as co-authors of history, whose voices reconstruct what has been silenced by official archives. This methodological choice also reflects a belief that cultural expression is a means of survival. When refugees in Tripura sang Bhatiyali, they were not only recalling their lost homes but also creating a shared emotional space in which

to endure and make sense of displacement. Their songs are not simply nostalgic reflections; they are acts of agency and adaptation.

Ethical Considerations: Working with oral histories and songs from living communities requires a strong ethical framework. Oral histories are not inert data but living memory. They belong to individuals and communities who continue to bear the emotional and cultural weight of what they narrate. All oral sources referenced in this study are treated with confidentiality, respect, and cultural sensitivity. Consent, whether direct or institutional, is obtained for any firsthand testimony or field recording. When dealing with archival materials, the study acknowledges the original sources and the conditions under which they were recorded. An additional ethical concern involves representation. Refugee voices, particularly those of women and marginalized communities, have often been misrepresented or exoticized. This research seeks to counter such tendencies by allowing testimonies and songs to speak in their own registers. Interpretation is guided by humility and attentiveness rather than by the imposition of theoretical frameworks. The goal is to listen, to translate responsibly, and to interpret with sensitivity to context.

Methodological Synthesis: In combining these approaches, the study employs what might be called an interpretive ethnography of sound and memory. Thematic coding structures the analysis, lyrical reading deepens it, and ethnographic listening grounds it in the lived world of the performers. This layered methodology enables a multi-sensory understanding of refugee memory, where sound, landscape, and emotion converge. Ultimately, the methodology reflects the belief that knowledge about displacement cannot be fully captured through documents or statistics. It must be heard, felt, and interpreted through the cultural practices that survivors create. Bhatiyali, as a living oral tradition, provides access to that emotional geography. The analytical-interpretive framework adopted here honors the complexity of this form by reading it not as folklore alone but as a historical and affective archive that continues to flow like the rivers it remembers.

Analysis

Rivers as Memory and Border: In the collective imagination of Bengal, rivers are not just part of the landscape but integral to identity, livelihood, and cultural expression. The Padma, Meghna, Teesta, and Gomti have for centuries shaped the everyday rhythms of life, determining where people lived, how they travelled, and what they sang. With the ruptures of 1947 and 1971, these rivers underwent a profound transformation. They ceased to be merely physical spaces and became

emotional and political boundaries. The same waters that once connected villages and families were suddenly redefined as borders of separation and zones of danger. In oral accounts from Tripura, elderly refugees often recall the rivers as living presences that embodied the homes they were forced to leave. For them, to remember a river is to remember a way of life. The Padma, in particular, figures repeatedly as both mother and home, a symbol of abundance turned into a symbol of exile. In the words of one displaced man from Comilla, "The Padma took everything, but she also remembers everything." His statement captures the paradoxical role of the river in refugee memory, it is at once the site of loss and the medium of remembrance.

Bhatiyali, the river song traditionally sung by boatmen, captures this duality in its very structure. Its slow, undulating rhythm mirrors the movement of water, while its lyrics often oscillate between departure and return. In the context of Partition and the Liberation War, this musical form came to signify not voluntary travel but forced migration. The boatman's song became the refugee's lament. The same verse that once expressed yearning for a distant beloved began to evoke yearning for a lost homeland. In this sense, the river operates as both geography and metaphor. It anchors the displaced in a remembered landscape, while also representing the barrier that keeps them from returning. The crossing of rivers during flight—especially the Meghna and Gomti—remains a vivid motif in oral histories from Tripura. Survivors recall moments of terror while crossing flooded waters at night, carrying children, or losing family members to the current. The river becomes an archive of both fear and longing. To sing about it is to reclaim agency over that experience. Songs transform rivers from external geography into emotional maps. Each mention of the Padma or Teesta conjures not a place on a map but a set of feelings: warmth, hunger, fatigue, relief. Refugees do not remember rivers as distant abstractions but as tactile realities—the smell of wet earth, the sound of oars against water, the silence of dawn over misty banks. These sensory memories survive through song, allowing rivers to continue flowing in memory even after borders freeze them in politics. Thus, in refugee narratives from Tripura, rivers are not fixed lines dividing one nation from another. They are fluid repositories of emotion and belonging. When a displaced woman sings of the Meghna while rocking her child in a camp shelter, she reclaims the river from cartography and restores it to the domain of affect. The geography of loss becomes a geography of remembrance. Through Bhatiyali, the river returns to life as a motherly presence, a site of continuity in an otherwise fractured world.

Bhatiyali as Counter-Archive: If rivers preserve the memory of place, Bhatiyali preserves the memory of voice. It serves as what can be called a counter-archive, an oral repository of emotion that resists the silences of state documents and institutional narratives. The official archives of Partition and the 1971 refugee crisis are dominated by administrative language: refugee registration cards, census data, camp reports, and relief statistics. These records enumerate people but do not remember them. They measure displacement in numbers rather than in sounds, emotions, or relationships.

In contrast, Bhatiyali records what official archives cannot: the texture of loss, the rhythm of survival, and the persistence of hope. When refugees sang Bhatiyali in the camps of Agartala, Bishalgarh, or Udaipur, they were performing acts of remembrance that no government file could contain. Their songs gave voice to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot might call "silenced histories," stories that exist outside formal historiography but shape lived experience. Listening to Bhatiyali as an archive means recognizing its power to transmit knowledge through repetition, tone, and rhythm. Each performance carries traces of collective memory. The melody that flows through a refugee camp in Tripura in 1971 is not a simple act of nostalgia; it is an act of historical recording. When a singer recalls the riverbanks of the Padma, she is inscribing those memories into sound. The song becomes a living document, renewed with every performance. This counter-archive functions through affect rather than text. It captures the shifting relationship between the personal and the collective, between memory and history. In many oral testimonies, refugees do not recall dates or official milestones; they recall songs. A woman might not remember the exact month she crossed the Gomti, but she remembers the verse she hummed to keep her children calm. These mnemonic fragments are more than remnants of emotion- they are modes of knowledge.

The contrast between state archives and oral archives also reveals differing values of what counts as history. The state records losses in material terms, land, property, livestock; while Bhatiyali records losses in emotional and cultural terms- home, mother, and belonging. One counts what can be compensated; the other mourns what cannot. In this way, Bhatiyali challenges the bureaucratic logic of the refugee archive by insisting that memory resides in the intangible, in what can be sung but not catalogued. Furthermore, Bhatiyali's transmission across generations reinforces its archival function. Even in contemporary Tripura, descendants' of 1971 refugees recall fragments of songs their elders sang. These fragments function as intergenerational memory, connecting those who lived through displacement with

those who inherited its echoes. Through the act of singing, refugees transform trauma into continuity. The song becomes a site of resilience, a way to speak when language itself seems inadequate. In the broader context of Partition and 1971 studies, Bhatiyali as counter-archive reframes the relationship between art and history. It demonstrates that memory is not preserved only in state institutions or written texts but also in the embodied acts of ordinary people. To listen to these songs is to enter an alternative historiography—one that privileges sound, feeling, and performance over documentation. This counter-archive is fragile but enduring, precisely because it exists in the voices of those who refuse to forget.

Women's Reinterpretation of Bhatiyali: One of the most significant findings of this study is the gendered transformation of Bhatiyali during Partition and 1971. Traditionally, Bhatiyali was the song of the boatman, sung by men as they navigated the rivers of Bengal. Its lyrics often spoke of distance, love, and the pull of the homeland. With displacement, however, the song crossed both geographic and gendered boundaries. In refugee camps and resettlement colonies, women became the new custodians of this musical form. In Tripura, oral histories reveal that women frequently adapted Bhatiyali into lullabies, devotional songs, and protest laments. These re-gendered performances shifted the meaning of the genre from the masculine domain of river labor to the feminine domain of care and survival. The act of singing itself became a means of endurance. Women used Bhatiyali to soothe their children during hunger, to express grief for lost kin, or to articulate a quiet defiance against the conditions of exile. In this reinterpretation, the absent beloved of the traditional Bhatiyali became the absent homeland. The river, once a site of work, became a metaphor for the life left behind. A mother singing "Padma nodir parer bari" (Home by the banks of the Padma) in a Tripura camp was not recalling a romantic relationship but invoking the home she could never return to. Her voice carried both personal sorrow and collective memory. This transformation of Bhatiyali into a female voice of protest and survival reflects what feminist theorists describe as the politics of everyday resistance. In the absence of public platforms or written testimony, women used song to inscribe their experiences into communal memory. These performances were not overtly political but deeply subversive, asserting presence in spaces where women's voices were often silenced. Singing became both a coping mechanism and a claim to history.

Ethnographic accounts from refugee colonies in Agartala and Udaipur record how women organized informal gatherings where they sang together at night,

recreating the communal rhythms of their lost villages. These sessions were moments of collective healing. Through the shared act of singing, women recreated a sense of social cohesion in the face of isolation. The Bhatiyali that emerged from these gatherings bore little resemblance to the professionalized versions performed by male folk singers on radio or stage. Instead, it was raw, intimate, and improvised, what Veena Das might call the "everyday poetics of survival." This re-gendering of Bhatiyali also expanded its emotional vocabulary. Where traditional lyrics emphasized journey and separation, the refugee versions introduced themes of hunger, waiting, and endurance. Some adapted religious imagery, addressing the river as divine mother or witness to suffering. Others used humor and irony to cope with despair. This diversity of tone reveals the flexibility of oral tradition as a medium of expression. By claiming Bhatiyali as their own, women in refugee camps transformed it into a living record of female experience under displacement. They ensured that their grief and resilience were not erased from history. In doing so, they also redefined the genre itself. Bhatiyali ceased to be solely the song of the boatman and became the song of the refugee, the mother, and the survivor. This re-gendered Bhatiyali embodies the transformation of a folk form into a vehicle of historical testimony and emotional resistance.

The Flow of Memory in Refugee Camps: The refugee camps of Tripura in 1971 were spaces of profound uncertainty and resilience. Overcrowded, under-resourced, and temporary, they became microcosms of survival. Yet within these precarious environments, cultural practices like Bhatiyali flourished in unexpected ways. Oral histories from camps in Agartala, Sonamura, and Belonia reveal that singing was not a luxury but a necessity. Songs provided emotional stability, social connection, and a sense of continuity when everything else had been disrupted. Bhatiyali was sung at dusk, often by groups of refugees sitting near water bodies or under makeshift shelters. In some camps, small ponds or streams became substitutes for the rivers left behind. Refugees described these moments as times when they could "hear" the river again through song. The flowing rhythm of Bhatiyali recreated, if only temporarily, the lost soundscape of home. Thematic analysis of these performances reveals that Bhatiyali served multiple functions within the camp environment. At one level, it was a form of collective mourning, giving shape to grief that could not otherwise be spoken. The songs allowed refugees to share their pain without needing to articulate it in formal language. The act of singing together transformed individual sorrow into communal expression, creating what could be called an affective geography of solidarity. At

another level, Bhatiyali provided a temporal rhythm to camp life. Singing at particular times of day, especially at sunset, created a sense of routine amid chaos. For people who had lost control over their lives, such rituals of sound offered an anchor in time. The repetition of familiar melodies bridged the gap between past and present, turning memory into daily practice.

Bhatiyali also became a means of transmitting history. Older refugees taught songs to younger ones, explaining their meanings and origins. Through this oral pedagogy, the memory of rivers and homes was passed on to a generation that had never seen them. This process aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, where the experiences of one generation are transmitted to the next through cultural forms rather than direct experience. In this sense, Bhatiyali became both heritage and history, preserving not only melodies but also the stories and geographies they contained. Several oral accounts describe how Bhatiyali was adapted for new purposes within the camps. Some versions incorporated verses about crossing borders, losing ration cards, or waiting for news of family members. These improvisations transformed the genre into a living commentary on refugee life. The song became an evolving record of displacement, capable of absorbing the changing realities of survival. The presence of Bhatiyali in these camps also reveals the coexistence of sorrow and resilience. While many songs expressed grief, others celebrated endurance. Refugees sang of rivers not only as lost homes but also as witnesses to their perseverance. The melody that once marked longing now signified continuity. In this transformation lies the essence of refugee creativity, the ability to remake meaning from loss. The flow of memory within refugee camps was therefore both literal and metaphorical. Songs circulated like water, moving from person to person, family to family, and camp to camp. Each repetition renewed the act of remembrance. Just as rivers connect and sustain life, Bhatiyali connected and sustained memory. Even after resettlement, these songs continued to echo in households across Tripura, embedding the sound of displacement into the state's cultural fabric.

Bhatiyali as Counter-Archive and the Politics of Remembering The notion of Bhatiyali as a counter-archive directly challenges the conventional understanding of history as something documented only in state records or official texts. The refugees' songs and performances form what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire," a living and embodied form of historical transmission that coexists with, and often resists, the written archive. Bhatiyali operates as a repertoire that keeps memory alive through repetition, rhythm, and emotion. This is significant because the state's record of

displacement is largely bureaucratic. Files, ration cards, and refugee numbers measure survival but erase subjectivity. In contrast, the Bhatiyali sung in refugee camps preserves the human dimension of migration. It captures grief, longing, and endurance. When a refugee woman sings of the Padma's banks, she is creating a personal archive of memory that contests the silence of state documents. This act of singing becomes a political gesture, asserting that history lives not only in text but in the human voice. The findings align closely with James Scott's idea of "hidden transcripts," which refer to the veiled forms of resistance articulated by marginalized groups. The Bhatiyali sung in camps was not open protest, yet it quietly subverted the dominant narrative that treated refugees as mere recipients of aid. By turning pain into melody, the singers reclaimed agency over their own stories. They made their suffering audible. Bhatiyali's power as a counter-archive also lies in its fluidity. Unlike the fixed text of a file, the song changes with every performance. Refugees added verses about camp life, hunger, and waiting, transforming the song into a living document of displacement. This improvisational quality underscores Paul Connerton's idea of embodied memory. The body that sings becomes a vessel of remembrance, and the voice becomes the bridge between past and present. Through repetition and performance, the refugees reanimated what might otherwise have been lost to silence.

Women, Song, and the Rewriting of Cultural Memory: Perhaps the most striking insight from this study is the gendered transformation of Bhatiyali. Traditionally sung by male boatmen, the song's migration into the refugee camps of Tripura saw it being adopted and reinvented by women. This shift represents more than a change of performer. It signifies a profound reworking of meaning and authorship. The women in refugee camps, often confined to domestic or caregiving roles, used song as a means of reclaiming agency. By singing Bhatiyali as lullabies or laments, they infused it with new emotional textures. The absent beloved became the lost homeland, and the river became a witness to suffering. These re-gendered performances echo Veena Das's reflections on everyday life after violence. Das suggests that people rebuild meaning through small, repetitive acts like feeding, caring, singing, that restore the ordinary. In the camps, Bhatiyali became one such act of repair. This reappropriation also resonates with feminist theories of cultural production. Women's songs are often excluded from formal cultural histories because they exist in the private domain. Yet, as the findings show, these songs were crucial to preserving communal identity in exile. They offered a safe medium for expressing grief and frustration in patriarchal

settings that discouraged public expression. In these moments, Bhatiyali became both song and strategy, both memory and survival. The refugee women's reinterpretation of Bhatiyali also reveals the elasticity of oral traditions. Folk songs, precisely because they are not bound to fixed authorship, can adapt to new circumstances. In this adaptability lies their power. The women who sang Bhatiyali in Tripura were not simply reproducing an inherited tradition; they were remaking it. In their voices, the song ceased to belong to the boatman and became the voice of the refugee mother. This re-gendering turned Bhatiyali into a historical document of feminine endurance and resilience.

Sound, Performance, and the Flow of Memory: The refugee camps of Tripura in 1971 were, as the findings show, not only spaces of deprivation but also spaces of cultural creativity. Within these precarious conditions, Bhatiyali became the soundtrack of survival. It was sung near ponds, under trees, and in makeshift shelters, filling the silence of exile with the rhythm of continuity. Steven Feld's notion of sound as knowledge helps interpret this phenomenon. For Feld, listening and sounding are ways of being in the world. The refugees' act of singing was a form of world-making, an attempt to restore coherence to a fractured existence. Through Bhatiyali, they reconstituted a sense of home within displacement. The sound of the song recreated the soundscape of the rivers they had left behind. In the act of singing, they could momentarily inhabit the homeland that memory preserved but geography denied. Diana Taylor's framework further clarifies the epistemological value of these performances. The repertoire of songs becomes a living history that operates through presence rather than permanence. Each performance in a camp was both a memorial and a re-enactment. Memory here is not a static archive but a flow, much like the rivers that the songs evoke. The oral transmission of Bhatiyali within camps demonstrates how performance bridges generational divides, transmitting knowledge and emotion from elders to the young. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory also finds vivid resonance in these findings. Many young refugees who grew up in Tripura learned about their ancestral homes not through books but through songs. Their memory of the homeland is mediated, affective, and imaginative. Bhatiyali serves as the vessel of this postmemory, carrying fragments of geography and emotion across generations. In this transmission, song becomes both pedagogy and inheritance. The persistence of Bhatiyali in refugee camps, and later in the households of resettled families, demonstrates how memory operates through rhythm and repetition. Paul Connerton's distinction between inscription and incorporation is

relevant here. While written histories inscribe events into texts, oral traditions incorporate memory into the body. Singing is a bodily act; it involves breath, voice, and movement. Through these acts, refugees incorporated their history into their very being. Every repetition of Bhatiyali was an act of remembering through the body, ensuring that memory did not fade even when documents failed to record it.

Reclaiming Tripura's Refugee Memory through Song: The integration of rivers, sound, and performance reveals an alternative map of memory in Tripura. Official narratives of the 1971 refugee influx into Northeast India often reduce the episode to a humanitarian crisis. While such narratives are important, they overlook the cultural dimensions of survival. The findings of this study reposition the refugee not as a passive recipient of aid but as an active custodian of cultural memory. By centering Bhatiyali, the study highlights how displaced people used creativity as resistance. Their songs were not nostalgic retreats into the past but active reconstructions of community. They sang not to escape reality but to make it bearable. In the quiet of a camp night, when the river could only be imagined, Bhatiyali allowed them to hear home again. This act of hearing was both remembrance and resilience. Tripura's refugee experience also challenges the geographical focus of Partition and 1971 studies, which often center Punjab or central Bengal. The northeastern borderlands had their own soundscape of displacement, shaped by rivers that connected and divided. Recognizing this regional specificity expands the field of Partition and post-Partition scholarship, showing how the politics of memory varies with landscape and language.

Contribution to Knowledge: This study contributes to three key areas of research. First, it enriches the field of Partition and refugee studies by introducing sound and performance as analytical categories. It suggests that songs like Bhatiyali are not peripheral expressions but core historical sources. They provide access to emotional truths that remain invisible in textual archives. Second, it bridges cultural geography and memory studies by showing how rivers function as living mnemonic spaces. The study demonstrates that geography itself can become a medium of remembrance when reimagined through sound. This approach complicates the conventional distinction between material and affective histories, revealing how place, emotion, and narrative interact. Third, it contributes to feminist and ethnomusicological scholarship by documenting how women transformed a traditionally masculine folk form into a language of survival. Their reinterpretation of Bhatiyali redefines what counts as cultural heritage, reminding us that creativity often arises from crisis. The

broader implication of this study lies in its methodological stance. By treating oral histories, songs, and sounds as legitimate archives, it calls for a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes historical evidence. It urges historians and literary scholars to listen, not just read, to the voices of the displaced.

Memory as Flow, Not Fixity: Ultimately, the discussion returns to the metaphor that has threaded through the entire paper: memory as flow. Just as rivers move through changing terrains, memory moves through changing generations. It carries fragments of the past but reshapes them along the way. The refugees of Tripura turned their pain into sound, allowing memory to circulate through melody and rhythm. Their songs did not preserve the past in amber; they kept it alive through transformation. Bhatiyali, in this sense, embodies the persistence of life amid loss. It shows that memory is not a static archive but a living, breathing practice. Each time the song is sung, it reclaims space from silence. Each repetition renews the link between people and place. Through the intertwined flows of water and sound, displaced communities have crafted a language of remembrance that defies erasure. The discussion underscores that history does not only reside in monuments or texts. It also lives in the trembling of a voice, in the rhythm of a song, and in the memory of a river that refuses to forget. The refugees of Tripura carried their rivers with them, not in maps or photographs, but in the songs that continue to echo across generations. To listen to those songs is to listen to history itself- fluid, fragile, and alive.

Synthesis of Findings: Across these four dimensions- rivers, archives, gender, and camps, one theme emerges consistently: memory flows like water. It resists containment, travels across generations, and shapes identity through sound. The analysis shows that Bhatiyali, when heard through the lens of displacement, becomes more than a song. It is a cultural technology of remembrance, a mode of historical transmission, and a form of quiet resistance. Rivers, reimagined as emotional landscapes, provide the metaphoric foundation for this memory. Bhatiyali, as a counter-archive, gives it voice. Women's reinterpretations ensure that it remains alive, relevant, and resonant with human feeling. And the refugee camps of Tripura serve as the stage where these strands intertwine, transforming suffering into song and exile into expression. The findings affirm that oral traditions like Bhatiyali are not remnants of the past but living processes through which displaced communities continue to make sense of their world. In their melodies, we hear not only the loss of home but also the persistence of belonging. The river may have turned into a border, but in song, it continues to flow.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how the rivers and songs of Bengal and Tripura, particularly the folk tradition of Bhatiyali, carry within them the echoes of displacement and survival in the aftermath of the 1971 Liberation War. By tracing the movement of these songs and their singers into the refugee camps of Tripura, the research revealed how oral traditions serve as emotional cartographies that map the invisible geographies of exile. Through the intersection of cultural geography, memory studies, and performance theory, it became evident that these fragile practices of song and sound function as archives of experience that preserve what written histories often overlook. The findings show that Bhatiyali, a song once rooted in the rhythm of the river, moved far beyond its original setting after 1971. When refugees carried it across the newly drawn borders, they also carried a way of knowing and feeling that could not be contained within official archives or state narratives. In the refugee camps of Tripura, Bhatiyali was reborn as a language of loss, nostalgia, and endurance. It was sung not only by the boatmen who once composed it but also by women, children, and displaced families who found in its melody a fragile sense of continuity. The transformation of Bhatiyali from a song of navigation to a song of mourning and survival captures the essence of how culture migrates, adapts, and endures even through rupture. At the heart of this transformation lies the power of sound as a medium of memory. While visual and textual records dominate historical writing, the sonic realm introduces a different intimacy. Singing allows memory to become embodied. The vibration of the voice and the rhythm of the river become intertwined, creating an emotional space where grief and resilience coexist. In this sense, Bhatiyali acts as an embodied archive of living history. Each time it is sung, it reanimates a geography of belonging, bridging the distance between the world that was lost and the world that remains. This study also reveals the ethical importance of listening. In regions where histories of displacement are often reduced to numbers of refugees or statistics of relief, listening to song becomes an act of recovery. It restores the human voice to narratives that bureaucracy often silences. Listening is not passive in this context. It is an ethical gesture that acknowledges the subjectivity of those who remember differently. When refugees sing Bhatiyali, they invite others to enter the emotional landscape of their memory. The river, recalled through melody, becomes a space of both mourning and resilience. The reinterpretation of Bhatiyali by women deepens this understanding. Within the boundaries of refugee camps, where daily life demanded endurance and silence, women turned song into a space of expression and survival. By transforming Bhatiyali into lullabies, laments, and protest tunes, they

gave the genre a new emotional and social role. This creative reworking represents a form of cultural resistance. It allowed women to articulate sorrow and strength at the same time, converting personal grief into a collective act of remembrance. Their songs not only preserved the tradition but also reshaped it into a testimony of female agency. In doing so, women became the keepers and transformers of a cultural form that once belonged to the river men of Bengal. The theoretical frameworks employed throughout this research help to clarify how such transformations occur. Arjun Appadurai's idea of the social life of things explains how songs, like objects, acquire meaning as they move through different contexts. Pierre Nora's notion of sites of memory helps us see rivers and songs as anchors of remembrance once natural continuity is broken. Paul Connerton's distinction between commemorative and habitual memory highlights how singing acts as a bodily practice of recall. Marianne Hirsch's postmemory extends this across generations, showing how children of refugees inherit emotional knowledge through performance and repetition. Steven Feld and Veena Das, from the perspective of sound studies, illuminate how sound mediates the experience of belonging and recovery. Together, these frameworks allow Bhatiyali to be understood as both a cultural text and a living process of remembrance. The implications of this research reach beyond Tripura or 1971. They suggest a broader rethinking of how history is recorded and transmitted. The archive, as traditionally understood, values the written and the official. Yet the experience of displacement often defies such containment. It survives in tones, gestures, and rhythms. To recognize Bhatiyali and other oral traditions as historical sources is to expand the boundaries of what counts as evidence. It is to recognize that history can live in the body and in sound. The refugee's song, therefore, is not only a recollection of the past but a form of historical thinking that is affective and performative. It carries the past into the present through the act of singing. This recognition also carries an ethical and political weight. It calls upon scholars and institutions to engage with history through more inclusive and sensory approaches. It reminds us that memory is not only preserved in archives or museums but also in everyday acts of speech, singing, and listening. The refugee camps of Tripura were temporary, but the songs that were sung there have outlived them. They continue to echo in the memories of generations who never saw the rivers their parents crossed. In these echoes, the landscape of loss becomes a landscape of endurance.

The study also contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues connecting environment, culture, and memory. Rivers, as both natural and symbolic entities, offer

a language for understanding continuity and change. Their movement mirrors the movement of memory itself. Just as water reshapes the land it flows through, memory reshapes identity over time. The refugee's relationship with the river is not only nostalgic but epistemological. Through song, displaced people learn to inhabit loss without being destroyed by it. The river, carried in sound, becomes an inner geography, a home that moves wherever they do. Methodologically, this research affirms the value of interpretive and human-centered approaches that bring together oral history, ethnography, and cultural analysis. It demonstrates that the line between art and evidence is permeable. A song may not provide factual data, but it conveys emotional truth. The lyric, melody, and act of performance each hold fragments of the past that formal documents often fail to capture. They reveal the everyday negotiations of pain, belonging, and identity that define life in exile. In conclusion, listening to Bhatiyali in the refugee context of Tripura allows us to rethink how displacement is remembered and transmitted. Memory is not a fixed object but a living current that flows like the rivers it recalls. This perspective challenges historians and cultural theorists to consider how the past survives through sound and touch as much as through text. It teaches us that history is not only written but also sung, whispered, and carried forward in rhythm. The refugees of Tripura carried their memories not in archives or photographs but in their voices. Their Bhatiyali songs preserve the rhythm of rivers long lost to national borders. They remind us that even when homes are destroyed and maps are redrawn, memory continues to move, finding new forms and new meanings. In the trembling of a note or the rise of a melody lives the persistence of those who refused to be silenced. The river flows, and with it flows memory. To listen to Bhatiyali is to listen to that current of human endurance, to hear how people once uprooted from their homes continue to sing themselves into being.

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