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Transnationalist Negotiations in the Bangla Eyewitness Accounts of WWI

My paper will explore how three Bangla eyewitness accounts of the First World War, a neglected body of literature, represent transnationalism as a lived experience in conversation with and in the interstices of the statist discourses of patriotism and nationalism.

Out of these texts, *Abhi Le Baghdad* (Take Baghdad Now; 1958) by Sisir Prasad Sarbadhikari records the multi-layered engagements of the author (a private of the Bengal Ambulance Corps) with the British, the Arabs, the Turks, the Germans and the Armenians that often undercut the official narratives of hostility and peace. Further, *Paltan Jibaner Smriti* (Memories of Army Life; 1940) by Mahbul Alam consistently evokes Bengali sub-nationalism as a frame of reference for recording his experiences as a member of the 49th Bengalee Regiment posted in north-western India and Mesopotamia. Alam's account exposes the sectarian and regional biases operative within the construct of Bengali identity, while also registering his discomfiture about the prospect of fighting against his co-religionists in the name of national pride. A more striking piece of life-writing is *Kalyan – Pradip* (The Lamp of Beneficence; 1928), where the 80-year-old author Mokkhada Devi reminisces about his grandson Dr. Kalyan Mukherji, who succumbed to an epidemic as a POW in Mesopotamia. Mukherji's reservations about coloniality and disenchantment with nationalism (as evident from his war-time letters quoted in the book) militate against the sectarianism of Devi's commentary.

These eyewitness accounts are never far from the perspective of the tourist and they frequently resort to cultural stereotypes when describing the racial other. Besides, they never seek to transcend or negate an irreducible substratum of Bengali identity. The paradigm of community forged on the front line and in the POW camps is necessarily provisional and transitory, but these texts reveal surprising ways of inter-personal bonding that cannot be exhaustively theorized. These texts, my paper will argue, embody a form of transnationalism that is necessarily enabled by state agencies and mediated by cultural identities. Although operating across political/cultural divides, the transnationalism portrayed in these texts is posited on such divides.