

# Refugee Management in Post Partition West Bengal: A Queer Dilemma

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**Abstract:** *Refugee management and placement in post-partition Bengal had been a very uphill task both for the government and for the refugees trying to look for some shelter. After the partition of India and Pakistan, thousands of Hindus and other community members soon started to migrate to West Bengal to escape from the torture and oppression of the Muslims in the newly established East Bengal or at that time known as East Pakistan. However, the migration of such people was incorporated with multiple dilemmas and uncertainties. People fled from East Bengal to find a suitable habitation in West Bengal; however, that dream was associated with a lot of political and administrative uncertainties. Most of the migrants left the majority of their belongings in their respective places; they had nothing except their desire to find a comfortable habitation. But the impact of such a huge mass exodus of people made the situation a more critical one to handle for both the government of India and the administrative management of West Bengal. However, migration camps were set up in order to provide immediate shelter and food to those migrants. The government or the administrative management showcased an open-hearted approach in welcoming such a number of people. But very soon it was realized that the settlement of such a number of people would at once become critical and people were spreading across Bengal and other states in India. Those migrants also impacted the demographics and culture, which resulted in a more diverse dimension of the culture. But the issues that were there in the refugee management were regarding the migration camps, corruption and indiscriminate, outrages on women, caste and religious discrimination, torture and oppression, and along with all these such migrants also felt the anxiety of displacement. Hence there was a queer dilemma among the migrants and also among the administrative management in managing such refugees.*

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Dilemma, Displacement, Refugee, Management, Authority

## 1. Introduction

It needed to be mentioned that the first Partition of Bengal (1905) was a territorial reorganization of the Bengal Presidency implemented by the authorities of the British Raj. However, the recognition of East and West Bengal was not done in a separate manner as both the Bengal was under the territory of the nation of India. However, things changed drastically after the partition of 1947, when the nation of India got divided into two parts. A separate independent nation, namely Pakistan was created and they demanded the Eastern part of Bengal, known as East Bengal to be part of the nation. And as soon as the East Bengal fell within the territory of Pakistan administered by Muslims, people living in that part of Bengal, mostly the Hindu people felt insecure and wanted to migrate to the other part of Bengal where the majority of Hindu people lived. Historically it had been seen that there had been numerous stories, accounts and evidence of torture, and oppression done by Muslims upon the Hindu caste people. Such incidents of oppression proved intolerable for the Hindu peoples and for this reason majority of the Hindu people along with people from other communities and religions started migrating to West Bengal.

The objective of the paper would be to look at the migration history of the East Bengal people settling down in West Bengal. The primary focus of the paper had been to look at the exigencies and difficulties faced by the migrants after coming into West Bengal. This paper would be also focused on the various migration camps and how they catered to the need for food and shelter of the migrants. And, how, such migration camps became the base for the migrants to become a citizen of India and to get a habitation place. One of the key objectives of the paper had been to look at the administrative management behind the settlement of the refugees and to analyze the

performance of the administrative management in light of the partition instability of the government. Along with these, the paper would raise certain questions regarding the loopholes and mismanagement of the refugees, and the mistreatment of caste and hierarchies. In the end, the paper would also briefly focus on the effects of such mass migration on the demographics of West Bengal and how it shaped the political as well as caste culture of the state of West Bengal. This paper would look at certain books, articles and newspapers to bring out the history of administrative management and refugee settlement at the time of partition. And in order to bring the history of partition and migration and its several exigencies, this paper will also take the aid of several secondary writings on partition and refugee management across India and West Bengal. This paper would also take the aid of historiography and government records for bringing a proper account of the refugee management in West Bengal. By doing all these, this particular paper under consideration would look forward to bringing out a comprehensive account of administrative activities during the mass migration of people after the partition in 1947. Soon millions of people migrated to West Bengal. Hence Indian independence came with a high price that was born out of partition displacing 15 million people. Millions had to leave a part of their lives in search of an alternative, being turned into refugees almost overnight. In West Bengal alone 30 million refugees entered until 1960. In the 1970s the number of people entering from the east was closer to a few million. The primary concern of those migrating people was finding shelter after arriving in the state of West Bengal. Such people left most of their belongings in their homeland because at that moment they could take anything with them while migrating to this part of the world. Not just only that, such people were grasped with exhaustion and frustration and felt severe anxiety of displacement. In such a moment of pandemonium, the

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government of India and the West Bengal State government welcomed such refugees. However, the concern was the management of such a huge number of people constantly migrating to this part of Bengal. Refugee camps were set up, people were transferred to other states, particular regions were provided to them, and several people were made to inhabit a particular place for temporary periods. Providing adequate food, drinking water, and clothes to such people was also difficult. A lot of discrepancies were seen in such migration camps and refugee management in several parts of West Bengal. Because such huge mass migration of people not only affected the administration of the government but also affected the demographics of the state. Hence peculiar circumstances were there after the partition in 1947.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of migration had been one of the burning problems throughout the world. Whenever human conflict, territorial dispute, or poverty occurs people would get forced to live, with family ties, shelter, language, and culture and would get focused on the search for a better life. The partition of Bengal in 1947 was the cruelest partition ever in the history of the world where the bedroom of a household had been under the geographical boundary of West Bengal, and the kitchen was on the other side of the border and causing forced illegal migration from erstwhile East Pakistan. However, it needed to be mentioned that Bengal was intended to be divided in the year 1905 because according to the colonial government the Bengal province was a huge province and proved too difficult to be administered in its uniform geographical space. For that reason, the Britishers intended to break the province of Bengal into two parts, namely East Bengal and West Bengal. Although a number of protests against the partition incurred a pause in the Bengal partition in the year 1911. But, when the newly established nation of Pakistan demanded East Bengal as one of their five provinces, the Indian government forfeited that part to be included under Pakistan's territory. Things started to change after that partition in 1947 and the East Bengal was named East Pakistan. From then on a severe kind of torture and oppression of the native Hindu community members was done by the independent Muslim nation of Pakistan. That was the reason why the Hindus residing in East Bengal were forced to escape and migrate to West Bengal, a Hindu dominated province.

The migration between India and Pakistan following the Partition in 1947 remains one of the largest population movements in history with an estimated 15 million people crossing the new border between India and Pakistan. Within just four years, the Muslim-majority district of Nadia turned into an overwhelmingly Hindu-majority district through this two-way population<sup>3</sup> movement. This extraordinary population movement had been usually explained as the logical response to the creation of a Muslim Pakistan—composed of an East and West Wing—and a predominantly Hindu India. The period was characterized by unimaginable ethnic violence coupled with the hasty and barbaric experience of border crossing in a now-divided Punjab, and the slower, more continuous flow of Hindus leaving East Pakistan for the Indian state of West Bengal. A legacy of

the colonial project, the partitioning of India was not animated by a desire for peace and self-determination, but by Britain's need to withdraw quickly from the subcontinent. The result was the establishment of two independent states, two distinct development projects, and the creation of identifications with two different national imaginaries.<sup>iv</sup>

The phenomenon of migration had been going on from the earliest civilization and it had been continuing ever since. The rate of migration or the number of mass migrations in the history of civilization had not been noticeable all the time because it happened on a smaller scale. But large scale migration could be noticed and its impact could inflict a permanent change in demographics, culture, economy, religion and politics of a nation, state or any geographical space. Such kind of mass migration happened in India, particularly in the state of West Bengal when refugees from East Pakistan arrived in West Bengal in different phases and were grouped into two categories: the 'old' arriving during 1946-1958, and the 'new' during 1964-1971. The West Bengal Government took the responsibility of rehabilitation of the 'old' refugees, but not the 'new' ones; eventually, it did, but only on the condition that they re-settle outside the state. But even the old refugees staying at the camps of West Bengal received atrocious treatment. This paper focuses on sanitary and health conditions in the old refugee camps in the 1950s. Although the Government assumed a policy of relief, surprisingly, hardly anything was provided to the refugees staying at the camps. Also, neither proper medical aid nor proper sanitary arrangements were provided to them. The lack of proper sanitary conditions in the camps led to the spread of infectious diseases that took epidemic proportions. This was in sharp contrast to the northern Indian camps where medical aid was provided systematically.<sup>4</sup>

#### Administrative activities:

Crisis management and development had been two sides of a coin in terms of the development of a nation. In the circumstances of partition aspects of crisis management in the shape of refugee management as well as the development of a newly established state and the nation became two sides of a coin. And regarding this, Glenn Brigaldino once commented that the link between<sup>6</sup> disaster and development is rarely, if ever, a straightforward return to previous conditions. Given this context, the strikingly different way in which the Government of India viewed the refugee problem in the east and in the west was not altogether surprising, although the refugees from the east paid dearly for it. The crisis in Punjab, the government decided, was a national emergency, to be tackled on virtually a war footing. In September 1947, the government set up the Military Evacuation Organisation to get Hindus and Sikhs out of Pakistan in a swift and orderly fashion.

By 15 November, within just two months, the Government of India had escorted 1.7 million Punjab evacuees into its refugee camps. From the start, the government accepted that a transfer of population across the western border

with Pakistan was a fact of Partition, inevitable and irreversible. So it readily committed itself to the view that refugees from the west would have to be fully and permanently rehabilitated. It also quickly decided that property abandoned by Muslims who had fled to Pakistan would be given to the refugees as the cornerstone of its programmes of relocating and rehabilitating them.<sup>7</sup>

The influx of refugees into Bengal, on the other hand, was seen in an altogether different light. In Nehru's view, and this was typical of the Congress High Command, conditions in East Bengal did not constitute a grave and permanent danger to its Hindu minorities. It was convenient for Delhi to regard their flight westwards as the product of fears, mainly imaginary, and of baseless rumours, rather than the consequence of palpable threats to life, limb and property. Well after it had begun, Nehru continued to believe that the exodus could be halted, even reversed, provided the government in Dacca could be persuaded to deploy 'psychological measures' to restore confidence among the Hindu minorities. The Inter-dominion agreement of April 1948 was designed, Canute-like, to prevent the tide from coming in. In the meantime, the government saw the giving of relief to refugees from East Bengal as a stop-gap measure since permanent rehabilitation was judged to be unnecessary; indeed it was something to be positively discouraged. So it set itself against the redistribution of the property of Muslim evacuees from Bengal to incoming Hindu refugees; the policy was to hold it in trust for the Muslims until they too came back home. The official line was grounded in the belief that Bengali refugees crossing the border in either direction could, and indeed should be persuaded to return home. The government clung to this view, in which optimism triumphed over experience, long after it had become patently obvious that the refugees in Bengal had come to stay and that their numbers would only increase. It was several months before the Government of West Bengal accepted that it had to do something for the refugees. When it belatedly set up a rehabilitation board, it was never given adequate resources to do the job. Even after the number of refugees in Bengal had outstripped those from Punjab, such relief and rehabilitation measures as the government put into place still bore the mark of its stubborn unwillingness to accept that the problem would not simply go away on its own.

This was what led the refugees to organize and demand that government should give them what they regarded as their 'right'. Their movement of protest embroiled refugees and the government in a bitter and long-drawn-out battle over what legitimately could be expected from the state. These increasingly entrenched positions were set out in official policy decisions and the campaigns against their implementation launched by refugee organizations. The nub of the matter, however, was quite simple: did the refugees have rights to relief and permanent rehabilitation, and did the government have a responsibility to satisfy these rights? As both sides argued their corner, they were forced to spell out their own (often unexamined) assumptions on a range of critically important issues about the ethical prerogatives of citizenship and the imperatives of real politik.

Campaigns by refugees against government diktat were a persistent and highly visible feature of political life in West Bengal well into the 1960s. But their formative period coincided with the initial wave of migration between 1947 and 1950. The issues began to crystallize after the Government of West Bengal decided, quite early on, to deny relief to 'able-bodied males' and to phase out relief camps. As soon as refugees demanded a say in their rehabilitation, the battle lines had been drawn.

Stopping free relief to able-bodied males was only the first of a series of measures to limit the government's liability towards the refugees. The essence of the policy was to whittle down, by one device or another, the numbers eligible for help from the state. By November 1948, the surge in migration caused in large part by events in distant Hyderabad began to tail off." As soon as the number of refugees entering West Bengal had slowed down the government was quick to claim that the worst was over and some officials, adding their two-and-a-bit, even argued that the lure of handouts in the relief programmes was itself attracting migrants—a convenient justification when the government decided to stop providing the pitifully meagre relief it had reluctantly given. In late 1948, the government began to put a new and harsher policy into place. On 25 November 1948, Calcutta announced that only refugees, narrowly defined as persons ordinarily resident in East Bengal who had managed to get to West Bengal between the precise dates of 1st June 1947 and 25th June 1948, on account of civil disturbances or fear of such disturbances or the Partition of India were to be entitled to relief and rehabilitation" A second-order published in December 1948 declared that refugees would not be registered after 15 January 1949, further cutting back the official definition of a refugee.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Laws and regulations for Migrant habitation:**

There had been several laws and regulations applied regarding refugee management in India and it was consequently applied in West Bengal also. The aid of law was necessary for managing such a huge number of people. And to stop pandemonium from getting created several policies were implemented in terms of food, habitation, employment and citizenship. In order to decrease the amount of tension or anxiety which was rising among the migrant people regarding food and habitation, the government initiated several rules to be followed in order to provide an equal benefit and comfort to these migrant people. It was seen that in several places, lands and houses were left by the Muslims who migrated to Pakistan and left their belongings. Such belongings were offered to the Hindu migrants, government lands and not so inhabited fertile lands were also offered to these migrants by following certain habitation offering rules. Such rules and regulations were also mandatory to stop corruption and discrimination from taking place. In July 1949, Calcutta announced that all relief camps in West Bengal must be closed down by 31 October 1949, just three months down. A little later, the deadline was grudgingly extended by a further three months until 31 December 1949, 'with a clear direction that rehabilitation of the inmates of the camps be completed by that date and

the camps be closed with effect from that date. This time, the Government of West Bengal took pains to make it clear that while there may be cases where refugees may show disinclination to move. That should not be any reason why the closing of camps should be delayed. As soon as lands have been allotted and tents offered and railway warrants issued, refugees are expected to move to their new places of settlement. If they do not, they unnecessarily hold up rehabilitation. It should be made clear to them that by doing so they cannot continue the life of the camp which shall positively be closed.

In one draconian step, Bengal's first national government spelt out its final solution. It asserted that it had fulfilled its responsibility to provide 'relief' to the refugees. From now on it would only 'rehabilitate' those few persons it chose to define as refugees. Refugees had to be made to understand that they should expect no further relief and that they would be entitled only to whatever crumbs by way of rehabilitation the government decided to offer them. This was the first in a series of official announcements by which it was made unequivocally clear that refugees had no choice in the matter. They had to take what was offered or get nothing at all.

Earlier the Central, as well as the State government, took some initiatives to check the incoming refugees. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy both wanted to return the refugees. In April 1948, Inter-Dominion Conference was held and produced an Indo-Pakistan Agreement. This agreement provided to remove the fear of the minorities by constructing Minorities' boards in both Bengal. Under these State boards in both Bengal, there would be District Boards. The State Board would work under a State minister and District Board would work under District Officers. The Governments of both Bengal would take care of the Evacuee Property by constructing legislation for Evacuee Property Management Board. This board would be composed of the members of the minority communities. This agreement created a good result and migration of the refugees trickled down for a moment. But the situation was getting worse after some time. The economic and social exclusion by the majority of the community of East Bengal created another problem and soon it gathered power.

The West Bengal Government declared a press note that no persons would be registered as refugees after 25 June 1948, as this exodus was taken place by social and economic issues (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 30.06.1948; Chakrabarti, 1999). During the 1950s' when the Namasudra community was perpetrated by the Muslim community and exodus had been taken in full fledge, the governments wanted to check it by Delhi Pact signed on 8 April 1950. This was a bilateral treaty between Nehru and Liaquat about the refugees' property. It was an agreement to take over the refugees' forced to land and looted property when they would return to their place. After this agreement 12 lakh, people returned to East Pakistan (Choudhury, 1983). Later Pakistan government introduced the Passport system on 15 October 1952 to check the migration flow.

Approx. 10000 people came to West Bengal just before the introduction of the Passport system (Sengupta, 2017) In the 1950s' the government also introduced a border slip system at the border stations of Ranaghat, Bongaon to check the refugee influx (Dasgupta, 2016). But the influx continued.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Future of such immigrants:**

The thrust of what the government set out to do, at least in the prospectus, was to encourage refugees to be self-employed. Categorized by their social background and training, refugees were to be offered soft loans of varying amounts to enable them to buy appropriate equipment, tools or supplies in order to set themselves up as entrepreneurs. Those who felt they had neither the training nor the talent for entrepreneurship but wanted 'proper jobs' instead, those who preferred to stay on in camps and those who deserted' from the concentration camp-like conditions of 'rehabilitation colonies' were given no choice. They had to do as they were told or lose all claim to the meagre rehabilitation benefits on offer. Hardly surprisingly, this unattractive policy brought the government into repeated conflict with the refugees.

These directives give an insight into the government's view of its responsibilities towards its refugee citizenry. The policy of the Centre and the state of West Bengal may have differed in emphasis, but more significant is the measure of consensus between them on this question. So the core assumptions that underpinned their common position need to be examined, as they have an importance that goes beyond the issue around which their thinking crystallized. By attempting repeatedly to restrict the definition of who could claim to be a 'refugee', the government showed that it had to accept, however grudgingly, that it could not altogether avoid responsibility for those displaced by Partition and to acknowledge that it had some obligations towards the 'victims' of India's vivisection. The fine sentiment, frequently and platitudinous voiced in the documents of the Rehabilitation Department was that 'to succour and rehabilitate the victims of communal passion is an obligation the country is solemnly pledged to honor.' In practice, however, the government strove officiously to limit its liability and did so by cutting its definition of the term 'refugee' to the bone. A refugee, Calcutta declared, was a person who had migrated before the end of June 1948; to be classified as a refugee, he was also required to have registered himself as such before January 1949.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Citizenship of Migrants:**

In the case of divided Bengal, citizenship followed a different path. Migration from one territorial unit to another, even if it temporary defined one's nationality; signaled the intent of acquiring new citizenship and simultaneously giving up the original identity. In the years between the Partition and the enactment of appropriate legislation laying down the regulations and definitions of citizenship in India and Pakistan, individuals who crossed the border had to constantly negotiate the ambiguities

surrounding their migration, residence, and putative and 'natural' national identity.

The initial policy of the Government of India had been to allow citizenship rights to those migrants who officially declared their intention to become citizens of India and later acquired the necessary documentation. Getting one's name on the electoral rolls was one of the primary ways to ensure subsequent citizenship rights. Such a policy presented two contradictory dilemmas for Indian authorities. On the one hand, allowing any migrant to acquire citizenship could limit its rehabilitation responsibilities toward the refugees. On the other hand, the government feared that such a policy might encourage Hindu minorities to opt for migration in such large numbers that would not only create an economic strain but also threaten the secular façade of the Indian State. In order to stem the continuing tide of migration, the Indian government fixed a time limit by which a refugee/migrant had to declare his/her intention to stay in India, and in the early 1950s, declared that inclusion within the electoral rolls would not guarantee automatic citizenship rights.<sup>11</sup>

### Migration's effects:

Given the fact that post-partition migration formed the largest flow of displaced population of this century, the available demographic data, ironically, are chiefly often unreliable<sup>12</sup> approximations. Hindu nationalists made the migration from Bangladesh an election campaign in West Bengal during the 1990s. Although there were various allegations against Bangladeshi migration, it never became a mainstream political issue in the state, like in neighbouring Assam. West Bengal shares the longest border with Bangladesh, compared to any other Indian state, and hosts a large number of Bangladeshi migrants, according to the Census reports in India. West Bengal and Bangladesh share a common ethnicity, both were predominantly Bengali.<sup>13</sup> The actual figure for displaced people may be much higher. The figures of incoming refugees between 1947-51 reported by the Indian and Pakistani census, of 1951, were 7.22 and 7.29 million respectively and these add up to over 14.5 million people. The post-1951 migrations which mainly took place in Eastern India were substantial and must also be taken into reckoning.<sup>14</sup>

### 2. Conclusion

It had been seen that the partition of 1947 was a historical turn around for the nation of India and particularly for West Bengal because West Bengal had been one of the most affected states by partition and it had been sharing a large border area with East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh. The communal or religious anomalies brought up by the partition of Hindu and Muslim states, incurred mass migration of people from one state to another for safe and peaceful habitation. Hence millions of people changed their habitation and the respective government or administrative management had to tackle all the necessary outcomes of events regarding their safe passage, food and shelter and habitation. The government took various initiatives over time to tackle the refugee

problems. But most of the policies and initiatives became unsuccessful. Out of four rehabilitation schemes for agricultural refugees, only type schemes got the attraction to the refugees. In industrial schemes employment rate was unsatisfactory. The student enrollments ratio in Secondary Education was also low. If we could carefully observe the reason for those failures we could find that lack of proper monitoring and the absence of an active governing body was the prime cause of the failure of these schemes. Governments had to take care of the refugees properly since the beginning of the influx and should be provided necessary actions accordingly. However after a couple of years, things started to change, the government introduced several policies for habitation, employment, and education and also provided citizenship to the willing people. However with all being said, it needed to be mentioned that the initial circumstances after the partition took the government or the administrative management by surprise, but after a couple of years along the stability of the government or the administrative management, the refugee management improved significantly.

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