

Refugee Rehabilitation: A Study Of Bengali Migrants In Post-Partition India.

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Abstract:

The partition of India produced millions of refugees on both side of the border. People from East Pakistan (currently Bangladesh) and West Pakistan migrated to India during and after the independence of India. However, there are historians and literary writers who have pointed out the different attitudes of government agencies towards the refugees of western and eastern side of partition. The paper will address the issues related to the Bengali migrants in post-partition West Bengal and their step-motherly attitude for the Bengali refugees by the central government and how the refugees reacted against this discrimination. It would also attempt to highlight how the east Bengali migrants were discriminated based on their caste and class and why some of the refugees were sent to Dandya Karanya forest and Andaman Island while others were allowed to settle in and around Kolkata city. The paper will also highlight different phases of migration in Bengal and its differences in comparison to the migration happened in western border of Indian sub-continent.

Keywords: Partition, Bengali Partition Narratives, Refugees, Rehabilitation, Migration

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I. Introduction

Bengal has witnessed three partitions to date. These are - the partition of 1905, the partition and independence of India (Bengal province also partitioned) in 1947 and East Pakistan's separation and creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Bengal has witnessed three partitions to date. These are- the bifurcation of Bengal in 1905, the partition and independence of two newly formed countries in 1947, and the bifurcation of Eastern part (Bengal) from Pakistan which gave birth to a new country called Bangladesh in 1971. The present research would focus on the literature written in the context of the second partition of 1947. The novels studied for research are related to West Bengal and written in English and English translations from Bengali novels and memoirs.

In 1905, Lord Curzon attempted to divide Bengal to curb the nationalist movement, led by the Bengali Hindu *bhadraloks*. He thought that if Bengal was divided, then in East Bengal, the Muslim community would start dominating its political space which would resist the nationalist movement instigated by the Bengalis. The Bengali Hindus protested the move, and the British were forced to revoke the decision due to the continuing struggle. Lord Mountbatten announced the partition of Indian sub-continent on 3 June 1947. On 14 August 1947 Pakistan, and 15 August 1947 India were declared as independent countries respectively.

The partition marked the mass migration in human history where countless people from both sides were killed, sexually assaulted, forcefully converted, abducted, and mutilated during displacement. However, the history of partition seems to have been the consequence of political development. As Gyanendra Pandey argues, the experience of millions during partition, their sufferings, loss of lives, pain of separation etc. have been given a 'lesser status' in the description of India's freedom struggle (Pandey 1991, 6-7).

Bengali Partition Narratives

The partition of Bengal, by consensus, was less violent in comparison to that of Punjab. The partition memory of Eastern Indians differs significantly from that of the North Indian victims. The Bengali partition

narratives mainly deal with the fear of being attacked at any point of time, with the attendant apprehension that they would never get religious freedom in an Islamic country. Characters are often seen remembering their homeland (*Desher Bari*) nostalgically in the novels.

Bengali partition novels deal with various partition themes, but there is little mention of 'direct' partition violence as seen in some of the north Indian partition novels. The novelists show protagonists separating themselves from the events of partition, so that the witness may create a version of their past. Characters live in two worlds, the everyday reality in post-partition society and the memory of violence they encounter during and after the partition.

The partition of Bengal problematises the identity formation process. Several layers of identity came into existence due to the partition of Bengal, such as Indian Bengali Hindu, Indian Bengali Muslim, Pakistani Bengali Muslim, and Pakistani Bengali Hindu. Various Bengali partition writers have also presented the *Ghoti* and *Bangal* identity issue among the Bengalis of West Bengal. Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purba-Pashchim* (2000) has portrayed this *Ghoti* and *Bangal* issue extensively. The natives of West Bengal in India are known as *Ghoti*, and those who migrated from Bangladesh (East-Pakistan) are known as *Bangal*.

The Bengal province witnessed a movement for united Bengal. When Congress and Muslim League demanded Bengal on their respective sides, some Bengali intellectuals, and political activists like Saratchandra Bose and Suhrawardy campaigned in favour of a sovereign Bengal. However, their attempt was too weak to make a difference at the time. This counter-movement from Bengal to India's mainstream political parties has received attention in several Bengali Partition writings. The movement has remained unnoticed in India's mainstream partition narratives.

The Bengal partition has left a significant imprint on the intellectuals and creative minds over the years. The Bengali language has also produced many partition writings that have contributed to the Bengali literary spectrum. Some of the exemplary works are: Manik Bandopadhyay's *Sarbojanin* (1974), Amarendra Ghosh's *Beaini Janata* (1952), and Jagadish Chandra Mandal's *Banga Bhanga* (1977), to mention a few.

Besides these novels, a considerable number of films have been produced in the Bengali language, which hinge on several issues concerning the partition of Bengal. Some notable works of this category are Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1951), Nirmal Dey's *Sare Chuattar* (1953), Sukumar Dasgupta's *Ora Thake Odhare* (1954), Ritwik Kumar Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* (1975), Satyajit Rai's *Mahanagar* (1963), Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Tahader Kotha* (1993) etc.

The portrayal of the partitions on the Punjab side is emphasised equally in history and literature. Historians and literary authors seem to be worried about the incidents that have taken place in Punjab. However, the effect of partition was not similar in Bengal and Punjab. Ethnic violence took the form of a genocide that forced the government to intervene quickly on the western side. When it came to the eastern front, there was no sense of urgency. Hindu minorities in East Pakistan were not considered to be under immediate threat, and refugee flow in eastern front was mostly the subject of unflattering rumors and expected worries.

Partition has triggered one of the greatest migrations of people in history. Some twenty million people were migrated, marking it the largest displacement in the twentieth century, with twenty million people displaced in Punjab province alone. This unprecedented, forced transfer of people occurred despite the assurance of party leaders and the British administrators. The Indian subcontinent was divided to avoid violence, but it became the very reason for the great genocide that no one could have ever imagined.

The partition is one of the classic examples of "refugee generating process". It left millions of people on the other side, it was one of the greatest exoduses in world history. Migration in Bengal happened in three phases. The first phase of migration occurred between October 1946 to March 1958. Those, who entered West Bengal during this time were termed as 'old migrants'. They comprised of elite Hindu *bhadralok*, who did not become a burden on the provincial government. Many of these migrated people had socially or economically influential relatives or assets in the newly formed West Bengal. The second phase of migration took place from 1958 to 1963. These refugees were called "in between migrants". They consisted of the working class and upper-middle class people. They were not recognised as displaced people and were not provided with any economic assistance. The people who migrated from East Pakistan for the government's offers were declared as refugees. Even the Nehru government had suggested the government to shut down the rehabilitation works. The third phase of migration happened during January 1964 to March 1971, this wave of migration started with the incidents of Hajratwal in 1964 when few miscreants desecrated Hajratbal Dargah, and in reaction to that incident, there were communal riots in various parts of Bangladesh (East Pakistan). In this phase, East Bengali people from the peasantry and the artisan sections left their homes for India.

Nilanjana Chatterjee, in her article 'Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence' analyses the reasons behind the migration of East Bengali people. She discusses three things that forced the people of East Bengal to leave their homeland for West Bengal. She opines-East Bengali claims to victimhood used the language of Muslim communal violence- fear of losing life, property, and honour

(Pran, Dhan, and Maan) to legitimate their claim to be political refugees and to gain public sympathy in India (Chatterjee 2006, 20).

The migration in the post partition Bengal was not just a politically forced mission but it was significant culturally as well as socially. It formed a new fractured identity not just of a nation but of its people. Who could not adapt to the imagined or rather a newly formed homeland. This was also the time when reverse migration began. There were incidents of reverse migration during partition because of the confusion regarding national boundaries. Preet Nagar Town near Amritsar and Malda district in Bengal province witnessed such reverse migration. These two areas were first declared to be part of Pakistan, and most of the non-Muslims residing in that area vacated for a 'new' country. However, after a few days, both places were declared part of India and the people who left, returned to their homes and thus reverse migration happened.

Jogendranath Mondal reiterated that the Dalits and oppressed people opposed the decision of partition. He decided to stay in Pakistan after the partition and became a minister in the Pakistan government. Although, backward Bengali people, including most of the Dalits, sided with the narratives of Congress and Hindu Mahasabha. They preferred to stay in the Indian union and wanted to see themselves as a citizen of a Hindu majority nation-state. In the aftermath of the partition, the Dalits were the most backward community in each field. They were not welcomed with an open heart by West Bengal's people, despite belonging to the same linguistic group. The native people of West Bengal kept a distance from them. The lower caste refugees were denied any help by the upper and upper-caste migrants, with whom they left their homeland.

Rehabilitation measures adopted for the two classes were also visible because of the caste system. With resources in their possession, the upper caste refugees could easily be integrated into the mainland of West Bengal. On the other hand, the lower caste people were forced to live on the fringes, and they went on to new places like Andaman Islands or the Dandakaranya forest. Jhuma Sen writes-

It must also be mentioned that in Calcutta and its vicinity, 149 unauthorised colonies, colloquially termed as '*jabor dakhal*', sprang up to house the bhadralok refugees. Conversely, the chhotolok were placed in transit camps and forced out of the state (Sen 2015, 3).

Adhir Biswas and Byapari's memoirs claim that refugee camps and colonies have been organised in West Bengal concerning caste and class hierarchies. The upper class's poor refugees were also acutely dominated and distanced from the refugees of a lower caste. Following the migration, many socially upright but financially weak people resisted settling in the camps with other refugees. They considered it a shame to live with the Dalit people in the same camp. This was discrimination within discrimination.

Discrimination by the Government:

The caste and class-based discrimination appeared in the rehabilitation project of refugees under Dr Bidhan Chandra Ray's ministry. The government planned to resettle the Dalit Bengali refugees outside of West Bengal, to the places like Andaman Island and the Dandakaranya forest area. Sarbani Banerjee draws the status of lower-class refugees from East-Pakistan who led their insular life since their economical status was never good. They did not have any choice but to leave their 'own motherland'. They had no choice to choose their desired life style in post-partition society. The Bengal government also planned to settle them either in Dandakaranya forest or Andaman Island.

The lower-class people had earlier led an insular life in East Pakistan and would not be incorporated in mainstream nationalistic political movements. Because they did not have a monetary hold, they could not propose any choice about their desired style of living in the post-partition period (Sen 2015, 38).

On the representation of Dalits and other lower caste Bengali refugees, Jhuma Sen brings an account of discrimination and repression of *Chhotolok* or *Dalits*, in her article "Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives" (2015). She says- "Bengal's romance with the upper caste bhadralok's 'traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal' has dominated the imagination of partition historiography so much" (Sen 2015, 1).

Dandakaranya Project

The Dandakaranya Project Area (DPA) covered about 77,700 km of Orisha and Madhya Pradesh. The process of sending refugees started as soon as the DPA began in 1958. Dandakaranya was an area culturally and socially removed from the known world of the refugees. Many refugee camps witnessed a mass protest dissenting against the attempt of the government to send them away. Even the government served the refugees notice to either go to Dandakaranya or leave the camps within 30 days. However, from the first day itself, refugees started leaving the Dandakaranya forest. Since most of the refugees were poor, and from farmer background, they would not be familiar with other activities other than farming. The Dandakaranya forest area was not fertile. The refugees, who were sent to Dandakaranya were neglected for their basic needs because of the misconception between the state administration of Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and the DPA.

The Bangladesh government opened the national border for the *sharanarthi* (refugee-seekers) who fled during the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. As a result, many refugees return to the newly formed country Bangladesh. However, the ruling state government planned to settle the remaining poor and Dalit migrants in the Dandakaranya forestry in Madhya Pradesh. Like Andaman, the government also expected to 'use' the refugees in cleaning lands or rigorous labour.

Whenever some communal incidents happen, refugees started to migrate from East Bengal. Lacs of refugees entered Bengal during various stages in the post-partition period. The conversation between Biswanath and Pratap shows how big the problem of refugees is going to be for the native people of West Bengal.

Lacs of refugees, can West Bengal alone manage all this? They will spread over Bihar, Orissa and Assam and there would be some problems regarding that. Problem! Problem! The problem will continue. Muslims have tried to drive out Hindus from East Bengal but after all, these, are they happy? It seems that East Bengal has become the colony of West Pakistan?" (Gangopadhyay 1975, 49).

Due to the overload of refugees, the West Bengal government decides to send refugees to the Dandakaranya forest. Harit Mondal, being a refugee leader, protests against the decision. He exclaims, "the government is sending us to the Dandakaranya forest, is it right?" He asks Sahajahan, a Bengali Indian Muslim, "you people demanded Pakistan and you would stay in Kolkata, and we will go to Dandakaranya in Orissa? Why?"

Refugee leader Harit Mondal actively participates in the protest march against West Bengal's government, demanding necessary facilities and rehabilitation for them. The government plans to send the refugees to Dandakaranya forest and Andaman Island. They protest against the state strongly supported by various communist organisations. Police beat Harit Mondal several times because of his involvement in the refugee struggles. He leaves his home, properties, and ponds in East Pakistan and after migration he struggles to settle himself.

He says, "I had my house over there with three rooms, one kitchen, one cowshed. Besides these, I had a small pond, and one shared big pond, thirteen bighas of paddy field. I was never worried about food and other things" (Gangopadhyay 1989, 115).

The writer mentions the death of Jawaharlal Nehru and the reaction of Bengali refugees. The refugees are sent in the Dandakaranya forest. However, due to the cyclone, their camps are blown up. The government does not do anything for them, and camp officers flee, expecting a backlash from the refugees. Suddenly, they hear a drum with an announcement of Jawaharlal Nehru's death. After listening to this news, refugees start dancing because they believed that Nehru is the reason for their misfortune. They think Nehru's step-motherly attitude towards Bengali refugees deprived them of many facilities that the Punjabi refugees availed.

A news of death brings the tide of happiness despite their sufferings and pain. They surrounded the announcer and wanted to know further information. Has someone shot him? Did he suffer pain while dying? Was there someone beside him to give him water while he was dying? (Gangopadhyay 1989, 347).

Post-partition Identity Crisis and Refugee Rehabilitation

The writer presents several Bengali Muslims who think of themselves as Bengali first and Pakistani second. Mainul Khan is one such person, who is a 'fanatic Bengali'. He explains to the narrator that Pakistan is the name of the country, and it consists of various linguistic and cultural groups such as Sindhis, Punjabis, Balochis and Bengalis. These Biharis are only a group of Mohajirs or migrated people. However, they are occupying lands of Bengali speaking people. There is also tension regarding Urdu language among the Bengali speaking community. The national anthem of Pakistan is composed in the Urdu language. The Bengali students consider the anthem as strange since each word and sentence is alien to them. On his visit to East Pakistan, Jinnah advocates for Urdu as the official language. Urdu is introduced in schools as a compulsory subject. The school authority provides Urdu textbooks to the students. The narrator writes about the Urdu language- "The alphabet looked like a spider web and we were advised to read from right to left, not from left to right" (Dhar, 2012, 148). The Bengali students of East Pakistan were not happy with the imposition of the Urdu language on them. Many students protest this decision of the government. Senior students at the school start singing a Bengali song, "*moder ghorob moder asha, amori Bangla bhasa*" (My Pride, My hope, my Bengali language), in protest against the Urdu language. They see it as an attempt to keep them away from their mother tongue. The writer says-

We had no idea who Jinnah was but young as we were, the consensus was that no one, not even Jinnah, had any right to ask us to forget our mother tongue. How could a Mymensingh Bengali dialect speaker imagine forgetting his uniquely flavoured language? Could anyone compose Mymensingh Geetika and Bhatiali songs in Urdu or English? Could any other language capture the pathos of Chand-Sundari folktale songs, and the lilting songs composed by my father or the ballads of Mymensingh and local boat songs? (Dhar 2012, 149).

The writer presents Bengali culture and society in the post-partition period in West Bengal. He mentions "a football match between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan" (Dhar 2012, 288). The East Bengal team

consists of people migrated from Eastern Bengal, established in 1920. They are known as Bangal. In contrast, the Mohun Bagan team consisted of players from native people of West Bengal who are known as Ghoti, established in 1889. When the East Bengal team scores two goals, Mohun Bagan's supporters become angry and start fighting each other. The narrator is beaten up badly in that fight since he is also a Bangal. People from these two groups consider their prestige issue on the result of the matches. The other important club is Mohammedan Sporting Club, founded in 1892. The narrator mentions massive competition between these three clubs, and their sports often lead to skirmishes between the groups. If East Bengal win, the match, then the price of Hilsa fish would increase. They would purchase Hilsa fish out of happiness since it is the symbol of the Bangals. On the other hand, if Mohun Bagan wins then the price of prawns will get higher. Because prawn was the symbol of Ghatia. If Mohammedan SC defeats either Mohun Bagan or East Bengal, some Hindus or Muslims would be stabbed for sure.

Mullick added that on the day Mohun Bagan won against East Bengal the prices of chingri (prawn) maach would skyrocket. Prawns were the symbol of the Ghatia. Reversely, the price of hilsa fish would skyrocket when East Bengal defeated Mohun Bagan. He hastened to add that whenever the Mohammedan Sporting Club happened to defeat either the Mohun Bagan or East Bengal, some Hindus or Muslims were sure to be stabbed (Dhar 2012, 288-89).

Refugee rehabilitation remains controversial as it applies to the concept of 'refugee' as an indifferent community whose perceptions of displacement and rehabilitation are homogenised. Further, these examinations assume that the Bengal partition generated a singular and automatic 'refugee' identity, which was dissociated from the minority question that engulfed public and political debates on citizenship after 1947. Irrespective of the tensions created by this, there will always be occasions where identities of all kinds bring people closer. Haimanti Roy rightly points out in her book *Citizenship and National Identity in Post-Partition Bengal* (2016) that "these conflicting attempts to homogenise national identities in religious terms were contested in the post-partition period, as identities based on region, language and culture competed for primacy" (Roy 2016, 65).

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