

The Long Shadow Of Partition: Bengali Displacement, 1946-1981

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Abstract:

In this paper an attempt has been made to see the migration primarily into the western parts of Bengal from its eastern parts. The trends, already present, were exacerbated in the tumult of partition. The social, regional and economic background of the migrants has been looked at while estimating the numbers that actually migrated. The wave-like nature of migration is seen as being fed by factors as diverse as cyclone and communal disturbances. Covering the period when migration was legal it surmises that illegal migration continues.

Keywords: Migration, Partition, Refugee, Communal

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The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, carried out on the basis of religion, remains one of the most poignant and traumatic episodes in South Asian history. Its human cost was immense, primarily manifested in one of the largest forced migrations of the twentieth century. This mass displacement unfolded across two major regions: Punjab in the west and Bengal in the east. On the western front, an estimated 7.4 million refugees migrated from Pakistan to India, while approximately 7.2 million people moved from India to Pakistan.¹ In eastern India, the process was more prolonged and extended well beyond 1947. Between 1946 and 1970, nearly five million Hindus migrated from East Pakistan to West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, while around one and a half million Muslims left West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Tripura to settle in East Pakistan.² Unlike the relatively short but intensely violent western migration, the eastern experience of displacement was marked by its slow, episodic nature, creating enduring social, economic, and political consequences for the region.

This article foregrounds the migration from East Bengal to West Bengal, employing quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the circumstances of refugees and displaced persons and to interrogate the structural and historical causes behind these migratory flows.

I. Bengal: The Migration Scenario:

The exodus from eastern India began nearly a year before the formal announcement of partition. The Muslim League's call for "Direct Action" on 16th August 1946, intended to press the demand for a separate Muslim homeland, precipitated large-scale communal riots in Calcutta.³ The violence soon spread eastward to Noakhali on (10 October 1946) and Tipperah in eastern Bengal, and then westward to Bihar on (25 October), followed by Uttar Pradesh in November, and subsequently to Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province from March 1947 onwards.⁴ The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 alone claimed the lives of at least 3,000 people, marking a decisive rupture in Bengal's fragile communal coexistence. Violence continued unabated in the months that followed, with Muslim mobs attacking Hindus in Noakhali and Tipperah, while retaliatory violence by Hindu mobs targeted Muslims in West Bengal and Bihar.⁵ These cycles of communal brutality created an atmosphere of pervasive fear and insecurity, which ultimately contributed to the mass migration of both Hindus and Muslims across newly forming borders.

While communal violence undoubtedly played a crucial role in triggering displacement, Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarty, in his seminal work "The Marginal Men" argues that post-partition migration from East Pakistan cannot be explained solely through episodic riots. According to Chakrabarty, Hindus left East Pakistan largely due to what he terms "deliberate and sustained mental torture" inflicted by sections of the Muslim population.⁶ This psychological coercion manifested through persistent pressures to conform to "Muslim culture," alongside forced conversions, murders, destruction and burning of Hindu property, sexual violence, abduction, and forcible marriages of Hindu women in the aftermath of the Noakhali and Tipperah disturbances.

The Muslim League government of Bengal, headed by H. S. Suhrawardy, officially disclaimed responsibility for the violence, asserting that the League had no involvement in the disturbances. However, the administration's failure to take decisive action against perpetrators further deepened minority insecurity and reinforced the perception of state complicity or indifference.⁷ Over time, the emotional attachment to ancestral homes and cultivated lands—often sustained across generations—was overwhelmed by fear, repeated humiliation, and, in many cases, the tangible loss of life, property, and the cultural worlds around which everyday existence had been organised.

Every Hindu individual and family in East Bengal—much like Muslim families in West Bengal—was confronted with the agonising decision of whether to stay or migrate in the aftermath of partition. Although often represented as a unified community, the Hindus of East Bengal were far from homogeneous in terms of caste, class, occupation, and regional distribution. They were concentrated largely in the southern districts of East Pakistan, a region that had historically been a stronghold of Hindu political authority. The density of the Hindu population was particularly high in Khulna, Jessore, Barisal, Faridpur, and Dacca. Within this population, sections of the upper castes, especially Brahmins and Kayasthas, were concentrated around Barisal, Dacca, and Bikrampur. These groups constituted the *bhadralok*, who were almost uniformly literate and often highly educated, either in English or in the vernacular. In contrast, Scheduled Castes, primarily Namasudras, Pods, and Jalia Kaibartas, were predominantly engaged in agriculture, manual labour, and fishing. They were dispersed across Faridpur, Dacca, Jessore, Khulna, Barisal, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Pabna, forming the backbone of the rural economy. Scheduled Tribes, such as the Santals, were largely concentrated in Rangpur and Dinajpur, while the Chakmas inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts and parts of Mymensingh.⁸ The Rajbangshis, classified as a Scheduled Caste, resided mainly in the northern districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur. In the urban centres of northern Bengal, *babus*—educated Hindu clerks, professionals, and petty officials—were a ubiquitous presence, occupying key roles in administration and commerce.⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the Noakhali violence, migration from East Pakistan to West Bengal was led primarily by the *bhadralok* classes. Minority Hindu communities in East Pakistan faced acute economic distress as trade networks, shops, and businesses were systematically destroyed during communal attacks.¹⁰ For the *bhadralok*, these material losses were compounded by a deep-seated fear that, in the newly created state of Pakistan, they would suffer a loss of social status, economic security, and political influence, effectively becoming second-class citizens. Social and psychological factors further intensified this sense of insecurity. Many among the *bhadralok* found it difficult to reconcile themselves to life under a Muslim-majority administration, which they perceived—through the lens of entrenched caste and class prejudices—as economically and socially inferior. These perceptions, rooted in colonial-era hierarchies, sharpened the trauma of partition and accelerated migration. Moreover, *bhadralok* refugees often maintained long-standing social, political, and economic ties with western Bengal, making relocation appear both feasible and desirable. Educated Hindus who had actively participated in the freedom movement were among the earliest to leave East Bengal immediately after independence. Consequently, the first wave of post-partition migrants largely comprised middle-class professionals and property holders, including teachers, lawyers, doctors, shopkeepers, businessmen, *jotedars*, and *talukdars*. Their departure not only reshaped the demographic composition of East Pakistan but also profoundly altered the social and intellectual landscape of post-partition West Bengal.

By June 1948, approximately 1.1 million refugees had migrated to West Bengal. Among them, around 350,000 belonged to the urban middle classes, while 550,000 came from the rural middle strata. Nearly 100,000 agriculturists and peasants left East Bengal during the early waves of migration, a period when the situation there was still relatively stable and communal tensions had not yet reached their peak. Additionally, just under 100,000 artisans migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal, driven largely by anxieties regarding the loss of livelihood security.¹¹ Migration among the Namasudra middle classes was comparatively limited in the initial phase, with only a small number managing to migrate by selling their property or arranging exchanges of land with others.¹² Overall, only one in four refugees came from Scheduled Caste or tribal backgrounds, indicating the class and caste-selective nature of early migration.¹³ The disruption of Hindu commercial and agrarian interests through the theft of cattle and boats, destruction of crops, and burning of property—severely undermined economic stability and contributed to growing insecurity. The incorporation of East Bengal into an Islamic state further intensified Hindu anxieties about their future, reinforcing fears of marginalisation and accelerating the decision to migrate.

During the first two months of 1950, the influx of migrants into West Bengal showed signs of slowing. However, from the last week of February, migration surged dramatically following the riots in the Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna in (December, 1949) and its subsequent spread to regions such as Rajshahi and Barisal. This renewed outbreak of communal violence triggered an almost avalanche-like movement of refugees across the border. The 1950 riots marked a decisive watershed in the history of refugee migration and rehabilitation in West Bengal. By the end of that year, over 1 million additional refugees had entered the state, fundamentally altering both the scale and character of the refugee crisis.¹⁴ For many Hindus who had remained in East Pakistan

despite earlier waves of violence—often by resigning themselves to a position of social and political subordination—this episode proved to be the final blow. The gravity of the situation was acknowledged at the highest levels of the Indian state. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, addressing Parliament, referred to the unfolding events as the “grim East Bengal tragedy,” underscoring both the humanitarian catastrophe and the failure of existing safeguards for minority populations in Pakistan.¹⁵

This later wave of refugees consisted predominantly of the lower social strata, including peasants, agricultural labourers, rural craftsmen and artisans, fishermen, and the urban poor. As one contemporary account observes, “When peasants fled from East Bengal in large numbers in early 1950, they did so because they were the victims of terrifying communal violence in the rural tracts of Khulna, Jessore, Barisal and Faridpur. The level of migration of the poor and lowly continued to rise, but peasants were inclined to leave only when the spectre of communal violence stalked the land.”¹⁶ In March 1950, Dr P. C. Ghosh, a member of the Congress Working Committee, visited Dacca and publicly acknowledged the pervasive climate of fear, stating: “There is no sense of security in the minds of the Hindus. The greatest scare has been caused by attacks resulting in deaths in the railway trains.” Reports from rural East Bengal further reveal that Muslims forcibly appropriated land from Namasudra peasants and subjected women to sustained harassment and intimidation.¹⁷ For East Bengali Hindu refugees—most of whom belonged to the lower classes—the cumulative impact of riots, economic dispossession, and sexual insecurity produced an overwhelming sense of vulnerability. Unable to feel secure in East Pakistan, many sought to cross the border and gain admission to government-run refugee camps in West Bengal. Similar dynamics operated in reverse, with Howrah district emerging as a major site of Hindu reprisals against Muslims, prompting Muslim migration to East Pakistan. Notably, migration did not cease even after the signing of the Delhi Pact of 1950, which formally provided for the return of migrants on both sides and guaranteed full proprietary rights over immovable property left behind. In practice, however, the Pact failed to inspire confidence among minority populations. Persistent insecurity, memories of violence, and the absence of effective state protection ensured that displacement continued unabated, underscoring the limits of diplomatic agreements in resolving deeply rooted communal trauma.

By 1950, approximately 54 refugee colonies had been established in and around Calcutta, each accommodating an average population of about 4,000 residents.¹⁸ According to P. N. Luthra, in his work *Rehabilitation*, by 1951 there were an estimated 31.24 lakh migrants from East Bengal who had entered West Bengal and other parts of India.¹⁹ For many among the Namasudras and other Scheduled Castes, acute food scarcity, coupled with sustained pressure to convert to Islam, constituted a decisive push factor for migration. Environmental calamities further exacerbated these vulnerabilities: floods in parts of Mymensingh and Pabna, as well as cyclonic devastation in villages of Faridpur and Jessore, compounded economic distress and reinforced the decision to migrate to West Bengal.²⁰

A significant proportion of this migration occurred before Pakistan introduced the passport system for travel to India on 15 October 1952. The announcement of passport requirements heightened anxieties among both Hindus and Muslims, who perceived it as an attempt to permanently seal escape routes across the border. This sense of impending closure generated widespread panic, leading to a sharp increase in migration in the months immediately preceding the policy’s implementation.²¹ By 1952, nearly 98 per cent of refugees were entering West Bengal via Bongaon, with the remainder crossing through Banpur, and most congregated in and around Sealdah railway station upon arrival. An overwhelming 95 per cent of these refugees were Namasudras, primarily engaged in occupations such as cultivation, day labour, fishing, washing, and other forms of manual work. The principal cause of this sudden influx was acute economic dislocation in East Bengal. Traditionally, Namasudra livelihoods depended either on cultivating land owned by upper- and middle-class Hindus or on wage labour in their households. With the earlier migration of these dominant Hindu groups, lower-caste Hindus were left virtually without employment. The Pakistan government provided little to no relief to these displaced populations, further deepening their marginalisation. Most of these refugees originated from the districts of Khulna, Barisal, Faridpur, and Jessore. Upon arrival in West Bengal, they found shelter wherever space was available—on vacant land, in customs godowns, and on the platforms and surrounding areas of Sealdah station.²² Their precarious living conditions underscored the class and caste dimensions of displacement, revealing how partition produced not only communal but also profoundly socially stratified patterns of migration and suffering.

In 1953 and 1954, refugee admissions to government camps in West Bengal numbered 10,474 and 46,904 respectively. The subsequent years, 1955 and 1956, witnessed renewed communal disturbances in East Pakistan, particularly in connection with the national language movement and the promulgation of an Islamic Constitution. These developments intensified Hindu anxieties and triggered another wave of migration to India. Correspondingly, refugee admissions in government camps rose sharply, reaching 109,834 in 1955 and 71,263 in 1956 (up to July).²³ The situation was further complicated by the introduction of Migration Certificates in 1956, which became mandatory travel documents in the post-passport regime. Alongside passports and the priority-based issuance of migration certificates, these measures imposed stringent restrictions on cross-border

mobility. As a result, only a limited number of refugees were able to migrate legally in the years that followed. Although these controls led to a comparative decline in refugee inflows, migration did not cease altogether. Up to 1963, the number of refugees arriving from East Pakistan showed a steady decline. Nevertheless, the 1961 Census recorded over four million migrants from East Pakistan residing in India, of whom more than three million were settled in West Bengal.²⁴

Following a relatively quieter phase between 1957 and 1963, migration resumed dramatically in the wake of the communal riots of 1964. As contemporary accounts note, “In 1964, a mass exodus again took place when the theft of the holy hair from the Hazrat Bal mosque in Kashmir was attributed to the Hindus.” This incident sparked a chain of communal attacks and retaliations between Hindus and Muslims, escalating into widespread riots in both West Bengal and East Pakistan.²⁵ The violence spread rapidly to regions such as Rajshahi, Pabna, and Dacca, resulting in extensive loss of life among minority communities. In 1964 alone, approximately 6.93 lakh refugees migrated to India from East Bengal, of whom 4.19 lakh entered West Bengal.²⁶

On the eve of the birth of Bangladesh in 1970, yet another wave of displacement occurred, with nearly 2.5 lakh refugees crossing into West Bengal from East Pakistan.²⁷ Despite these figures, estimating the precise scale of migration remains difficult due to the prolonged, episodic, and often undocumented nature of displacement. According to P. N. Luthra, in *Rehabilitation*, approximately 52.83 lakh refugees migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and other parts of India between 1946 and 1970, of whom nearly 39.56 lakh settled in West Bengal alone.²⁸

Table 1: Reasons why refugees fled from East Bengal, 1946-1970 (figures in lakhs)

Year	Reasons for influx	Total	Into West Bengal	Into other states
1946	Noakhali riots	0.19	0.14	0.05
1947	Partition	3.44	2.58	0.86
1948	'Police action' by India in Hyderabad	7.86	5.90	1.96
1949	Communal riots in Khulna and Barisal	2.13	1.82	0.31
1950	Ditto	15.75	11.82	3.93
1951	Kashmir agitation	1.87	1.40	0.47
1952	Worsening of economic conditions; persecution of minorities; passports scare	2.27	1.52	0.75
1953	-----	0.76	0.61	0.15
1954	-----	1.18	1.04	0.14
1955	Unrest over declaration of Urdu as <i>lingua franca</i>	2.40	2.12	0.28
1956	Adoption of Islamic constitution by Pakistan	3.20	2.47	0.73
1957	-----	0.11	0.09	0.02
1958	-----	0.01	0.01	----
1959	-----	0.10	0.09	0.01
1960	-----	0.10	0.09	0.01
1961	-----	0.11	0.10	0.01
1962	-----	0.14	0.13	0.01
1963	-----	0.16	0.14	0.02
1964	Riots over Hazratbal incident	6.93	4.19	2.74
1965	-----	1.08	0.81	0.27
1966	-----	0.08	0.04	0.04
1967	-----	0.24	0.05	0.19
1968	-----	0.12	0.04	0.08
1969	-----	0.10	0.04	0.06
1970	Economic distress and coming elections	2.50	2.32	0.18
TOTALS		52.83	39.56	13.27

Source: P. N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1972 pp. 18–19.

The final phase of the influx of East Pakistani refugees was precipitated by the Indo–Pakistan War of 1971 and the subsequent emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state. The political situation in East Pakistan deteriorated sharply following the military crackdown launched by the Pakistani Army in Dhaka on 25 March 1971. Within just two days, nearly 30,000 people were killed, including a large number of students, teachers, and intellectuals, marking it as one of the most brutal episodes of state violence in South Asian history.²⁹ This campaign of repression triggered a massive refugee influx into India, involving not only Hindu minorities but also large numbers of Muslims fleeing military violence and economic collapse. Although a substantial proportion of these refugees returned to Bangladesh after independence, the return was far from complete. A 1974 survey conducted by the Government of West Bengal estimated that approximately six million refugees had migrated into the state between 1946 and 1973.³⁰ Significantly, it found that of those who entered India between 1970 and 1973, nearly two million did not return, choosing instead to settle permanently.

In contrast, migration in the opposite direction remained comparatively limited. The number of Muslims migrating from India to East Pakistan to join their co-religionists was substantially smaller; estimates suggest that no more than 1.5 million Muslims migrated between 1947 and 1970.³¹ This asymmetry underscores the fundamentally unequal nature of displacement in eastern India, shaped by recurrent communal violence, state repression, and enduring minority insecurity.

Following the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, a bilateral understanding between India and Bangladesh fundamentally altered the legal status of cross-border movement. All future entrants were reclassified not as refugees but as “illegal infiltrators,” effectively closing the possibility of legally recognised refugee inflows from Bangladesh to India.³² In formal terms, this marked the end of refugee migration. In practice, however, migration did not cease.

A survey conducted by the Government of West Bengal in 1981 reported that approximately 1,615,024 refugee families—amounting to nearly eight million individuals—had migrated into West Bengal from East Bengal between 1946 and 1981. This figure, significant as it is, does not account for those who crossed the 1,200-mile-long border through innumerable unmanned and informal points, beyond the reach of official enumeration. As a result, the precise scale of migration remains unknowable, underscoring both the limits of state surveillance and the enduring compulsion that drove displaced populations to cross borders despite shifting legal regimes.³³

II. Conclusion:

In the aftermath of independence, post-Partition migration emerged as the single largest humanitarian crisis confronting both the Indian state and its people, with Punjab and West Bengal bearing the greatest burden. In West Bengal, the process of displacement had begun even before independence. Those who crossed into India from East Bengal were variously described as “refugees,” “displaced persons,” or “migrants,” but they were not generally perceived as culpable actors, since Partition itself had compelled their movement.

The first phase of migration consisted largely of bhadralok and middle-class groups and may be characterised as “voluntary” or “intended” migration, shaped by anticipatory fears of political marginalisation and loss of status. In contrast, the second phase, triggered by the communal riots of 1949–1950, represented a fundamentally different phenomenon. The collapse of everyday coexistence between Hindus and Muslims at the local level, combined with sustained psychological intimidation and acute economic distress, acted as powerful catalysts for Dalit migration, which was overwhelmingly “forced” or “unintended” in nature.

This pattern of legally recognised refugee movement continued until the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Following the creation of Bangladesh, however, the legal framework governing cross-border mobility changed decisively. Migration persisted, but it was no longer officially acknowledged as refugee movement and instead came to be categorised as illegal migration, marking a critical shift in the state’s understanding of displacement, rights, and belonging.

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