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**An Analysis of Post-Partition Life
of the People in West Bengal**

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Abstract

The dissection of the Indian sub-continent changed the future of both the nations that came into being in the year 1947. The event led to the massacre and displacement of millions. Women, children, aged people were brutally killed on both sides of the border. The step taken by a few at the political level was certainly not a solution to the then existing problems. In fact, it gave birth to numerous problems for individuals who had to shift overnight. The division of the nation affected many parts of India, but it has only been recently that various facets associated with it have been explored. This paper intends to analyse a few aspects related to the impact of Partition in post-Partition India, with special reference to West Bengal.

Keywords

Partition, migration, rehabilitation, experiences, displacement

Introduction:

Partition of the nation was perhaps not the best decision or step taken around 70 years back. It triggered violence which led to the brutal massacre of innocent masses. It also compelled millions to leave their home and shift to a new territory. It left unforgettable painful memories in the minds of the people who lost not only their home property but also their loved ones. It also changed the future of our nation and contributed to the birth of several problems that the nation in the present is struggling with. Violence spread on a huge scale in Punjab which led to the killings of a million people. However, the scale of violence that spread in West Bengal was not of that magnitude. In West Bengal, Partition was like a long drawn process which continued for decades, but in Punjab, the wave ended in a short span of time. The inflow of population from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) to West Bengal changed the

demography of the state and also problematised other aspects of the society. Scholars have tended to engage in a discourse of the Partition that was personality driven, focusing on major figureheads that were instrumental in the Colonial political landscape, and to whom the British would leave the baton of the Indian sub-continent upon their departure. It has only been recently that scholars have dealt with other important aspects related to post-Partition India. It is commendable as the general tendency has been to treat the history of Modern India as to have ended in 1947. These issues have been studied by various scholars who have used different methods to write about the aftermath of Partition. The works of Butalia, Menon and Bhasin in the context of Punjab is path-breaking in the sense that it not only focused on the experiences of women but also talked about the lives of people post-Partition. Sanjoy Hazarika is of the view that the movement of people has been largely voluntary Post-Partition. Myron Weiner categorised the movement of people into two groups- unwanted migrants, i.e., those who are not liked by the host community, and rejected people. Hazarika is of the view that a migrant is not necessarily a refugee, and that 'Refugee' remains a political term. A refugee can be a migrant. According to him, a migrant is not forcibly evicted or displaced. He/she chooses to move (Hazarika, 2006). The situation of post-Partition West Bengal has also been written by various scholars who have enriched our understanding by focusing on myriad issues. In this paper, an attempt has been made to look at a few selected works related to Partition, and present an analysis of the same with special reference to West Bengal.

Rehabilitation, Resettlement or Relief?

Various terms were used for the Hindus who left East Bengal and shifted to West Bengal after the Partition of India. Those who left before 15th October 1947, the term 'displaced' was used by the government to refer to them. Later they were referred to as 'migrants' and were further divided into two groups- 'old migrants' (who migrated before 1958), and 'new migrants' (who migrated between January 1964-March 1971). People who came to West Bengal between 1958 and 1964 were excluded from the definition of 'migrants' (Chaudhury, Dey, 2009). Calcutta declared that a person had to have migrated to West Bengal before the end of June 1948, and also, had to be registered as a 'bonafide refugee' before January 1949. Bonafide 'registered' refugees were entitled only to 'relief', but not 'rehabilitation', as the policy was based on the premise that the refugees would eventually return (Chatterji, 2007). Another clause

according to the definition of citizenship provided by Article 6 states that if a person has migrated to India before 19th July 1948, he/she would be considered a citizen. However, if an individual migrated to India after 19th July 1948, then it was mandatory to reside in India for six months, and then register with a government official before attaining Indian citizenship. Therefore, it is apparent that the Government of India was primarily concerned about the resettlement of the refugees from West Pakistan, and that the national leadership was ambivalent regarding its responsibilities towards the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan. Nehru's letter to Bidhan Chandra Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, reflected that kind of ambivalence. To quote him:

"It is wrong to encourage any large-scale migration from East Bengal to the west. Indeed, if such a migration takes place, West Bengal and to some extent the Indian union would be overwhelmed ... If they come over to West Bengal, we must look after them. But it is no service to them to encourage them to join the vast mass of refugees who can at best be poorly cared for".

Mohanlal Saksena, the then Rehabilitation Minister of the Government of India made it clear to the representatives of Tripura, Assam, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, in a meeting held in the Writers' Building on March 2, 1950, that the Government's work would be restricted to relief only rather than to rehabilitation. Moreover, Saksena was in favour of establishing the relief camps in the border areas to facilitate their quick return to their homeland. However, it is to be noted that the Constitution of 1950 had given powers to the Centre to dictate rehabilitation policy throughout India, which in turn to a great extent complicated the situation.

One thing that needs to be mentioned here is that those who crossed over to West Bengal from East Pakistan from the late 1940s and early 1950s primarily belonged to the upper or middle classes who did not prefer to go to the government organised camps. In fact, it has become almost a world-wide phenomenon that where there is a choice either to receive protection and assistance in camp or to bypass the refugee camps and self-settle without support or with partial supports, the majority of the refugees prefer self-settlement. The question may arise that, why does the majority of the world refugees choose self-settlement? Probably this

is because they prefer to have no support or partial support than to lose their freedom of movement, and self-reliance as it played an important role in the case of the East Bengali upper caste refugees. Moreover, due to their class character, their natural destination was Calcutta where they hoped to find jobs or professional opportunities suitable for them. Many of them had friends, relatives and acquaintances in Calcutta, who initially helped them to resettle here. In a way, a social network system of these displaced people played an important role to reconstruct their lives on the other side of the border. Even those who belonged to the middle class and comparatively worse off families, and did not possess many resources, did not prefer to settle in the refugee camps mainly because of their *maan* (honour). So, basically, those who took shelter in the camps were very poor and mainly agriculturalists who did not have any other option but to opt for refugee camps. (Chaudhury, Dey, 2009)

A Brief Analysis of a government-provided space (Jirat), self-found/organised space (Azadgarh), and Cooper's Camp

An interesting work on the experiences of refugees in the context of West Bengal has focused on two places namely- Jirat and Azadgarh. These two presents striking differences between the experiences of 'camp refugees', that is those who were resettled by the government, and the 'self-settled' refugee, whose rehabilitation was entirely the result of their efforts. Jirat was a space that was inhospitable. The people who arrived in this place came empty-handed. The population of this camp comprised (who arrived in 1950)- Brahmins, weavers, fishermen, carpenters, potters, washer-men, blacksmiths, bell-metal-smiths, workers, and scheduled castes. Some came from modest backgrounds, but almost all had enjoyed a high sense of financial security in erstwhile East Bengal. Setting up of a rehabilitation camp for destitute, but mainly literate refugees in the middle of a malarial swamp many miles away from the nearest town seem illogical. The chief problem cited by the residents of the camp was the lack of employment around Jirat, as local people were preferred. However, Azadgarh presents a different picture in comparison to Jirat. The refugees in Azadgarh belonged to higher castes, with a few *namshudras*, moderately educated, who earned well in East Bengal. They arrived in West Bengal before the outbreak of communal violence in East Bengal and were able to organise themselves. It was a place close to factories, and also had empty houses left by Muslims. Thus, the refugees were successful in identifying suitable land, although they did face resistance (Chatterji, 2007). These two places located

on the outskirts of Calcutta show different class, caste composition and experiences of the refugees. It definitely reflects the fact that the government was incapable of rehabilitating the refugees.

Cooper's Camp (Nadia District) was set up as a rehabilitation camp for the refugees in West Bengal. People in this camp were made to survive with poor quality food grains, lack of medical facilities, open drainage systems, and open latrines. It led to malnutrition and spread of diseases in the camp. An interesting thing about this camp is that a kind of refugee movement took place in the camp, which was described by a respondent as a communist struggle. The women of this camp opined that they are surviving under inhuman conditions and that the sanitation arrangement is far from satisfactory. Most of the women are engaged in bidi-making. Therefore, it is clear from above that the women are leading an insecure life in a government-organised camp. In this study of Cooper's Camp, a broad description of various facets related to the same has been presented, which indeed throws an important light in the study of post-Partition West Bengal.

The definition of permanent liability (P.L) camps according to the Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced persons in West Bengal (Report 1957) stated that only certain individuals are eligible for admission to the P.L. camps-

a) Those who are either infirm or aged or otherwise incapacitated or consist of women who have no able-bodied men to look after them. It also suggested that old men above 60 years and women above 50 years with no able-bodied member are qualified for getting an opportunity to live in the P.L. camps.

b) The definition of certain terms was also elaborated in the report-

Infirm: Those who have been suffering from a permanent disability.

Unattached women: Those who have no adult or able-bodied son.

Orphans: Unattached boys of 16 years of age, and girls till they are married or gainfully employed.

Dependents of the above first three categories and dependents of TB patients were also considered eligible (Chaudhury, Dey, 2009).

Even in the context of Punjab, we can observe this kind of patriarchal role that the government played in the name of relief and rehabilitation. The Indian State dealt with abducted women and widows differently.

Widows were redefined as victims of a national disaster, and an attempt was made by the State to provide them vocational training, employment, housing, food and education not only for them but their children as well. However, the State adopted a conservative approach to deal with abducted women. Kamlabehn, who was associated with the recovery and rehabilitation programme of abducted women, disclosed important information. Pregnant women were made to go through a complete medical check-up before they went back to their families because otherwise, the families would not accept them back (Menon, Bhasin, 2000). An important point to note is that during that time abortions were considered illegal. Thus, we see that be it women, self-settled refugees, or camp refugees, all of them had to go through different layers of hardship in an attempt to restart their lives afresh.

A Move Beyond Conventional Studies

It is important to understand that different kinds of people migrated to West Bengal in the wake of Partition for different reasons. In this context, the work of Rahman and Schendel stands out. They have not used the term 'refugee' for all the group/s of people who crossed the border after 1947. They have discussed five categories, namely-

- a) Cross-border settlers: Those whose movement across the borders had nothing to do with the new border. For example- brides shifting with their husbands, shifting cultivators, children being sent by their parents to nearby towns for schooling or college purposes.
- b) Cross-border labour migrants: Those who move to get better work opportunities.
- c) Border refugees: Those who left their home due to fear of persecution.
- d) Refugees from the interior: Displaced persons, shoronarhi, etc.
- e) The nationalists: Those who join the new nation because of their own set of ideals.

The categories mentioned above are not mutually exclusive, as the decision to cross the border is often a mixture of reasons like- fear, self- interest, idealism, etc. Both the authors have tried to emphasise on the fact that it is important to look at the different groups of people, their motives, experiences to have a broader picture of cross-border settlement. In addition to the categories stated above, four different groups of cross-border migrants are-

- a) The 'optees': Those who arrived in the borderland usually within days of Partition. One interviewee confided that the riots did not propel them to migrate; it was because of their job. This group of people did not face major hiccups, except for a few in the initial settling period.
- b) Displacement by education: The border separated many schools and colleges, despite which people continued sending their children to a foreign land.
- c) Riot refugees: This category came from various backgrounds, for which a further classification has been provided. Rahman and Schendel have also discussed the non-Bengalis who fled to Rajshahi in 1950-
 - Urdu-speaking people from Calcutta
 - Nawabi families from Murshidabad
 - Urdu-speaking people from U.P. and Bihar
 - Khotai from West Bengal who spoke both Urdu and Bengali

The above mentioned displaced non-Bengali people faced a crisis in different forms as sometimes they had to shift/migrate twice. Some had to leave without any money, some ended up in refugee camps, and some found petty jobs. They have also focused on displaced Bengalis who took refuge in Rajshahi in 1950. One interesting thing pointed out by them is about how Muslim Bengali residents were driven out by Hindus; the latter also organised and planned riots.

- d) Displacement by exchange: In the year 1962, two thousand Hindus perished in Rajshahi, which led to cross-border population movement. Numerous Indian Muslims and Pakistani Hindus migrated by exchanging their property with each other. This process of exchange was quite tedious as it was a difficult task to find exchange partners. Even if the paperwork was done, there was a fear of being robbed on the way, some did not have passports and had to pay the border guards. Many faced severe problems while settling down in a new place as the migrated families faced resistance from the locals, and some were never able to occupy their new land. Displacement by exchange ended with the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965.

Partition: A Legacy?

A few scholars who have worked on Partition have argued that the attitude of the government of India in the context of West Bengal was only to provide relief to the incoming people from East Bengal. The government was of the view that the people eventually will return to their native places. These scholars are also of the opinion that the Indian government was primarily concerned about the resettlement of refugees in the West. A couple of reasons have been cited by scholars to explain the reason for this difference in treatment: refugees in the West were near the capital of India; hence, the government was careful to avoid trouble. Second, Punjabis formed a major chunk in the armed forces; therefore the government didn't want to ignore this community (Chaudhury, Dey, 2009). Other reasons pointed out for the indifference of the government is that Bengal's Partition violence was less in comparison to the West. A blunder committed by the Government of India was that it was against the redistribution of the property of Muslim evacuees to incoming Hindu refugees, as opposed to the West (Chatterji, 2007). The Centre's influential role in dictating rehabilitation policy throughout India turned out to be problematic not only for West Bengal but also for Assam. Partition certainly disrupted Assam's situation gravely. Jawaharlal Nehru himself in a letter to the Chief Ministers of the different provinces had referred to the difficulties faced by the people of the Assam hills because of the breakage of trade links with former East Bengal. Riots in Lower Assam forced around 50,000 Muslims to flee from their homes. In fact, the difference of opinion between Assam and the Centre over the question of the settling of refugees from erstwhile East Bengal sowed seeds of separatist movements, which till date is troubling Assam (Misra, 2000). However, it needs to be mentioned that some scholars have critiqued the Government of Assam, with particular reference to Cachar in its failure in rehabilitating the refugees. (Dutta, 2016). Another work has hinted at the failure of the leadership of Assam in the context of Brahmaputra Valley to rehabilitate the refugees. She has also stated that the absorption of the Bengali Hindus into the host society is still a problem (Pathak, 2017). However, Misra has cited that although Hindu refugees had been flowing into Assam ever since the Partition, the Assam Government, despite severe financial constraints did its best to provide the basic necessities to the incoming refugees. Around twenty lakh refugees who entered India during 1947-1950, undivided Assam provided shelter to some three lakhs. It is important

to note that the wave has not yet ended as the border remains fragile.

Conclusion

Efforts were undoubtedly made by the government to support the incoming people from East Bengal. Attempts were made to provide work to the people, for example, in West Bengal's industrial sites, or developmental programmes; but it was not a permanent feature. Cooper's Camp never saw the light of industrial development. We also need to take into account the fact that many did not receive any help from any source and had to live as destitute. A powerful representation in Chakrabarty's work is the story 'In search of Ismail Sheikh' by Homen Borgohain (translated by M. Asaduddin). It is a story that talks about the plight of the refugees who were evicted from East Bengal and also the failures of the Rehabilitation programmes that were offered by the state. The first part of the story revolves around a Brahmin father and daughter who after Partition arrive in Calcutta as refugees. The father becomes a destitute, and the daughter is pushed towards prostitution. The second part of the story is about a Muslim immigrant who leaves East Bengal in search of better opportunity in Assam, but in reality only found disappointment when he lost the land he thought he could cultivate and make his own in Assam where he migrates to (Chakrabarty, 2004). This story shows that victims of poverty or Partition have no nationalities. Partition affected people who belonged to a different caste, religion, economic backgrounds, and gender. It did not mean that if for example, a Hindu returned to India, he/she was assured of stability or safety.

As discussed earlier, it is clear that the government has been criticised at various levels for its inability to look after the people who crossed the border in the wake of Partition. Does it bring the entire discussion to one root issue that was the division of the nation the only solution? Jawaharlal Nehru, too in a letter dated 16th February 1950, expressed "We had paid a very heavy price" (Nehru, 2015). Indeed, the nation is still caught in the vicious web of communal hatred.

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