

Taking Refuge in the City: Migrant Population and Urban Management in Post-Partition Calcutta

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This paper tries to lay bare the intertwined histories of rehabilitation of the refugees from East Pakistan and the development of the city of Calcutta in the initial decades after the partition of British India. Calcutta has attracted people from outside from its inception. Calcutta of the late-eighteenth century has been described as a ‘contact zone’, where people from various fields and countries, of varied descent, came to the city with their specific knowledge practices.¹ With the consolidation of the colonial rule, several classes of people flocked to the city—be it the quintessential salaried professionals or the *keranis*, the Marwari businessmen, the students from East Bengal or the upcountry labouring poor. It emerged as a cosmopolitan city *par excellence*. There were tensions among these varied groups, and each sought to define and create a city on its own terms. With the partition of the province in 1947, a new group of people came to the city to become its permanent residents. A new chapter commenced in the biography of the city. I will focus on the ways this new group sought to create a space for itself in the city and became a part of the everyday of the urban life. The chapter is divided into three broad sections—in the first section, I will make an appraisal of the rehabilitation schemes of the government focusing on the way the refugees were categorised according to their background and previous occupation and what was the consequence of such a practice; the second section will specifically focus on the women and the various training and job they took up to sustain themselves and their family. In the third and final section, I will focus on the situation of Calcutta and how the city changed due to the massive influx of population in the initial years of independence.

¹ See Kapil Raj, ‘The Historical Anatomy of a Contact Zone: Calcutta in the Eighteenth Century’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 48, no 1, 2011, pp 55-82. Raj borrows the notion of ‘contact zone’ from Mary Louise-Pratt’s influential study on colonial travellers. For Pratt, a ‘contact zone’ is “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. [It] is an attempt to involve the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historic disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect... By using the term ‘contact’, I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travellers and ‘travelees’, not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.” See M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (Routledge: London, 1992), pp. 6-7, quoted in Raj, ‘Historical Anatomy’, p. 56.

Refugees and Rehabilitation

The refugees, coming from the eastern part of the erstwhile province of Bengal, spread all over West Bengal and in other parts of India. But a major concentration was in the greater Calcutta region, where many 'colonies' came up. These colonies were a novel and distinct spatial arrangement in the urban morphology. Most of the early refugees from east Bengal belonged to the upper or middle caste groups. They tended to gravitate towards the urban centres, more specifically to Calcutta. Almost 60 percent of the migrants up to 1949 were non-agriculturalists.² Acute housing problem forced them to erect squatter settlements on the fringes of the city. But waves of migrating people lashed on to the city and the state for the next decade. The massive increase in the population of the city took its toll on the urban infrastructure. There was acute food crisis, industrial disturbances, black-market activities and political agitation in the city during the late 1940s and the 1950s. In this cauldron of discontent, the refugees had to survive. The government tried to deny the scale of the exodus at first, but by 1950 it realised the enormity of the situation and the hitherto policy of relief had to be shifted towards comprehensive programme of rehabilitation. Keeping in mind the class and caste composition of the refugees who came to West Bengal after 1950, the government put much stress on vocational training. The camp-dwelling refugees who were dependent on government doles were the prime targets of these vocational training programmes. A cornerstone of the rehabilitation plan was to categorise the refugee population in terms of their previous occupations. Thus, agriculturalists were to be settled in lands, if not available in West Bengal then in other states. The government wanted them to become 'productive bodies' who would be able to sustain themselves. The rehabilitation reports and various government pamphlets emphasised the point that the refugees were to be a labouring contributor to the society. Also, the huge influx of people from non-agricultural background flocking to urban areas needed to be rehabilitated through proper employment. The vocational training institutes were crucial in this respect. I will elaborate on this and see the pattern of employment among the refugee population in the urban and semi-urban areas. Their background often decided the place they were to stay in—peasants had to go to the rural areas. This was a curious situation which shaped the profile of the population in the urban centre. A large part of the migrants took up petty jobs in the city. With the sudden increase in the available manpower, the actual income received was often not enough to sustain the family in the city. As Joya Chatterjee has shown, demands of the refugees started to include the general urban poor and presented a united front. I want to critically interrogate the

² Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival', in Sukanta Chaudhuri ed., *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. II, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p 72.

changing labour market—both for the industrial labour as well as the white-collar professionals—to map the employment pattern of the city.

What happened to the Muslim population of the city at this point? The logic of partition made their position precarious in India. Muslims going to Pakistan and then returning to West Bengal has become a recurrent feature of this area. But to come back to India, as Ranabir Samaddar has argued, they had to *negate* Partition and live in ghettos as their ‘homeland’ could not provide the sustenance.³ Samaddar’s study of the Metiabruz area of Calcutta shows how the Muslim population negotiate with the situation and are engaged in a variety of vocation—be it a tailor, a rickshaw puller or casual labour. He offers a nuanced image of the place when he writes, “Employment of migrant labour, a thriving garment industry, virtual absence of any public utility services, riots, communal tensions, criminalization and lumpenization belong to an integrated scenario.”⁴ How did this situation come into being in the city of Calcutta and its neighbouring areas? What changed during the initial years after partition?

The 1951 Census of India mentions that Sukea Street, Colootola, Fenwick Bazar, Maniktola, Belliaghat, Belgachia and Cossipur wards had a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims before the riots of 1950. The *bustees* were deserted during the riots, but “[b]etween December 1950 and March 1951 almost all these deserted areas were rehabilitated and filled up by large settlements of Displaced Hindus from East Bengal in certain wards and large blocks of resettled Muslims from various parts of the city and Howrah in others. *They finally sorted out no more in mixed but clear-cut blocks of communities.*”⁵ Tension between the Muslim population and the refugees were pretty evident in these years. Joya Chatterji in an essay shows how the century-old graveyard of the Muslim at Selimpur was slowly encroached upon by the refugee settlement.⁶ With Partition, and influx of refugees, the Muslim population, especially the poorer section, that stayed back faced immense difficulty in maintaining their live and livelihood. “They now lived in cramped ghettos filled to overflowing alongside fellow Muslims from other, more dangerous parts of the city. The urban Muslim communities which in the early part of the century had been ‘distinct sub-communal groups’, became more ethnically diverse as they absorbed co-religionists who belonged to a variety of ethnic groups, who had lived by different crafts and who followed

³ Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*, Sage: 1999, p.135.

⁴ *Ibid.* 144

⁵ *Census of India 1951*, vol. VI, part III, p. xiv, cited in Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 182, emphasis added.

⁶ Joya Chatterji, ‘Of graveyards and ghettos: Muslims in partitioned West Bengal, 1947-1967’, in M Hasan and A Roy (eds), *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, New Delhi, 2005

different sects.”⁷ Most could not stand this altered scenario, and there was a sharp change in their vocations, with alteration in their hereditary trades and status associated with them. Some tried to stay afloat by managing to get an education for themselves and getting a job. But it was not easy to survive in such a situation and the shadow of 1947 loomed large in their lives, as Samaddar has mentioned in his study. I would like to probe a little in this direction and see how the Muslims negotiated with the situation. While dealing with the Hindu refugees, we cannot possibly turn a blind eye towards the position of the Muslims in the city.

Women and Work

Camp and Colony-life were harsh on the inmates. It pushed men as well as women to ‘come out’ and look for a job. In the colonies, many women started teaching in the newly-established local colony schools. In a sense, this was also an issue of empowerment for them. I want to look into this aspect to understand the gender-dynamic in this trying situation. Education gave the women a way to move out and share a hand in the family’s income.⁸ When teachers came from outside the colony, this was a step toward establishing certain contacts with the rest of the city. This was an important matter as the refugee-identity carried pejorative connotation for a long stretch of time. Other than being teachers, women started to enter a variety of professional spaces, from merchant offices to roaming sellers.

For the women in camps, the situation was different. They had to depend on the government schemes to get training and then a job. An important aspect in this case was the way the inmates of the camps was categorised and reorganised. In 1955, according to the need of the population, the government arranged the refugee settlements as Permanent Liability [PL] Camps, Homes and Infirmaries. The rationale behind this reorganisation often had an important bearing for the future education and training of the inmates. A Committee was formed to look after the reorganisation of the camps, PL institutions and Homes for the displaced persons, especially the aged, and infirm ‘unattached’ women and their dependents. For the purpose of training as well as for accommodation and maintenance, the Committee did not hesitate to recommend splitting up a family where the members did not share a ‘close’ relationship. Also, the committee proposed that family background was to be taken into account while selecting the subject of training. They recognised the fact that for a person staying in a camp, tradition and family occupation often did

⁷ Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition*, p 193.

⁸ In the context of role of women in post-partition period in general, see, among others, Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*, New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005; Rachel Weber, ‘Re(Creating) the Home: Women’s Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta’, in J Bagchi and S Dasgupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata: Stree, 2006.

not matter or that camp-life had 'destroyed' their vocation, "but even then perhaps something of them still remains."⁹

Women up to 35 years of age were encouraged to have basic education which would help them in their vocational training. For meritorious girls, a condensed course for the school final examination was proposed so that they can pass the examination in 2/3 years and take training to become teachers, nurses, or do village-level work. If they went to higher level schools and colleges, provision was made for learning short-hand or type-writing.¹⁰

One of the chief aims of the committee for the reorganisation of the homes for the displaced persons was "to make them self-sufficient."¹¹ The committee specifically looked into the ways women could gain employment through proper training. But they had their assumptions regarding the class of women who were thought proper for the vocational training schemes. In their view, "The women from middle class families with sons above the age of ten form a class altogether, and their rehabilitation will be a difficult task."¹² They recommended that these women should be given built houses in government colonies located in industrial areas where they can go to small industries for their job. Their children could go to the local schools for their education and "later get absorbed in the industries sponsored by Government where preference will be given to the boys and girls of the middle class refugee settlers."¹³ The members observed that, "In the existing factories, in the industrial area it has been found that the refugees have no place as most of the non-Indian employers are not in favour of appointing Bengali Hindu labourers but they recruit labourers from Behar, Madras and Orissa and prefer Bengali Muslims."¹⁴

The advisory board formed to look after women's rehabilitation tried to formulate a scheme for the training of women in several non-official organisation receiving government

⁹ Recommendations of the Committee for re-organisation of Camps, PL institutions and Homes for the displaced persons classed as the ages, Infirm unattached women and their dependents, [1955], File no. 7, Ashoka Gupta Papers, pp. 1-2, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.

¹⁰ Re-organisation of homes and camps for un-attached displaced women or/and old and infirm displaced persons from East Pakistan, From: S L Dang, Under Secy to GoI, To: Secy, GoWB, Assam, Tripura, Bihar, Orissa, UP, Relief and Rehabilitation Deptt, No. 16 (1)/56-Relief, 9 February 1956, GoI, Ministry of Rehabilitation, Asoka Gupta Papers, SWS, JU, p. 4.

¹¹ Recommendations of the Committee for re-organisation of Camps, PL institutions and Homes for the displaced persons classed as the ages, Infirm unattached women and their dependents, [1955], File no. 7, Ashoka Gupta Papers, p. 8, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

grants. They proposed various craft courses and the duration of such courses. The following subjects were agreed upon in a meeting on 5 July 1955:¹⁵

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Maximum period of training</u>
1. Tailoring including Lady Brabourne diploma	3 years
2. Weaving, bleaching and dyeing	2 yrs.
3. Spinning and weaving (khadi)	1 yr.
4. Sebika [care-giver]	1 yr
5. Domestic aid training	6 months
6. Type writing	9 months
7. Junior teachers' training	2 yrs
8. Senior teachers' training	1 yr
9. Dyeing and printing	1 yr
10. Hosiery knitting with machine	1 yr
11. Soap making	1 yr
12. Book binding	6 months
13. Condiments and paper making	6 months
14. Compositor work	2 yrs
15. a. Laundry work	6 months
b. Domestic service (other than cook)	1 yr
16. Catering, confectionary (sweet-making, management of restaurant)	1 yr
17. Embroidery, needle works, machine embroidery	1 yr
18. Nursing governess	1 yr
19. Gardening with goat-keeping, cow rearing or poultry	6 months

What did these schemes entail for the woman wishing to make a living under the trying circumstance of displacement, poverty and an alien landscape? Did they have any say in what they wanted to do? How did they cope with the male discourse—at once patronizing and parochial? I will try to find answers to these questions in this study.

Cauldron called Calcutta

¹⁵ Minutes of the meeting of the sub-committee appointed by the advisory board for women's rehabilitation, 5 July 1955, File no. 7, Asoka Gupta Papers, SWC, JU

The post-partition Calcutta changed rapidly. The city started to burst in its seams with the fast rise in its population. The initial years of independence were marked by severe bouts of cholera. Public health system was in a sorry state of affairs. Sealdah station, where refugees took shelter in lack of any other alternative, was described as ‘a veritable hell on earth’. The image of 1943 famine years was repeatedly invoked in the newspapers. Something was needed to be done to avoid that situation. New structures came up in the city with the refugee colonies and camps. Religious ghettos were formed with Muslims jostling in some pockets of the city. The Calcutta Corporation and the Calcutta Improvement Trust had an uphill task in restoring some semblance of urbanity in these years. The city also became the theatre of keen political contest, with the Congress and the Left parties, especially the Communists, vying for public attention and support. The Communists initiated a distinct form of politics of agitation that shaped the urban political milieu of the state. The deep link between the Communists and the refugee population has been explored by the scholars. I wish to interrogate further these aspects of the city’s life and see how the new migrants merged with the urban sphere that characterised the post-colonial times. I want to critically look at the ways, in which the city coped with the situation of increased population, deteriorating living conditions, and a claim by the downtrodden for a right to the space of the city.

Conclusion

The rehabilitation policies tried to sort out the problem of huge influx of population by linking them with the development regime of the nation. The dispersal scheme was an attempt to merge the two concerns, where the rehabilitation of the refugee was not the concern for any particular state, but the entire nation. But the rehabilitation of displaced population could not be done in a cold, technical manner. Even though the government took several measures to manage the refugees, the mode in which they were implemented left much to be desired. West Bengal was going through several crises at this point of time. There was an acute food crisis coupled with rampant black-market activities, which often led to violent clashes in the city. The situation of the jute-industry was tense with frequent labour strikes. The Congress-led government was also very wary of the growing influence of the Left political parties among the refugees. The government needed to secure its own base keeping in mind the elections. This meant looking after the refugees as well as the erstwhile residents of the state. As an article in *The Economic Weekly* pointed out, “If employment is the main aim of the Second Plan, refugee rehabilitation is

the main problem of West Bengal.”¹⁶ Initial reluctance to admit the enormity of the refugee crises only exacerbated the problem and gave a space to the dissenting voices to come together against the government. Over the years, the government through the recommendations of various committees came up with modified policies and schemes. But each new phase was accompanied by further challenges. I wish to study these changing dynamic of the whole process focusing particularly on the shifts they brought to the space of the city and the lives of the urban poor in post-partition period.

¹⁶ Refugee Rehabilitation', *The Economic Weekly*, vol. 7, issue no 39, September 24, 1955, p. 1141.