

# Abstracts

## Refugee Movement As Another Aspect of Popular Movement in West Bengal: An

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By now it is common knowledge how Indian independence was born out of partition that displaced 15 million people. In West Bengal alone 30 lakh refugees entered until 1960. In the 1970s the number of people entering from the east was closer to a few million. In the last sixteen years there is however a burgeoning literature on the partition refugees in West Bengal. The literature on refugees followed certain familiar terrain. I will endeavour to explain through broad sketches how that narrative evolved. To begin with it was a literature of victimhood in which the refugees were portrayed only as victims. It cannot be denied that in large parts these refugees were victims but even as victims they constantly tried to negotiate with powers that be and strengthen their own agency. By fixing their identities as victims and not problematising that victimhood the refugees were for a long time displaced from the centre stage of their own narratives.

With the ascendance of cultural studies in West Bengal the refugee experience was reduced to the memory of the refugees. Authors such as Dipesh Chakravarty, Manas Ray etc. discussed the imaginative mappings of the refugee lives through memories. The understanding was that a refugee lived in his/her memories whether they be of pre partition belongings or of post partition localities. These writings did not contradict the victimhood narrative but added a new dimension to it. Such narratives were often anecdotal and reductive challenging the understanding of refugee experience not through multiplicity but through singularity. Often it was the author's own experience that was privileged over group experiences and it is through such discourses that the author reclaimed agency.

Following these appeared a number of writings that discussed institutional responses to the arrival of forced migrants from both the west and the east. These writings by authors such as Samir Das and Monica Mandal discussed how the newly born governments operating within the imperatives of the state and nation building exercise came to terms with the influx of such huge population groups. The measures that were taken by these governments could be categorised

under relief and rehabilitation. These authors critique how that state viewed refugees not as individuals but in terms of numbers, shelter, food, health, hygiene etc. By doing so however these administrative agencies made it possible for these huge groups to survive and prosper. These authors often conclude that given the challenges and obstacles the administration worked creditably. These authors therefore shifted the spotlight from the refugees to the administrators thus once again displacing the refugees.

Apart from these there are other authors who have tried to understand refugee experience through experiences of particular communities. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, Joya Chatterjee and others belong to these schools of thought. These authors feel that by generalising much of refugee experiences are lost. Also they feel that each population group had experiences that were unique to that group and cannot be reducible. Although there is much that can be applauded in these writings but perhaps there is another way of looking at refugee experiences that has been undertaken by authors such as Dipankar Sinha who talks about the self help initiatives of refugees who set up colonies and markets and strategize on their lives and lived experiences of their neighbours for sheer survival. The authors who have either dealt with communities of displaced or refugee activities in building localities have seen refugees as agents of their own lives. It is true that their own lives were sometimes torn apart by greater forces than their own selves. But it is not to be denied that they were agents and through their agentive and communitarian struggles they emerged as empowered communities.

Although partition refugees in West Bengal have now become a favourite topic of research for many scholars and a number of research scholars in different universities in West Bengal are doing their PhD in this topic but still there are aspects that have not been studied adequately. One such aspect is how the refugee movement became part of the popular movements in West Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s. Refugees fight for land titles and the role of UCRC has been studied by a few authors but has not been adequately connected to the larger popular movements. Most of these authors have not tried to portray its connections with movement against eviction, land riots, food movements or the women's movement.

In this section I will endeavour to explore that connection. However, this will not be in the form of a research paper. I intend to do a collection that will contain documents that will address the history of how refugees became leading actors in the popular movements in West Bengal. For starters the refugee women changed the notion of who can be considered as *bhadramahila* in the

post partition days. This collection will contain speeches of leaders and politicians on the issue and all documents that are in the public domain, albeit hidden from our everyday visions. It will also contain newspaper reports, government documents and these documents will have an annotated bibliography pointing to the archival materials that contributes to this narrative. In the introduction I will point out how refugees became part of the larger political protests followed by a collection of documents and an annotated bibliography.