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The Political Mobilisation of Refugees in West Bengal

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When one speaks of the refugee 'movement' in Bengal, one must remember that the main thrust of the movement was to unify different strands of refugees. In this sense, it went against the grain of government rehabilitation policies. As the government tried to categorise the refugees in terms of their dependence on the state, so that the 'ineligibles' could be 'weeded out', the refugee leaders tried to bring the demands of the refugees on stations, in the camps and in the colonies together. This paper seeks to trace the threads of identification that bound the refugees together. It also tries to note that the refugees, even in their united struggles, did not forget their differences, so that a camp refugee could refer to a colony refugee as 'colony *babu*'. However, as the fight to survive on this side of the border marked their everyday lives, as the refugees lived with the borders within their bodies, their politicisation was inevitable. This politics was not 'out there', so to speak. The political drama unfolded within their homes. As their homes became sites for struggles, household utensils became weapons and women with children in arms came to constitute the front lines of resistance. The colony became something akin to a fort. To protect it, one had to receive training. To warn the insiders of eviction operations, bells had to be installed at the colony offices. Even while marking the ways in which the Leftist 'infiltration' occurred among the refugees, it needs to be recognised that a kind of politics, harping on the needs for land ceiling became relevant for the refugees. It was not a simple process of co-option by the Leftist leaders of the refugees, but also the refugees' co-option of a certain brand of politics.

The paper tries to look at the post-partition years in Bengal to understand the political pushes and pulls of the refugee movement.