

The Congested City: Towards and Understanding of the Crowd in Calcutta in 1950s and 1960s.

Anwasha Sengupta

(This is a draft copy not to be cited)

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(I)

Calcutta has its own Frankenstein – the four and a half million refugees ...are now holding the city at ransom. It is impossible to enter from any direction without climbing over their heads. They are in possession of the railway stations. Desperate and despairing, this is a classless society. Each one has been ground down to bear an identical face – a face from which all distinguishing marks of education, culture or occupation have been effaced. No longer it is possible to tell the school master from the postman.... At Sealdah station, on the east side of the city, the counter marked ‘Reservation’ is like some island in a vast sea of ragged filthy destitution. The clerk and his clients are separated by thick masses of humanity. At first the would be traveler looks around a little desperately, then he picks his way over sleeping children, bags full of rags that pass for clothes, before they can possibly arrange their reservations.¹

The above description is from a letter written in July 1957 to the editor of a reputed daily. The writer of the letter, Ila Sen, had little patience or sympathy for the refugees who had by then occupied the railway stations like Sealdah and Howrah, foot paths, parks, Muslim owned houses and almost all the available vacant plots of Calcutta. Sen was not writing about the *bhadralok* refugees who began to leave eastern Bengal in the aftermath of 1946 Noakhali Riots. They had, in the words of Joya Chatterji, ‘mobility capital’.² Sen was talking about the subaltern refugees – the low caste/ poor Hindus from eastern Bengal who mostly began to migrate after the February Riots of 1950 because of worsening communal situation and shrinking economic opportunities. My paper is also about them and their relationship with Calcutta, which seemed to be ‘infested’ by them. The key questions that I have in mind are pretty obvious: a) why did they come to Calcutta? b) how were they received/perceived by the city population and the government? C) what kind of labour they provided to the city? D) how did they perceive the city? However, I hope that these questions taken together will help us to understand some of the key concerns

¹*The Times of India*, July 14, 1957

of this conference – i.e., ‘how as migrant spaces cities become the battleground of discourses on rights, security, economy, citizenship, populism and culture; and yet how cities can develop as public spaces and spheres of participation in which varied actors negotiate diversity including race, class and gender.’ The paper, of course, talks specifically of Calcutta in 1950s.

(II)

Refugees in Calcutta: The Troublemakers

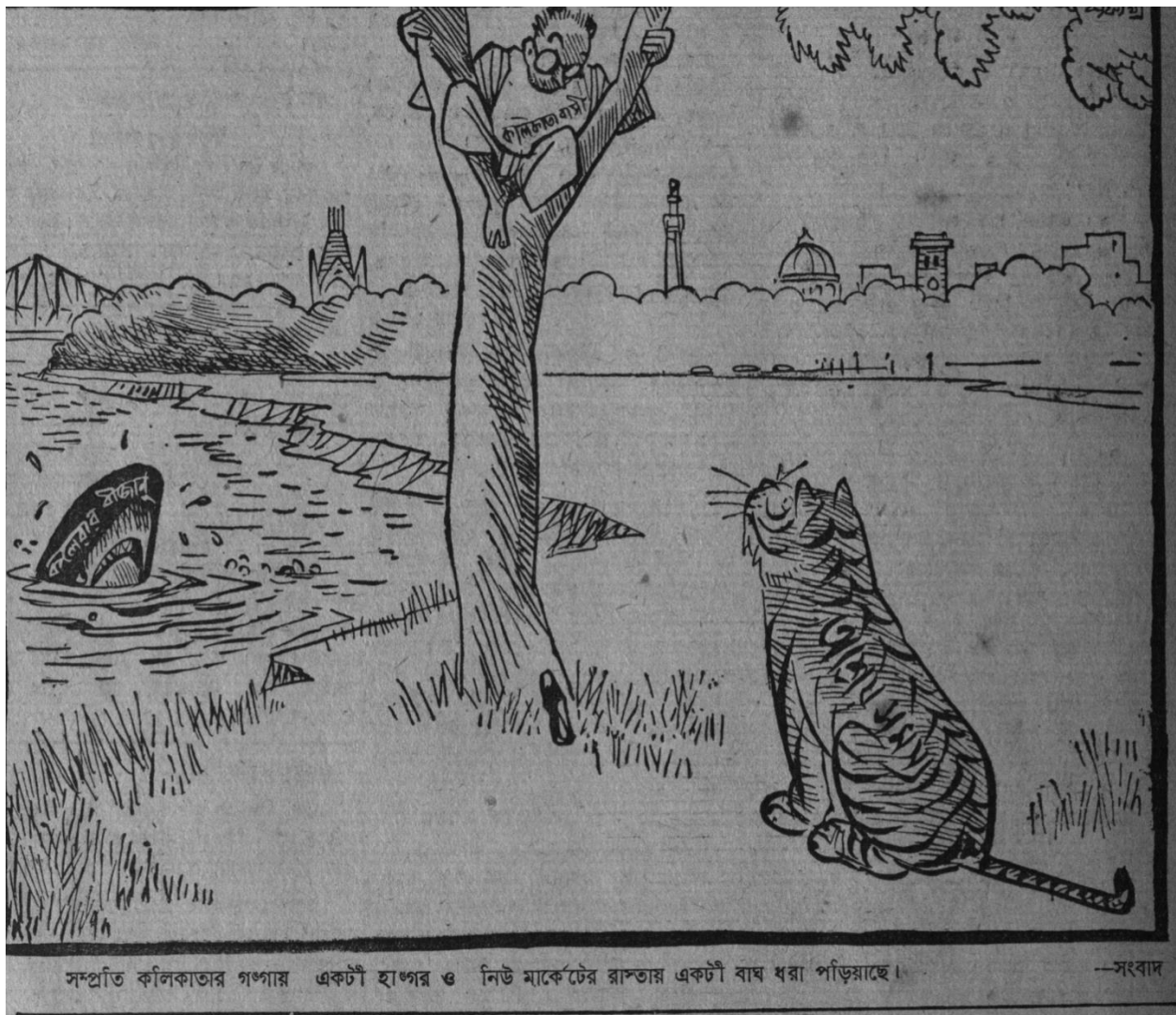
While there was a widespread sympathy for the Bengali Hindu refugees coming from East Pakistan to Calcutta and West Bengal, there was also a section among the city population who perceived them – particularly the subaltern sections among them – as troublemakers for various reasons. The sheer magnitude of the refugee influx threatened many of the Calcutta residents as well as the city authorities. By the end of April, 1949, nineteen lakh and fifty thousand Hindus had migrated from East Pakistan. Of this displaced population, nine lakhs and seventy thousand people came to Calcutta and its neighbourhood. Other districts in West Bengal had a total of six and a half lakh of refugee population.³ The numbers swelled massively in 1950 when West Bengal received 1.7 million refugee populations. Despite the government’s continuous efforts to keep Calcutta out of bound of these refugees, thousands reached the city daily in the early months of 1950. As Joya Chatterji mentions: the census of 1951 discovered that most of the refugees from East Bengal ended up in just three districts of West Bengal, the 24 Parganas, Calcutta and Nadia. In 1951, of a total of 2,099,000 refugees recorded by the Census, 1,387,000, or two-thirds were found in these three districts. 527,000 went to the 24 Parganas, 433,000 to Calcutta, and 427,000 to Nadia.⁴ The numbers were massive enough to alarm the city authorities and the city population. Law and order problem, diseases, rising food prices and unemployment, deteriorating urban sanitation and quality of urban life – all these were seen as consequences of the increasing size of refugee population in Calcutta.

There were other issues as well. Many feared that the ever increasing demographic pressure would destroy the urban sanitation system and Calcutta would become a breeding ground of deadly diseases. There were strong reasons for such anxieties. Since early 1948 frequent cases of cholera and small pox were reported in the city. The Director of Health Services blamed ‘inadequate supply of pure and filtered water, unprecedented urban crowding caused by the refugee influx, unhealthy condition in the slum areas

³Amritabazar, August 27, 1949.

⁴1951 Census, Volume VI, Part I-A, p.305. cited in Chatterji, ‘Dispersal’, p.1003, fn23.

and uncontrolled sale of unclean and unwholesome food on the streets of Calcutta⁵ for cholera, small pox and other diseases. The situation worsened in the 1950s.



The Condition of Calcutta. Source: *Jugantar*, May 4, 1950. In this picture, a man named “Calcutta-resident” is seen on the tree because of twin fear – the tiger in the land named “Housing problem” and a crocodile in the water named “Cholera Germs”.

Sisir Bhattacharya, a Calcutta resident, pointed out: “For past few weeks there have been numerous cases of cholera and pox. In front of the Sealdah station foods and drinks are prepared in most unhygienic way and are kept uncovered. If we draw the attention of the city police or the rail police, they simply

⁵SekharBandyopadhyaya, 31.

shrug off their responsibility. Right now Sealdah station is enormously crowded with refugees. They are buying these foods in low prices and becoming contaminated with these diseases. There are of course other sources of contamination. But the uncovered unhygienic food sold in the station and the uncleared dustbins are major sources of the diseases. If no action is taken a large section of the city population will soon be affected.”⁶ His fear was not at all misplaced. On the day before his letter in *Jugantar*, the same paper had reported that there had been 480 Cholera deaths in the city in the last seven days, ‘highest number of cholera deaths in last 25 years.’ During the same period 365 people had also died of small pox.⁷

Deaths were reported daily from Sealdah Station, where there was a permanent and sizeable refugee population throughout the decade of 1950s. Sealdah had only two latrines for women and eight for men. There were three tube wells for supplying water. As thousands fought for these toilets and tube wells, hygiene was severely compromised. Cases of cholera, tuberculosis, dysentery were reported daily. A few government ran medical units operated in the platform. But the arrangement was absolutely insufficient given the magnitude of the crisis. A *Times of India* report of 9th August, 1950 mentioned eighty-eight deaths within a fortnight in the station premises.⁸ Jatin Bala - a Namasudra refugee from Jessore who had spent a few days in the station immediately after coming from East Pakistan in mid-'50s - remembered,

Dead bodies of refugees were common sight at the station. Every day, the dead body carriers used to come to Sealdah station. They used to tie together four, seven or ten bodies and carried them away. We were told that these bodies were cremated together. No one could tell what happened to these bodies finally, their relatives also did not know.⁹

There was a general consensus that the poor refugees were dirty and diseased. They were seen as a threat to the urban public health. They were polluting the city by their presence. “Sealdah station has become a veritable hell on earth; it is emitting that odour which the famished crowd of '43 used to spread wherever there was any congregation of theirs,”¹⁰ wrote a staff reporter of *Amritabazar Patrika* in April 1950. The comparison was indeed very apt. As the food scarcity in Bengal became severe in 1942, tens of thousands of desperate immigrants from the countryside had moved to Calcutta in search of food. Consequently, by January 1943, the city had exceptionally high number of beggars coming from ‘the cyclone ravaged towns of Midnapore to the east, the military evacuated regions of Diamond Harbor to the south, and the

⁶‘Letter to the Editor’, 28 April 1950, *Jugantar*.

⁷*Jugantar*, 27 April 1950.

⁸*TOI*, August 9, 1950.

⁹Bala, ‘Jessorer Smriti’, 263.

¹⁰*Amritabazar Patrika*, April 21, 1950.

impoverished districts of Rangpur and Rajshahi to the north'.¹¹The official surgeon general's report of the Bengal Famine noted, '[these destitute were] clad in filthy rags, and a peculiar body odour emanating from them was often noticed. They were apathetic, oblivious of their surroundings or cleanliness and sometimes unconscious....'¹²The similarities in the two descriptions are only obvious. The modes of governing these starving, 'smelly', 'filthy' populations in late colonial and early post-colonial years also had uncanny resemblance. To this I shall return in the final section.

The presence of the refugees from East Bengal on the streets and railway stations of Calcutta was not only a threat to the *bodies* of the Calcutta residents, but their presence harmed the *body* of the city itself - by blocking the roads, clogging the footpaths and occupying the empty open spaces they were seen as obstructing the 'urban development'. This becomes obvious from the proceedings of the board meetings of Calcutta Improvement Trust for the decade of 1950.¹³To give a few examples: Refugee 'invasion' of the 'rehousing site at Christopher Road', reserved by CIT for those displaced by CIT improvement scheme¹⁴ slowed down their land acquisition process; ¹⁵construction of 'an 84 ft. wide approach road from the [Howrah] bridge to Mukhram Kanoria Road and an extension of it thereafter as a high level road, 70 ft. in width, up to Dobson Road'¹⁶ was obstructed because of the 'continuous inability of Government to oust the squatters and refugees from premises No. 6, Mukhram Kanoria Road';¹⁷ CIT's general improvement plan of Dhakuria lake area depended on government's ability to 'take immediate steps for removing the refugees (who have been squatting on the Dhakuria Lake area for several years now)'.¹⁸ Such examples can be multiplied.

Apart from staying at the empty barracks, stations and pavements or occupying empty/dilapidated buildings, many among the refugees made attempts to earn a living in the city by putting up make shift shops, hawking on the streets, working as domestic labourers and doing different odd jobs. According to the 1951 census 26.9 per cent of the hawkers in Calcutta were from East Pakistan. Such practices, like hawking on the streets by the refugees, were not welcomed by the city authorities. Throughout the year 1950 we see numerous news reports about police taking action against the refugee hawkers, evicting them

¹¹P.91.

¹²Ibid, 129.

¹³CIT was established in 1912 to enable and oversee road improvements and to clear out insanitary areas and to develop low cost housing schemes. It was the official body assigned to oversee urban improvement of Calcutta. therefore we can consider the discussions happened in CIT meetings and the decisions they took as official discourse of urban planning and urban improvement.

¹⁴ In particular Scheme No. V(M) – Upper Circular Road to Ultadanga Main Road. The scheme consisted of construction of sewer, road constructions, filling up tanks and dobas, beautification etc.

¹⁵Meeting No 1735, 19th November, 1949.CIT Proceedings 1949-1950; p.4.

¹⁶ 'Appendix A', Chairman's Note, Meeting No. 1990, 18th April 1959. CIT Proceedings 1959-60.

¹⁷ Meeting No. 1927, 28th June 1956, Proceedings 1956-57, p.6.

¹⁸ Meeting No. 1955, 21 September 1957, 1957-58 Proceedings, p.10.

from footpaths, destroying their shanties and demolishing their make shift stalls. For instance, *Jugantar* of May 5 (1950) reported about the demolition of eleven shacks near Sealdah station that were owned by refugees. There was a twelfth shack in the vicinity, owned by a non-refugee hawker, which remained untouched by the police.¹⁹ Refugee hawkers, thus, were particularly targeted. The government was anxious to push them away, lest many more refugees would follow their path.²⁰

Refugees did not ‘clog’ the city simply by occupying public spaces and empty lands. Their movements disrupted the urban “flows” as from early 1949 rallies by the refugees and rallies for the refugees became more and more common in Calcutta. They also blocked roads, confronted police barricades, burnt down tram cars, sat on hunger strike and called for *bandhs* with demands of rehabilitation and relief. They emerged as the surrogate proletariat for all the popular struggles that Calcutta witnessed in 1950s (tram movement, teachers’ movement, refugee agitation and food movement). Their politics, thus, disrupted the *flow* in the city – flow of traffic and people.

Since the early years of 19th century *circulation* and *flow* emerged as the key words in medical sciences, free trade liberalism as well as in urban planning. The health of the city, like the health of the human body, depended on easy circulation of air, water, people and commodities within the city-space (just like blood circulation in the body). Clogging and congestion of the roads and sewers were perceived as the major impediments towards turning Calcutta into ‘sanitary city.’ Narrow alleys, shops and houses jostling together, choked drains as well as ‘native habits’ were blamed for poor urban health and sanitary conditions in Calcutta. To add to this, the European residents of Calcutta continuously expressed their discomfort with smelly fish markets, butchers’ shops and slaughter houses, burial grounds and crematoriums, cow-sheds within the city boundaries. The 19th century liberal project of urban planning and urban governance was uncomfortable with the dead bodies and the dying bodies, blood, excrement and rotting. The dominant discourses about urban governance and urban aesthetics remained similar in twentieth century as well. This shaped the governmental policies towards the immigrant/refugee destitute in 1940s and 1950s. They were perceived as a threat, not only to the health of the individuals, but to the city at large. Because of them, Calcutta was not being able to become a ‘good city’. Bhaskar Mukherjee, a retired chief executive officer, identified ‘congestion as enemy number one’ of Calcutta in a lecture that he delivered at Rotary Club of Calcutta towards the end of October 1950. He noted that ‘there should be between 50-100 persons living in an acre in a good city. For tolerable living the figures might perhaps be stretched and doubled. But municipal administration did become a problem when the density was

¹⁹ *Jugantar*, 5/5/1950. For more news see *Jugantar* of 28 May and 30 May, 1950.

²⁰ There were simultaneous attempts to build separate hawker markets to accommodate refugee hawkers and petty traders. But the alternative sites were often unsuitable for profitable business and so the hawkers mostly refused to move.

between five to seven times the proper figures, as they saw in some parts of Calcutta today.’ Such a high concentration of population in Calcutta, according to Mukherjee, would disrupt city services like water supply, drainage and removal of refuse. In other words, circulation and easy flow of pure water and smooth outward flow of waste were hampered because of the rapidly increasing city population. To make the matter worse, the speaker mentioned, ‘most of the new comers to their cities never lived in cities before. They were unused to the mode and discipline of communal living. Their contributions to the funds of the city municipality could hardly be expected to be appreciable.’²¹ Removing the refugees from the streets, pavements, barracks and railway stations of Calcutta seemed to be the only solution to the demographic crisis of 1950s. This came to be known as the dispersal scheme and we shall discuss the scheme briefly in the final section of the paper. Before that, let us discuss the other dominant perception about the subaltern refugees: potential cheap labours. What kind of works were the poor refugees doing in Calcutta? What kind of opportunities did this city offer to its migrants?

(II)

Refugee labourers in Calcutta

Refugees who reached Calcutta in and after 1950 were mostly from the poorer sections – *chhotolok* as they were often called in sharp contrast to the earlier *bhadralok* migrants from East Pakistan. They did not have the cultural capital, prior connection to the city or friends and family in Calcutta. Neither did they have substantial property in East Bengal as their fall back options. They required jobs and Calcutta seemed to be a land of more opportunities than the small towns and villages of West Bengal. This was the prime reason for choosing a big city like Calcutta as against small towns or villages. To quote Joya Chatterji, “a powerful logic...dictated the decision of refugees to go to particular parts of West Bengal. They went to those places where they calculated they had the best chances of rebuilding their lives.”²² Calcutta with a large and burgeoning urban underclass, that had been historically very cosmopolitan, was a natural choice. Here the ubiquitous refugees became the hawkers, small shop keepers, factory workers, mechanics, domestic helps, cooks, private tutors and tailors. While the city elite ranted about their presence in the city, they also perceived these displaced poor people as potential low-priced laborers. A cursory glance to the contemporary dailies like *Jugantar* and *Amritabazar* will establish this point. For instance, *Jugantar* of April 30, 1950 carried the following advertisements:

²¹ Ibid.

²² P.1004. Joya Chatterji, ‘Dispersal’ and the failure of rehabilitation, 2007, MAS, 41:5. Pp 995-1032.

1. Experienced candidate required for sanitary engineering work. Refugee from East Pakistan preferred. Apply mentioning age, qualification and expected salary. Contact: Box No C, J 1088, *Jugantar*, Calcutta.
2. Refugee Brahmin widow required as cook for a small Brahmin family. Food, shelter and salary will be provided. Contact Jyotsna Debi, 10/7, Avay Mitra Street, Kolkata.
3. Healthy refugee boys with some education required for factory work. Contact D. Bhattacharya, 2/2 Nandaram Sen Street, Kolkata -5
4. Tailors required. Refugees preferred. Contact immediately between 9 AM and 5 PM, Annapurna Stores, 187 Bahubazar Street, Kolkata-12.
5. Cycle mechanic required. Accommodation will be provided in case of refugee from East Pakistan. Contact 'The City Cycle Stores', Raipur, Central Province.

Five such advertisements on a single day was no exception. Similar advertisements can be found almost every day in all the popular dailies throughout 1950s. Ishita Chakrabarty and Deepita Chakrabarty have calculated that between January 1956 and December 1957, one of West Bengal's largest circulated Bangla dailies, *Jugantar*, carried about 150 advertisements in the situations vacant column for domestic workers and cooks, among which more than 75 per cent asked for women applicants, mostly middle-aged, single, and in search of shelter. 'In search of shelter' during 1950s primarily, if not exclusively, hinted to the refugees. The refugees themselves also used the newspapers to ask for possible jobs. For instance *Jugantar* of December 31, 1950 had the following two advertisements:

1. Kayastha (East Bengal). Wants to teach upto 4th standard students to pay for own education (VIII standard). Ready to stay like a son with childless decent couple if they make provision for my education. Bijoy Singha, 111/1, Gopallal Thakur Road, Calcutta – 35.
2. Registered Ayurvedic doctor, ex- doctor of Marwari Hospital, well established refugee doctor seeks employment in an Ayurvedic medicine shop or Ayurvedic dispensary.

Of course newspaper advertisements were meant for only those few who had a minimum level of literacy and an access to the papers. However, the strikingly large number of advertisements for domestic help, factory workers, mechanic etc. might have had addressed various organizations that were working for the refugees.²³ Information might have passed to them through the good Samaritans.

²³ There were employment agents/agencies also. For instance *Jugantar* August 24 (1950) had the following advertisement: We try to provide work for destitute refugee weavers, tailors, carpenters, masons etc. Contact: Secretary, Srikrishna Parishad, 20 B Circular Garden Reach Road, Kidderpore, Kolkata.

A close reading of these advertisements tells us a number of things. First, when a refugee job seeker was looking for some employment in a household or when a household was looking for a domestic help from among the refugees, caste was an important criteria. Only a man or a woman of a particular caste could be allowed to stay in the house and to perform household works. We may mention here that a well off domestic household employed (and still employs) various types of labourers like cook, part-time *thikaworker* to do cleaning works (like cleaning the rooms, washing utensils and washing clothes), sweeper (to clean toilets and drains), *maali* (gardener), *ayaa* and wet nurses (to take care of very young children) etc. While sweepers (*jamadar*) and *thikalok* came from lower caste backgrounds to do ‘unclean works’, ‘in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, employers... would employ only Brahmins for cooking, since they would not accept food from the hands of lower castes.’²⁴ Though in contemporary West Bengal ‘the caste association with cooking has weakened considerably, with a much more heterogeneous urban middle class being increasingly less particular about the economy of touch in the preparation and consumption of food’,²⁵ the newspaper advertisements tell us that this was not the case in 1950s’ Calcutta. The trend of employing cooks and full time domestic helps (who would stay with the employer’s family) exclusively from higher castes continued in 1950s.²⁶ But it is possible that many of the refugees who got employed as cooks and domestic workers in upper caste households of Calcutta though claimed to be Brahmins or Kayasthas were often actually from lower caste sections.²⁷

Many of these advertisements for domestic labourers categorically asked for widows, others mentioned words like *daehin/ nirjhanjhat/ pichhutanhin* implying a single woman with no family as such. This would mean that she would have no home to return to and consequently would not take leave. Moreover, most of these advertisements also categorically asked for a woman with a specific body type – young/ middle aged (*madhyabayaska/ alpobayoshi*), hardworking (*karmatha*), and healthy (*swasthabati*) are the adjectives that can be frequently found in these advertisements.

²⁴*Domestic Days*, p.99.

²⁵*Ibid*, p.100.

²⁶ I am not making this observation from the only one advertisement that I have cited above. Similar advertisements were very frequent in the newspapers of early years of 1950s. to give a few more examples: a) A refugee Kayastha woman with no family obligation required for cooking in a small middle class household. Contact: Sati Prasad Basu, 119 Lower Circular Road. (*Jugantar* September 2, 1950); b) Cook required for a small Brahmin family. Middle aged, healthy, Brahmin woman with no family obligation is required. Food, shelter and pocket money will be provided. Please contact before 8 am or after 5 pm or Sunday. Sri Abinash Chowdhury, 10A SaratGhosh Street, Entally, Calcutta (*Jugantar* 24 January 1951); c) A Brahmin boy or a Brahmin woman is required for cooking. Food, shelter and some pocket money will be provided. Contact Nirad Chatterjee, 123/ 2B, Dinendra Street, Calcutta (*Jugantar* 14 December, 1952).

²⁷Sen and Sengupta have mentioned that ‘there are many anecdotes about ‘false’ Brahmins from neighbouring provinces, or men and women providing false testimony of their caste and obtaining work as a cook.’ *Domestic Days*, 99.

Young refugee widows belonging to lower middle class/ poor families fitted the bill most perfectly.²⁸ Seen as a burden to a family, they were the most easily dispensable members, particularly in a crisis situation. The government termed them as its ‘permanent liability’²⁹ but toyed with the idea of training them to become ‘tolerably good domestic servants’.³⁰ While the government initiatives to “train” them did not generate much interest, they themselves found suitable positions in the upper middle class/ upper class households. With little or no education, no exposure to city life, very little money and the constant fear of being sexually abused, becoming domestic help perhaps appeared to them as better of the few available options.

Domestic work was one of the many options where there was a demand for the refugee labour. The Bengali Hindus coming from East Pakistan formed a heterogeneous group with diverse skill sets, varied aspirations, different levels of mobility capital etc. Therefore, their career options and choices in Calcutta were also diverse. Apart from domestic workers, the ‘situation vacant’ advertisements frequently looked for teachers³¹, private tutors and tailors from the refugees. There were a number of similarities between a full time domestic help and a refugee private tutor. Often they were expected to teach the children of a household in exchange of food, shelter and some remuneration/ pocket money (*haatkharacha*). One Jatinbabu, for instance, gave the following advertisement in the *Jugantar* of September 9, 1950:

Full time tutor capable of teaching small kids required. He must be a matriculated, young refugee. He will be provided with food, shelter and suitable remuneration.

This was the standard job offer. Some advertisements categorically mentioned that the candidate should run errands apart from giving tuition if required. The young refugee men, looking for a job and a place to stay in Calcutta, were also agreeable to help in domestic chores apart from teaching the children of the house. Two advertisements published in *Jugantar* of May 5, 1950 will illustrate this point:

1. A refugee Kayastha young man with no family wants to teach young kids and willing to do other works also. Food, shelter and some pocket money is required. Knows some printing related work. Contact: Box No. HJ 2360 (P), *Jugantar*.
2. Kayastha, 18, male. Willing to teach students upto class VI and to help in any decent household work. Food and shelter have to be provided. Contact: Box No: J K H 25, *Jugantar*.

²⁸ Some houses, however, preferred young girls – ideally orphan refugee girl. See for instance, 14/12/1952.

²⁹ ‘Permanent Liability’ or PL camps were opened by the government

³⁰ From Ashoka Gupta Papers, cited by Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, p. 9, PP72.

³¹ I will not discuss about the refugee teachers here as teaching in schools cannot be considered as a part of the informal labour sector/ subaltern refugee work.

In pre-partition Calcutta, Muslims had dominated the tailoring occupation. Muslim *Darzis* who lived mostly in the Metiaburj and Santoshpur area, had nearly monopolized markets for readymade garments in Calcutta and Howrah. But with partition and riots of 1950, Muslims began to leave the city in large numbers—often with the desire to come back once more when things improved. Professions that had been traditionally dominated by the Muslim community now opened up to the refugees. Tailoring was one such example. The Muslim tailors who stayed put in Calcutta obviously felt threatened with the increasing number of refugee tailors in the city. As M.K.A Siddiqui and S.P. Lala note:

It is said that these people [i.e. the refugees from East Bengal] are more efficient businessmen than the Darzis of Metiaburj. Moreover they have an extra advantage..of receiving loans from the government.... Within a short period they have received a sufficient knowledge about tailoring by coming in contact with the tailors of Metiaburj.... The women of these refugee tailors also participate in the business.³²

The refugees were employed and perhaps preferred to an extent in almost every informal sector. Apart from the frequent advertisements for refugee maid, refugee tutor and refugee tailor, we come across a health drink and toffee making company looking for salespersons among refugees;³³ a vegetable wholesaler of College Street Market looking for twenty five Bengali refugee coolies;³⁴ a perfumery looking for few literate refugee youths;³⁵ a very vague advertisement looking for a Brahmin refugee young man with good Bengali handwriting³⁶ and so on. Such advertisements were most common during 1950 and early 1951 when Calcutta received the highest number of refugees.

Desperate for food, shelter and financial assistance, the refugees were ready to do such works that they would not have done in “normal” circumstances and that too for a low wage. Moreover, from the few autobiographies of poor Dalit refugees we learn that they were open to all kinds of jobs and looked for every possible opportunity that came in their way. For instance, Sadananda Pal tried his hands in various jobs including tailoring, hawking betel leaf, making sweets, setting up a stationary shop etc. His family in East Pakistan had been potters for generations. But as he reached Calcutta after partition, he realized that

³²Siddiqui and Lala, ‘The Darzis of Metiaburj’ in M.K.A. Siddiqui (ed), *Aspects of Society and Culture in Calcutta*, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1982, p-136

³³*Jugantar*11/3/1950.

³⁴*Jugantar*11/9/1950.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 5/5/1950.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 14/1/1951.

it was not wise to hold to his family profession any longer. He grabbed every opportunity the city had to offer. That was the draw of a city like Calcutta. It had many opportunities to offer to the refugees—ranging from coolies, domestic servants, private tutors, hawkers, shop keepers to typists, compounders, office boys and then doctors, engineers, teachers etc. That was why the refugees were so desperate to stay put in Calcutta (even if that meant staying at railway platforms) or in its surroundings. From another autobiography, written by Manoranjan Byapari, we learn how his father used to travel to Jadavpur area everyday from Gholadoltola to stand in the in the local “labor market”. Every morning, hundreds of laborers used to assemble near Baghajatin More [Crossing] of Jadavpur looking for work. New colonies were coming up in this area and new houses were constructed. Consequently, there was acute need for workers. So the labor contractors would come and hire many of them for the day (or for few days). When his father developed severe gastric and could no longer work, Manoranjan left home in search of job. He travelled to Calcutta and Siliguri (northern part of West Bengal), to Guwahati (Assam), to Kanpur, to Dandakaranya and then back to Calcutta. In between these places, he assisted a cook, became a rickshaw puller for a while, then a political ruffian. Subsequently, he worked as a manual laborer, tea seller, a domestic help and utensil washer in a tea stall.³⁷ Coming from a family that had traditionally provided agrarian labor and had owned small cultivable lands, partition turned Byapari and Pal (and their families) into classic precariats without adequate income-earning opportunity, absolutely zero employment security, and no opportunity for developing particular skills in order to develop an expertise in a particular job or any adequately stable income. They looked for all possible openings that a place had to offer at a particular time. Calcutta thus shaped their vocation to a large section, while they too influenced the labour market and the wage pattern of the city.

With the influx of the refugees to Calcutta, the existing urban underclass faced competition and threat. The above quoted lines from Siddiqui and Lala had already hinted towards this. Though Calcutta did not witness any major confrontation between the locals and the immigrants, the possibility was always there. Naran Banerjee’s semi fictional writing published in the Sunday supplement of *Jugantar* depicted this tension well. This was an account of a certain Mr. Bose, a “petty jobless” man, who had lost his military accounts job because of a retrenchment policy a couple of years back. Since then his sole source of income had been a few private tuitions and a copy editing job. Earlier he used to charge Rs. 15 per tuition. However, when the new Bangal fellow in his neighborhood began to offer tuition in a lower rate, Mr. Bose had to reduce his rate too. Naran Banerjee used this example to argue that the refugee influx in the city had made the lives of the lower middle class jobless people of Calcutta miserable. There were no jobs

³⁷ Ibid. Byapari’s 457 pages long memoir details his journeys from one place to another and from one profession to the other and his struggles to survive.

for them, let alone for the refugees. The author complained, “a few hawkers will increase on the street, some may get agricultural plots, a few shops will also come up. But what will happen to the remaining thousands of refugee jobless people?...the government will continue to give them ration and dole...the same government that cannot give me adequate ration twice a week will now provide ration to the refugees.”³⁸ Banerjee’s account is very important as it reveals the tension between the “locals” and the newcomers – something that is not well documented in partition studies, at least in the context of Calcutta and West Bengal.

Till now I have been trying to make the following points: a) how the destitute refugees were perceived as harmful to Calcutta and its citizens; b) simultaneously, how they were perceived as potential source of cheap labour. These twin perceptions shaped the governmental policy of ‘dispersal’ – i.e., the scheme of sending the refugees to scarcely populated areas within and outside West Bengal. This scheme, they assumed, would serve twin purposes – it would reduce the congestion of Calcutta and it would provide cheap labour in areas where labour need was acute. I will discuss this scheme briefly in the next section.

(III)

Kailash Nath Katju, the governor of West Bengal, in an address to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce in March, 1950 commented on the refugee condition of Calcutta. He said:

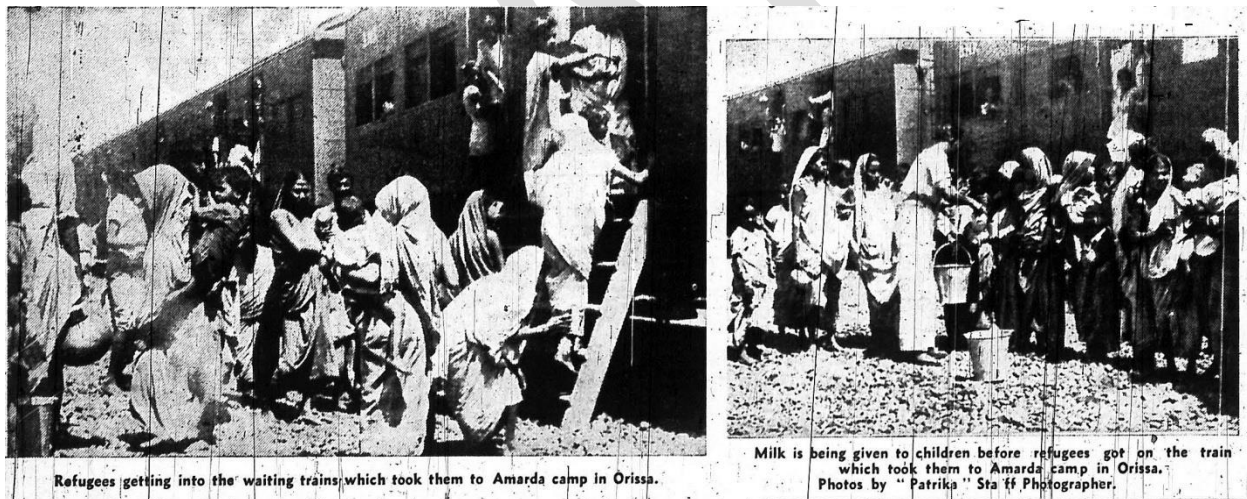
There was the natural desire everywhere amongst these people [refugees] to live in Bengal, among people who were familiar to them by language, by diet and because of familiar climatic conditions. Somehow Calcutta exerted a magnificent influence on almost everybody in Bengal and everyone of them wanted to live somewhere in Calcutta or round about in Calcutta in places like Tollygunj, Ballygunj, Howrah or other places within a radius of 5 to 10 miles of the city. They all knew that the conditions of Calcutta were already horrible. Calcutta bustees were a disgrace to the civilized mode of life. In the circumstances to expect that it would be possible to inject another million and a half in Calcutta was not practicable. They must have to go therefore, elsewhere.³⁹

Katju was voicing the dominant position of the government. The West Bengal government was simply not ready to bear the demographic burden on its own. Though the subaltern refugees appeared to be “useful” to some as ill paid maids, tutors, tailors and coolies, the seemingly never ending trail of them, their diseased bodies, their continuous demands for food, shelter and jobs and the competition they posed

³⁸Naran Bannerjee, ‘Bastuhara O Bastughughu’ in *Jugantar*, *Jugantar*, 23/04/1950

³⁹*Amritabazar*30/3/1950.

to the urban poor, irked many more. Particularly during the year of 1950, when thousands of refugees were reaching West Bengal daily, the situation seemed critical. The refugees had to be prevented from reaching Calcutta and those who were already there should be sent away. In the previous year an initiative was already taken to shift the refugees from the city as 200 families were moved to the Andaman Islands. From 1950 (and particularly in 1950) such dispersal initiatives became more intense. Trains were stopped at border stations like Ranaghat and Bongaon and refugees were asked whether they had any close family in Calcutta or elsewhere in West Bengal. If their answers were in negative, they were taken to nearby transit camps and from there to the camps of Orissa/ Bihar or to the camps in the districts of Midnapore/Bankura/ Purulia. But this initiative met with very limited success. Though many people were accommodated in these areas, a substantial number of passengers still preferred to try their luck in the city. Consequently, the crowd at the Sealdah Station increased.⁴⁰ Similarly, refugees came to Calcutta by chartered steamers from Narayanganj (East Pakistan). The first two steamers reached Shalimar (Howrah) on April 8, 1950. To prevent the passengers from entering Calcutta, special trains were arranged to transfer almost every one of them to the Amarda camp in Orissa. Exceptions were made only for the selected few refugees who had some close relatives in Calcutta or in its suburbs.⁴¹



Refugees being taken to Amarda Camp from Shalimar, *Amritabazar*, April 9, 1950.

From the Sealdah Station too, the government tried to get hold of the refugees and to take them to different camps outside the city and the province. B.G. Rao, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, in a press interview on July 14, 1950, informed; "dispersal of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Amritabazar*, April 9, 1950.

refugees from Sealdah where there were at present 13,000 [refugees], would start immediately, and situation at Sealdah was expected to improve over a fortnight, if not earlier.”⁴² He added that, in the preceding two weeks, 4000 refugees had been already moved from the station to various camps at Bihar and Orissa. More people were to be sent in Bihar but “difficulties of transport arising out of the heavy rush of pilgrims to “rathajatra” at Puri” was slowing down the process.⁴³ Since migration continued incessantly throughout the 50s with occasional lull in the flow, the mechanism of dispersal remained in place. Overcrowding at Calcutta and its surroundings, including in places like Sealdah Station, had to be prevented. A decade back, the colonial government had spent considerable time, energy and money in rounding up famine victims from the streets of Calcutta and was sent to destitute homes outside the city.⁴⁴ Now the dispersal initiatives might have created a sense of déjà vu among the residents of the city. The *bhadralok* refugees who were staying in the colonies or in the rented/owned houses were not touched by the government. The subalterns among them were the prime target.

The dispersal initiatives met with very limited success. The chart below will establish this point:

Statement showing the number of East Pakistan displaced persons resettled outside West Bengal:

Serial No	Name of the States	Population	Persons Deserted before Rehabilitation	Persons who received Rehabilitation Assistance	Desertion from Rehabilitation Centres	Total Desertion from the State
1.	Bihar	62,500 (*28,130)	9,569	21,600 (old) 17,105 (new)	3,198	12,167
2.	Orissa	34,745 (*32,823)	15,145	12,437	5,834	20,979
3.	Assam	333,414	++	155,300	++	++
4.	Tripura	280,075	++	158,574	++	++
5.	Manipur	1,783	++	1,783	++	++
6.	U.P.	4,090	Nil	4,090	590	590
7.	Andaman	3,315	Nil	3,315	520	520

Source: *The Report of the Committee of Ministers for the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, 1954, p. 46.

⁴²*Amritabazar*, July 15, 1950.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Janam Mukherjee, *The Hungry Bengal*.

* Figures indicate number of sponsored displaced persons

++ Figures not available or maintained

Old refugees are those who were displaced prior to the 1950 riots.

The high rate of 'desertion' from camps and colonies reflect the failure of the dispersal initiatives. Deplorable situation in the transit/ work site camps, inadequate income opportunity in the colonies, problem of language and culture, bureaucratic high handedness, hostility of the local people – were the reasons for 'desertion'. The 'deserters' mostly returned to Calcutta and jostled together in Sealdah and Howrah stations and pavements of the city. The government had failed them. High rate of child mortality, frequent cases of cholera, dysentery, pox and typhoid, reports of rape and molestation, absence of educational facilities and several starvation deaths from camp sites and colony areas exposed the failure of the government. The 'deserters' were now determined to stay put in and around Calcutta (even if that meant long term stay at railway stations) to participate in the urban labour market. As a reporter of *Amritabazar*, while describing a group of 'deserters' from Bihar who were staying at Howrah Station, noted:

Goaded by the instinct of self preservation they [the deserters squatting in Howrah station] are putting in the last amount of their energy and resources to rehabilitate themselves and the evidence of the same is available when one finds that every fifth unit is found hawking or collecting odd things to sell.⁴⁵

Calcutta promised a better life than the camps and the colonies. Moreover, Calcutta gave them the much needed visibility and power of political negotiation. Starvation at Sealdah would grab more attention than starvation at remote areas of Bihar or Orissa. Similarly, the government would be more perturbed if they took out processions near Rajbhavan or Auckland House, sat on the rail tracks near Howrah or Sealdah or began a hunger strike somewhere in the city. Therefore, from mid '50s the 'deserters' formed a significant section of the refugee crowd of the city. Prafulla Chakrabarty's private papers confirms that by mid April 1957 'about 20000 out of 30000 refugees at Bettiah (Bihar) about 5/7000 refugees from Kumardoga, Bihar and about 2500 from Burdwan District of West Bengal had already taken their shelter at Sealdah, Howrah Maidan and some footpaths of Calcutta and its suburbs.'⁴⁶

While discussing the presence of famine destitute in Calcutta in 1943, Janam Mukherjee had poignantly written

⁴⁵ *Amritabazar Patrika*, June 16, 1951.

⁴⁶ 'Refugee Affairs', date 15.4.1957. 'Folder 1'. Prafulla Chakrabarty Papers, IAS, Amsterdam.

In the context of famine, establishing a “right” to remain in Calcutta often meant the difference between life and death. A right to Calcutta meant a territorial claim. The round up and removal of ‘sick destitutes’ from the streets was, in this sense, only a more stark and authoritarian means of establishing “priority”. Questions of who belonged in Calcutta and who did not, who was to be granted residence and who removed, who was “essential” and who disposable, had all been central to patrolling the urban space of Calcutta at least since the onset of the war. Famine only heightened the stakes and ensured that these same questions would continue to breed contention and violence for many years to come.⁴⁷

Like the war and the famine of early 1940s, partition opened up similar questions about belonging and rights to the urban space of Calcutta. It also revealed that patrolling the urban space of Calcutta in late colonial and early post-colonial years essentially meant similar sets of strategies. Calcutta remained a deeply contested urban site in the 1950s – where claims and counter claims were put forward by the Muslims and the Hindus, by the non-refugees and the refugees and by various sections within the refugees (like colony refugees and camp/station refugees). The *national* government mediated between these groups in similar way as their colonial predecessors would do. On the other hand, like famine and war, clinging to Calcutta during the turbulent years of partition was a survival strategy for many. Despite the government’s repeated attempts to get rid of them, the city remained crowded with the refugees, among whom the ‘deserters’ formed a significant section. They worked in the city – often for a low wage, participated in the politics and left the city from time to time being allured or forced by the government. Their sheer number, diseased bodies, perseverance and desperation intimidated the city residents and the government authorities alike. Their potential as cheap human resources was noticed by them too. These perceptions and potentials shaped the policies towards the subaltern refugees and the possibilities/power of negotiation they could have.

⁴⁷ Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 138.