

Way Back Home: The Partition of India and the Right to Return of the Refugees

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Partition of British India on the basis of religion turned millions of people into religious minorities. For most of the Hindus who found themselves in Pakistan and the Muslims whose homes fell within India, becoming minority meant becoming victims of insecurity, fear and violence. Some of them preferred to leave their homes and villages and migrate to the neighbouring country where they would no longer be religious minorities. For many, the migration was not a matter of preference but of compulsion. Nevertheless, there were people who thought and hoped that their migrations were temporary. They hoped for a better tomorrow when they would be able to come back. The governments of India and Pakistan too insisted the minorities to stay put, they promised equal rights and freedom to all irrespective of their caste, creed and religions. They also recognized the rights of the refugees to return.¹ However, the partition literature, while studying the patterns of migration of the minorities, have almost always missed this idea of 'right to return' as a point of analysis. In my paper I would like to address this issue in the context of East Pakistan and West Bengal. The Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950 categorically recognized the right to return of the refugees in Eastern India and East Pakistan, promised them that the governments would restore their properties and would help them in settling down. Once the pact was signed, the newspapers regularly reported the statistics of returnees to East Pakistan and West Bengal. Before and after the Pact, there were people, both Muslims and Hindus, who migrated with the hope of coming back in near future. But was the way back home smooth for the refugees? To what extent the governments encouraged the return in reality? Did the governments aid the returnees to settle down? Who returned and why did they return? These are some of the fundamental questions that this paper raises and tries to answer. It is important also to keep in mind, that the returns of the refugees were not necessarily an act of hope. Many of them found their refugee lives worse than their experiences of being minority and so decided to return. This paper intends to explore their experiences of returning vis-à-vis the governments and the community: did their lives improve in their homes? Were they got any aid and support from the government and the majority community as they came back? Or, after partition being refugee or being minority were like choosing between the fire and the frying pan? My paper will be based on archival research, newspaper reports and oral narratives.

¹ Only, Punjab was to be the exception, where both the government agreed for a total transfer of population.