

Partition Stories of Malda and Memory of Two Emigrants

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The Independence of India was marred by the great division of the country into two parts – ‘India’ and ‘Pakistan’ and the agony caused by it. Punjab had to pay the price of Independence in the form of Partition.¹ Historically India had been a safe heaven for refugees and displaced persons. After Independence, Partition precipitated a massive exodus and influx of displaced persons – Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India and Muslim to Pakistan. It’s estimated that some 15 million persons traveled across the newly formed borders.²

But now the question arise that who are the Refugees? The definition of Refugee is based on the 1951 UN convention, according to which a refugee is “any person who owing to well-founded fear of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside in unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country . . .”

In 1971, these Refugees were called ‘evacuees’ they were, in effect, treated as refugees requiring temporary asylum. According to Home Ministry Report (1996) there are 2,72,013 refugees staying in India, but the World Refugee Survey (1997) estimates the figure to be in excess of 3,50,0000. According to Md.Maqbool Dhar, Minister of State for Home Affairs (1996) revealed that the number of foreign refugees staying in India and their country of origins were : Tibetans (98,000), Sri Lankan Tamils (87,729), Bangladeshi refugees (66,234), Burmese (52) and there were 18,932 Afghans, 255 Somalis and 808 refugees from other countries living in India.³

According to official Indian source, Non-Muslim evacuees vacated 6,729,000 acres of land in west Punjab, alone, where in 4,307,000 was canal irrigated and the land was left by non-Muslim in Sindh, North West Frontier province, Baluchistan and Khairpur. Muslim evacuees from East Punjab and the state of Patiala, Faridkot and Kapurthala in India, abandoned 4,735,000 acres of land out of which 1,326,000 areas was under irrigation.⁴ Indian sources estimated the total value of the left out property by Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan at 8 billion and that of Muslim evacuees property in India at 800 million.⁵

At the beginning, determined efforts had been made by India and Pakistan to deal with the settlement of the property interests of the refugees in a conjunctive way. A special meeting of the Joint Defence Council of India and Pakistan, held at Lahore on August 29, 1947, under the chairmanship of Mountbatten, and Participated by the Prime Minister of India and Pakistan.⁶

There are various types of migrations to India both in terms of Causality as well as their impact on domestic policies. There were seven types of migrations may be considered. They are-

1. Hindus migrations caused by the partition
2. Bangladeshi refugees as a result of the civil war in Pakistan
3. Sri Lankans Tamils, Burmese Indian and Bhutanese Nepali refugees due to inter-ethnic class-struggle.
4. Nepali, Bangladeshi and Pakistani setters due to open borders
5. Developmental and environmental refugees from Bangladesh
6. Indians Tamils (Sri Lankan) repatriates as per-contractual obligations
7. Tibetan and Afghan refugees as a result of military intervention by extra-regional powers.

Apart from these seven categories three primary categories of refugees can be identified :-

1. Refugees who receive full protection as per standards set by the Government of India such as the Sri Lankan Tamils, Tibetans.
2. Refugees who's presence in Indian territory is acknowledged by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and they are protected under the principle of non- refoulement by Government of India such as Afghan, Iranian and Burmese refugees.

Refugees who entered India and have been assimilated into different communities. Their presence is not acknowledged by either the Indian Government or the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. ⁷

India does not have a consistent refugee policy. It's policy was first declare by the late Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in Parliament on March 30, 1959, during the exodus of Tibetan refugees. Nehru asserted, " It is the sovereign right of the state to give asylum when it chooses but no individual can insist on obtaining such asylum. Individual cases have to be considered on merits, whenever occasion for this arises." ⁸ The principle of non-refoulement was accepted by India during the meeting of Asian countries when the Bangkok principles were laid down in 1966. The External Affairs Minister, B.R Bhagat told the "Indian Parliament that the Government had come up against certain difficulties as regards the implications of it according to the 1951 convention." ⁹

However this paper address only the migration problem of eastern border more specifically the problem of West Bengal precisely of Malda. For Bengal, the influx continued in different forms for many years after Partition. It has correctly been indicated that, while the partition of Punjab was a one-time event which hassle and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947- 1950), the partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuing process. ¹⁰

In spite of the fact that the Independence of India and Pakistan, accompanied by a large – scale population movement, was an important historical event, the number of refugee studies for

the subcontinent is limited. In this condition this paper propose to understand the identity of refugees from East Pakistan who settled in a border district, Malda, on the northern part of West Bengal. By tracing the process of movement and settlement of Partition refugees in Malda, I will try to present two Hindu Bengali memories in the aftermath of the Partition, to identify the original condition of that time.

Here I shall show the year wise influx of refugees into Malda, 1946 - 1951 ¹¹

	No. of displaced people		
Year	Male	Female	Total
1946	105	86	191
1947	2,307	1,978	4,285
1948	2,536	2,685	5,221
1949	3,233	3,041	6,274
1950	22,243	20,992	43,235
1951	494	498	992
Total	30,918	29,280	60,198

The first block of refugees arrived in Malda after the anti – Hindu riots in Noakhali and Tippera in 1946, a year before actual Partition. The shelter – seekers continued to come until the end of 1949.¹² Those, who came during this phase, mostly belonged to the upper and upper – middle class like the land downing, merchants and professional classes.¹³ Till the year 1949, approx 15,971 people came to settle in Malda.¹⁴ The reason for their exodus was not because of large – scale violence but economic boycotts of Hindu traders and professionals.¹⁵ The first arrival of refugees posed no great problem to the district administration. Most of the refugees at this stage were well to do. A small section of these people were able to sell their property in East Pakistan or arrange property exchange with Muslim property owners who were leaving Malda.¹⁶

The picture changed from December 1949 and the influx of refugee in Malda reached its peak in 1950. Anti – Hindu riots in Khulna, Rajshahi, Faridpur and Barisal compelled a large number of people to cross the border. As the table shows from December 1949 to December

1950, more than forty nine thousands people arrived in Malda. ¹⁷ In the year 1950, April 8 Jawaharlal Nehru and Liakat Ali signed a pact. It was decided that those people who had left their homeland to other country would be encouraged to come back to their native land and the Government would restore the abandoned property to them. But this Nehru – Liakat failed to provide the way for the return of the refugees to their homeland. The refugees who came to Malda from 1950 onwards were mainly displaced peasants and agricultural labourers. This time who crossed the border were very poor and possessed very little expect their labour powers. Most of them belonged to the so – called lower castes, like Namasudra, Sadgop and Malos.

The experience of the refugees of 1950's was substantially different. For the lower caste and class refugees, there were very few jobs to compete for. They were largely unable to acquire on their own initiative land on which to rehabilitate themselves. It was this section of refugees who went through the real pain, trauma and agony of the Partition. ¹⁸ Here I will show the bulk amount of the refugees in Malda mainly came from the Rajshahi district of East Pakistan. A large number also came from Faridpur, Pabna, Dinajpur and Bakharganj :- ¹⁹

Sl. No	District of origin in East Pakistan	No of Persons
1	Rajshahi	42,532
2	Kusthia	36
3	Jessore	322
4	Khulna	802
5	Rangpur	430
6	Dinajpur	2,609
7	Bogura	580
8	Pabna	3,056
9	Dacca	1,344
10	Mymensingh	864
11	Faridpur	4,309
12	Bakharganj	2,343
13	Tipperah	310
14	Noakhali	301
15	Chittagang	167
16	Sylhet	21
17	Others	179

In the initial stage, the most difficult problem faced by the district administration was the scarcity of land in Malda. The number of immigrant to East Pakistan was less, and more importantly, immigrant properties were not available in Malda because the Muslim who left for East Pakistan were relatively poor and did not possess substantial land holdings. The coming of the first group of refugees prior to 1950 posed no serious problem to the district administration, as they were few in number. The district administration did not find it necessary to set up any refugee camp. Moreover, there was no clear thinking at the government level, as to whether the refugee needed relief, which was a temporary affair, or rehabilitation, which was long-term. It was thought that the refugees would return to East Pakistan and the short term measures would be enough to cope with the situation. By the end of the 1950, when the influx of refugees into Malda reached at its peak, the district administration was forced to extend relief and rehabilitation efforts. The administrative effort may be discussed at two levels : Urban and Rural.²⁰

A large number of refugees coming mainly from the Rajshahi District of East Pakistan started to settle in the municipal areas of Englishbazar. The commissioners of the Municipality mentioned scarcity of water, electricity, proper drainage system and crisis in other municipal facilities due to the influx of refugees rapidly.²¹ Due to the continuing influx of the displaced persons from East Pakistan, the population of Englishbazar was rocketed up. The table shows, the population of Englishbazar town was nearly doubled during the year 1941 – 1961

Growth of population in Englishbazar Town, 1941 – 1961²²

Year	Male	Female	Total Population
1941	12,816	10,518	23,334
1951	16,348	14,315	30,663
1961	24,496	21,494	45,900

In the Urban Malda many refugee families settle on their own. They were given various types of rehabilitation assistance, which included house building loans, trade loans or professional loans, Government sponsored colonies were also established. There were three such colonies with 600 families.²³ Up to September 1953, about 200 families were given trade and Business loans.

Steps were also taken for education of refugee children. It was decided that every refugee school going and the more deserving among them should get free secondary education.²⁴ The State Government also sanctioned school and expansion of some existing school to take in some refugee students. Malda College, was established in 1944, received grants from the Government

for its infrastructural expansion to accommodate refugee students. The root of the college can be traced to a pre-partition temporary college at Dadanchak in the district of Nawabganj, Bangladesh. But it was expanded in the area of English bazaar with the refugee students.

Not only in the India but in the other three largest countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka faced major problem like School exclusion and un-education during and after the Partition. Though our paper is concentrating on India only still we should know the rate of School Exclusion in the other countries during this period :-

- Pakistan has the highest rate of school exclusion for pre-school age children (51%) and for primary school-age children (34.4%). This indicator falls to 30.1% for lower secondary school-age children largely due to late entry in school.
- In Bangladesh, around 34% of pre-school age children are not in school. The rate of exclusion is lower for primary-school age children at 16.2% but rises sharply for lower secondary school age children at 30.7%
- For India the rates of non-participation in schooling for pre-school age children is 12.4% and for primary school age children is 6.4%. The rate of exclusion for lower secondary school-age children is 5.7%. ²⁵

In the Rural areas of Malda the refugees settled mainly at Gour, Kendua, Rampura and Mobarakpur. At the Gour the refugee populance concentrated in the 3 camps set up by the district administration :-

1. At the northwest of Bardwari of Rajshahi district settled themselves up.
2. The refugees belonging to Namasudra caste from Pabna and Faridpur concentrated in the camps on the East of Burdwari.
3. At the camps located on the south bank of Choto Sagardighi resided the refugees belonging to the upper caste.

As the cross – border influx continued to come in the 1950's the helpless uninvolved civilians reached at the Englishbazar town. The relief and transit camps were set up in different parts of Malda district to provide immediate help to the displaced people. They are the women who are mostly innocent peoples. They are targeted both by state and non state abusers. We don't have the exact estimates of such victims and have never reported the violation against them. Women as symbolic bearers of caste or ethnic identity are systematically tortured. From a cultural perspective, the entire community is polluted as a consequence of the acts of sexual violence. The effect of women themselves can range from psychological traumas to social ostracism of the respective women and children

born out of the sexual violence. Women are targeted because of their gender, and the form of abuses carry upon them tend to be gender specific.

Other than this, the main problem which confronted the refugees was the insufficiency of medical facilities. A very small number of doctors and medicine of various diseases, fever, small pox etc became almost epidemic in every relief camps. Since they had grown in an entirely unplanned way, illegally and without license from the government, they did not have even the most basic comforts like drains, electricity or running water.

Actually The Government mainly set up three types of camps namely, Women's Camps, Worksite Camps and Permanent Liability Camps (here after P L Camps). In most cases, the military barracks and tunnel – shaped huts made of iron constructed for the soldiers were converted originally into makeshift camps for the refugees. Thousands of refugees, the displaced persons who arrived either by train or by truck from across the border, were dumped in these camps. When some of these camps became overpopulated and the government could not provide any more space in these military barracks or huts, the additional refugees got tent to live in.²⁶ Consequently the camp life was not always satisfactory but sometimes subhuman in nature. In most of the Women's Camps did not have the proper maternity units at that time. As a result in many cases the pregnant women had to deliver their babies almost under the open sky.²⁷

It would be worth mentioning in this context that, after visiting the camps of West Bengal, the leading social workers, including Bina Das, Ashoka Gupta accompanied by Suniti Pakrashi, Deputy Director of Women's Rehabilitation in West Bengal submitted a report about the measurable conditions of the camps to the Government of India. The report revealed that, the " lack of privacy and of kitchen space is notorious. Scanty water supply with hand pumps and congested rooms with leaking roofs have led to a number of strikes in P L Camps. All the camps that we have visited Malda in West Bengal for P L Women and children lack workroom, playground and prayer rooms . . .²⁸ . The displacement of women refugees from their own country, changed their perspective towards lives.

It is true that, for some of refugees, perhaps it was an escape from violence in more than one sense, but for the women campmates, the economic uncertainty associated with a life almost beginning from the scratch, disaster, as they faced different kinds of atrocities – atrocities that usually the women only face. Some cases happened in that camps, where women were forced to work as a sex workers. There are many instance like this.

Here I will share two stories of that time of two different persons from where we understand the actual condition of that time.

Interview 1 :

Name : Ashim Saha

Currently Residing At : Kolkata, West Bengal, India (Shifted to Kolkata in the year 2000)

Age : 08 (In the Year 1947)

Migrated From : Pabna, Bangladesh

Migrated To : Malda, West Bengal, India

Ashim Saha remembers how police would attempt to destroy the settlements migrants had built in the colonies outside Kolkata after Partition. The Netaji Nagar School Was built on one of those settlements overnight, with no Government support.

Ashim Saha was born in 1939 in Pabna, Bangladesh. His father was a school teacher who used to teach in the same District. He recalls that they owned some agricultural lands in the lowlands of Dhaka where his uncle supervised cultivation.

He studied in a school in Bangladesh but completed school in Malda after migration. Mr.Saha has vivid memories of his school, recalling that his school's Head master choose to stay and educate local children instead of moving to a more lucrative position in a large city.

After Partition, his family decided to migrate to India as his elder brother was working in Kolkata. At that time, new colonies were established for migrants in the southern outskirts of the city. His family at first moved to one these new colonies, Which later became Netaji Nagar Colony. He recalls that the land was withheld from migrants from land holders and the police would repeatedly try to destroy the establishments. They formed night guard parties to secure the area as the area was not secure for the women. Two or three rape cases happened in the same area. Apart from that Netaji Nagar School was created over the course of one night, without any help from Government.

After two years they shifted to Malda. He remembers the struggle of life as a refugee in Malda. The family received no help or compensation from the Government. Refugee kept on arriving, and those who came later struggled a great deal, He recalls.

He speaking about going back to Bangladesh once again, he seemed eager and his eyes lightened up. He mentions that he would be very interested if anybody is willing to take him to Bangladesh and the first thing he would like to see is his Playground. ²⁹

Interview 2 :

Name : Seuli Rani Dasgupta

Currently Residing At : Howrah, West Bengal, India (Shifted to Howrah in the year 1991)

Age : 10

Migrated From : Rangpur, Bangladesh

Migrated To : Malda, West Bengal, India

Seuli Rani Dasgupta, was born in 1937 in Rangpur. She remembers growing up with a huge joint family of almost 29 peoples in their house in Rangpur. Her father was an Ayurvedic doctor. She was the youngest among his eight siblings. She describes her house that spanned across a large area consisting of more than ten rooms. Her family also owned six ponds which were used for farming fishes.

Mrs. Dasgupta studied at Rangpur school until the five grade. She recalls, many families leaving in the days leading up to Partition. Once Partition became a reality, the family decided to migrate to Malda in August 1947. They took a train from Rangpur to Malda. When she arrived in Malda it was dark, with isolated roads. She recalls that there was a great deal of confusion regarding Malda and Rangpur as to which side of the border they were to be part of. She mentions that the Pakistani flag was hoisted in Malda while the Indian flag was hoisted in Rangpur and there was a reversal after two days of intense rioting.

Mrs. Dasgupta's family members did not migrate simultaneously. She remembers having heard the news of her brother's death while she was in Malda. She remembered that when she and her father were about to board the train to go to her relative's house, suddenly she realized that she had lost the main key of their house. His father sent her back along her path to find the key. "Along the way I saw riots beginning to erupt around the city, houses set on fire", she says. She remembered watching the fires from their neighbor's roof. A bell would be rung to indicate trouble ahead. Out of fear that his daughter would be abducted, Mrs. Dasgupta's father did not allow her to go to school, and the education did not continue. "There was continuous atmosphere of fear." Their house was attacked as well. Leaving their home, they could take nothing except the clothes they were wearing. The girls in the family were sent across the border the same day on a plane, while the men stayed back for a year afterward. She remembers her father describing how the army would come and search the house often. She remembered there were empty houses in Malda and many families occupied them

to seek refugees for some time. In that time there was Cholera epidemic, and “ It was a disease unheard of or unknown to us, no medical team was there.”

Mrs. Dasgupta, speaking about going back to Rangpur once again, she seemed not interested. She said, “I’m now old and don’t want to recall my memory of that terrible days.”³⁰

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