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## The Sordid Saga of Partition: Forced Migration from East Pakistan to West Bengal

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**Abstract:**

Partition of Indian Sub-continent between India and Pakistan in 1947 created one of the world's largest migration problems. Punjab in the north-west and Bengal in the eastern border was the main epicentre of this migration problem. Near about fifteen million people were displaced with close to two million killed. Though the scale of violence was very high in the western border but situation was under control within one or two years. However, what is unique about the Bengal Partition is that unlike the massive exchange of population in 1947-48 and till 1950 on the western border, the influx of refugees continued for many years after partition, and continues in different forms on the eastern border of India. Therefore, the displacement and migration from East to West, that is former East Pakistan and Bangladesh to West Bengal is still a reality. Though the Migration of the Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan is a ceaseless process but there is some specific developments which accelerated the refugee flow from East.

**Keywords:** Partition, migration, refugee, riot

The partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan left millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims on the wrong side of the fence and led to a mass exodus unparalleled in world history. The birth of two dominions i.e. India and Pakistan was accompanied by maximum scale of displacement, leading to new socio-political equations on both sides of border. What is unique about the Bengal partition is that unlike the massive exchange of populations in 1947-50 on the western border the influx of refugees across the Bengal border remained a ceaseless process for decades to follow. Experiences of those Bengali refugees, comprising of elements like displacement, migration, relocation, nostalgia, trauma and finally the survival, rolled into one is a subject worth studying.

In this paper I intended to discuss only about the Diaspora of the East Bengali refugees to West Bengal from 1947 to 1970. Migration of the Bengali refugee from East Bengal was started from the time of Noakhali riot of 1946 and this migration was continued until 1971<sup>i</sup>. Another chunk of refugee from East Bengal came to India due to civil war in East Pakistan. In order to deal with the vastness and wide scope of the subject, I intend to study up to 1970; consciously not taking up the fresh wave of refugee influx on the eve of Bangladesh war from 1971. If we go through the statistical data of refugee influxes to West Bengal from East Pakistan we can find four major divisions of refugee influx in West Bengal.

1. 1946 to 1949,
2. 1950 to 1959
3. 1960 to 1965,
4. 1966 to 1970<sup>ii</sup>

The diagram below shows the refugee influx in West Bengal and the other eastern Indian states from East Pakistan between 1946 and 1970. Migration from east to west also tended to increase in some specific years when the communal tension increased or the bilateral relation between India and Pakistan worsened.

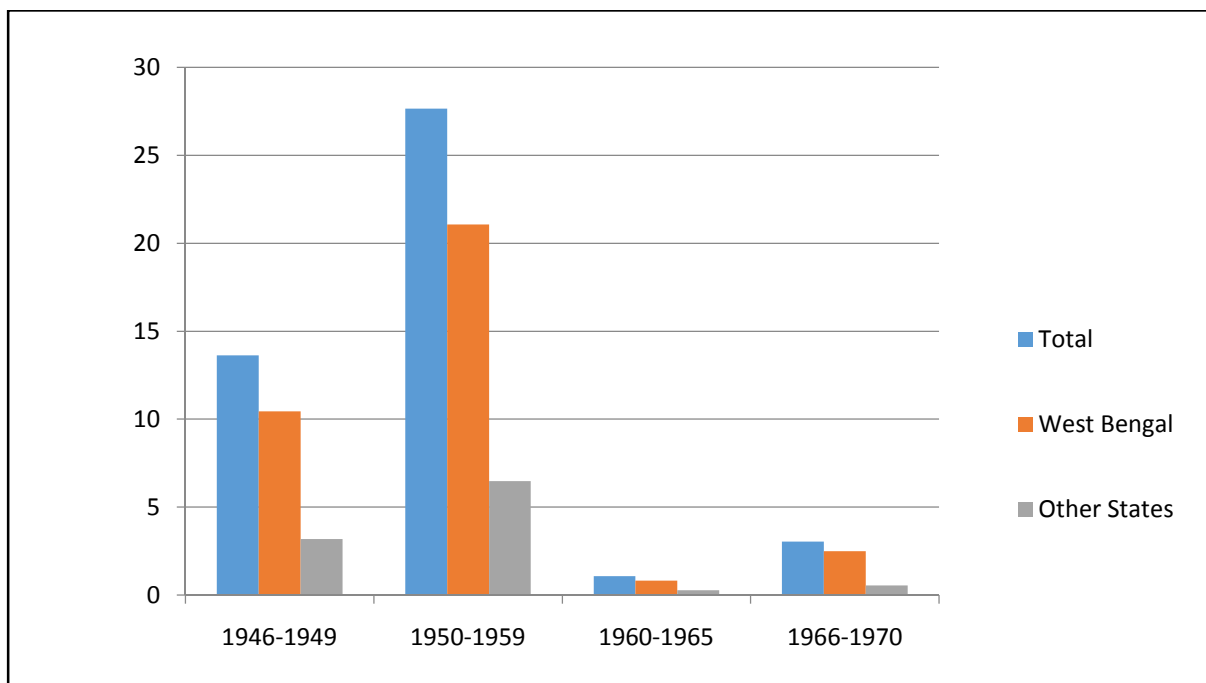


Figure 1: Number of Refugee (figures in lakhs (100,000s))

Source: P. N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 18–19 cited in Joya Chaterji's *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India*, C.U.P., Cambridge, 2007

Refugee influx from East Bengal started after the riots in Noakhali in October 1946, which took place in the crescendo of violence in Calcutta immediately after the call for Direct Action Day on 16 August of 1946. The violence of Noakhali scared the Hindu minority of the East Bengal. Increasing communal tension and the political consequences was a clear message to the political conscious Hindu upper and upper middle Class like the landowning, merchant and professional classes made their exit from East Bengal. This conscious class was very much able to understand that the Hindu community will remain a second class citizen of the proposed Pakistani state. This class of migrant were educated and wealthy thus they were not dependant on the Government's relief and rehabilitation. Maximum of this class had a previous connection in Calcutta or other districts of West Bengal. In August 15 of 1947 India gained its independence and the nation was divided into India and Pakistan. The migration again accelerated by the news of partition and almost 3.5 lakh people migrated through ought the year<sup>iii</sup>. Migration from east to west also tended to increase wherever relations between India and Pakistan worsened. Indian government direct a military operation in September 1948 in which the Indian Armed Forces invaded the State of Hyderabad and overthrew its Nizam, annexing the state into the Indian Union. In spite of the overwhelming Hindu majority, as Nizam of Hyderabad was Muslim Pakistan government and the entire Muslim community was against the annexation. This created an environment of fear in the Hindu minority in East Pakistan. There were reports of looting, mass murder and rape of Muslims in reprisals by Hyderabad's Hindus and Indian Army soldiers.<sup>iv</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru appointed a mixed-faith committee led by Pandit Sunderlal to investigated the situation. They thought that the entire agony of the Muslim majority Pakistan will be fulfilled by attacking them in reprisals. This fear psychosis leads to the largest migration of the Bengali Hindu after partition. Near about 786000 people migrated after the police action in Hyderabad.<sup>v</sup>

In the beginning of 1950 communal disturbance spread over some districts of East-Bengal particularly in the villages called Kalshira in the Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna district on December 20, 1949 and in Nachole in Rajshahi district on January 1950 and then violence spread out to Dacca, Mymensingh, Barisal, Sylhet, Chittagong, Santhahar of East Bengal in February 1950. Thousands of Hindu started to cross the border for India and the biggest exodus of Hindu from East Pakistan began. The exodus of 1950 brought the administrative machinery of West Bengal almost cracked. It was impossible to state government to face such a mass of refugee in a short time. In the massacre of February 1950, epicentre of violence was mainly the Namasudra-inhabited areas, where most of the people were very poor and mostly agricultural labours. This people came with nothing with them thus they were heavily dependent of the Indian government. Near about 17, 88,000 people fled to India in between December 1949 to November 1950.<sup>vi</sup> Relation between India and Pakistan became worsen in 1951 regarding the Kashmir issue. In 1951 the first election was held in Kashmir National Conference won all 75 seats of the Constituent assembly of Jammu and Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah remained the prime minister until his dismissal in August 1953 on the grounds of conspiracy against the state of India. Pakistan's anger on Kashmir issue again created fear in minority Hindu of East Pakistan and they started to migrate in India.

The economic conditions of the Minority Hindu started to decline after 1950. Pakistani administration started unequal behaviour with the Hindu minority. Middle class and the upper middleclass Hindu dominated the economy of the East Bengal before partition. Soon they lost their position and it became very difficult for them to earn their living. As the wealthy zamindars and other patrons leaved, dependants over them had no way except follow them. Passport system was introduced between India and Pakistan on 15th October

1952. Introduction of Passport system scared the minority Hindus of East Pakistan. They thought that it will stop them to influx in India. If the communal situation decline they will not be able to cross the border and forced to live in East-Pakistan. It is worth mentioning that, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, signed in April 1950, failed to provide the way for the return of the refugees to their homeland. Later on, when the 'passport system' was introduced for travel from Pakistan to India on 15 October 1952, more people started to arrive. It was a "now or never kind of situation", which scared many people during this phase.<sup>vii</sup> As a result from this (15th October, 1952) refugee influx from East Pakistan started to increase. In 1956 Pakistan adopted Islamic constitution. This also scared the Hindu minority. Thus worsening of economic conditions, persecution of minorities; passports scare all leads to a large scale migration of the East Bengali Hindu minority and caused almost of 10 lakh refugee influx in to India. This influx was slowed down in between January 1953 and June 1954. The Migration of the Hindu refugee from East Pakistan again accelerated due to increasing Urdu Bengali controversy in East Pakistan from the middle of 1954. Pakistan provincial authority had firm belief that there is collusion between the language movement and Hindu leaders. Thus they arrested the Hindu leaders' viz. Manoranjan Dhar, Gobindalal Bandyopadhyay, Pran kumar Sen. The CM of the East Bengal said that the Hindus are leading the language movement in disguise of the Muslim.<sup>viii</sup> Pakistan adopted its constitution in 1956 and declared the nation as an "Islamic Republic of Pakistan". The minority Hindu lost their constitutional protection and remain as a second class citizen. The internal policy of Pakistan was one state one nation. For the minority Hindus Pakistan's policy was convert them in Islam or forced them to leave.<sup>ix</sup> Martial law was imposed in the East Pakistan on 7 October 1958. The minority Hindus were the prime victims of the military government as they believe that Hindus are the main moving force behind the uprising in the eastern province. Military government arrested so many Hindu leaders of East Pakistan and imposed ban on the political involvement of some Hindu leaders.

On 27 December 1963, the hair of Muhammad went missing from the Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar in India. There were mass protests in Jammu and Kashmir over the disappearance of the relic. In East Pakistan, Abdul Hai, a member of the Advisory Committee of the Islamic Board declared jihad against Hindus and other non-Muslims of East Pakistan.<sup>x</sup> While returning to Islamabad, the President of Pakistan Ayub Khan made a statement at the Dhaka airport that he won't be responsible for any reaction in Pakistan in response to the Hazratbal incident.<sup>xi</sup> The Pakistan Convention Muslim League declared 'Kashmir Day' on 3 January 1964.<sup>xii</sup> On 4 January 1964, the relic was discovered and the miscreants were arrested. However, the next day Pakistan Radio described the discovered relic as fake.<sup>xiii</sup> As a result a widespread violence was started in the several areas of East Pakistan, most sever among them were Khulna, Dhaka, Narayanganj, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Mymensingh etc. On 12 January 1964, the East Pakistan government promulgated the East Pakistan Disturbed Persons (Rehabilitation) Ordinance that prohibited the sale of immovable property by any Hindu. When the exodus started, the Hindus had no other option that to leave their properties and flee to India. Their assets were subsequently misappropriated by vested quarters of the Muslim leadership. The genocide of the minority Hindu and the repressive measures of the East Pakistani government resulted in unending waves of Bengali Hindu refugees in neighbouring West Bengal. The refugee rehabilitation became a national problem in India, and hundreds of refugees were resettled in Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh. The accession of Hyderabad, the Kashmir war and the Jubbulpore riots led to relatively modest migrations, but the violence in 1964 which followed the Hazratbal incident was on a much larger scale, and led to significant exoduses from both sides of the Bengal frontier.<sup>xiv</sup> Refugee influx from East Pakistan started to decrease in 1966-67. In wave of the Bangladesh liberation another mass migration was started. Scholars have seen this migration from a separate angle; these refugees from East Bengal in 1970s were not recognised as partition refugee. But it is not so tough to understand that refugee flow from East Pakistan never stopped, Bangladesh's liberation war only accelerated it.

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