Refuge and Reinvention: Rehabilitation, Camps, and Resettlement in West Bengal after 1947

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Introduction

This book begins with a rupture. In 1947, the drawing of a border across the Bengal delta turned neighbors into strangers and millions into refugees almost overnight. The consequences were not momentary but durational, shaping livelihoods, landscapes, and laws for decades to come. “Refuge and Reinvention” traces how displaced people and the institutions that received them—state agencies, municipal bodies, voluntary associations, and religious organizations—worked to make life livable again in West Bengal. It asks a deceptively simple question: what does it take to remake home after a line on a map has unmade it?

Our approach is both archival and human. Government files, planning reports, legislative debates, and local newspapers reveal the official imagination of “rehabilitation”—a language of lists, plots, subsidies, and schemes. Survivor testimonies, family photographs, and community memory-making show another archive: of risk and resilience, gendered labor, caste-specific exclusions, and everyday acts of reinvention. By placing these sources in conversation, the book assesses successes and failures without losing sight of the people behind the paperwork. Rehabilitation, we argue, is not just a policy field; it is a social process negotiated in camps, on embankments, in market lanes, and across kitchen floors.

West Bengal’s story is distinctive because of its geography and governance. Refugee arrival sites were border towns and ferries across the Ichhamati and the Padma; they were also the crowded neighborhoods of Calcutta/Kolkata, and the agrarian tracts of Nadia, North and South 24 Parganas, and Cooch Behar. Camps were not only temporary shelters; they became worlds with rules, solidarities, and aspirations. Land allocations remade the countryside even as squatter colonies and bustees transformed the city. Rehabilitation unfolded amid monsoon cycles, river erosion, and mangrove frontiers, reminding us that resettlement is always environmental as well as political.

Chronologically, the book moves from the immediate post-Partition years to later waves of displacement and response. Early relief and registration schemes set the template for what counted as “deserving” and “self-reliant.” The 1950s and 1960s brought new instruments—cooperative housing, vocational training, and the controversial push to resettle refugees beyond Bengal, notably in Dandakaranya. The crises of the late 1960s and 1971 tested state capacity and opened new channels for international aid. The tragic events at Marichjhapi in 1979 underscored the costs of development pursued without dialogic consent. The post-liberalization decades reframed rehabilitation through markets and identity documents, leaving long shadows over citizenship and welfare access.

Analytically, the chapters foreground three recurring themes. First is scale: programs designed for hundreds were often asked to serve hundreds of thousands, forcing improvisations that shaped outcomes as much as intentions. Second is inequality: caste, class, gender, and community differences structured who received land, credit, or schooling—and on what terms. Third is agency: displaced people were not merely recipients of policy but authors of inventive solutions, from cooperative settlements to neighborhood schools, from micro-enterprises to collective protest. These themes connect policy histories to human stories, and they make the archive speak to the present.

The book is organized to guide readers from institutions to intimacies and back again. Early chapters reconstruct the legal and administrative architecture of relief and camps; middle chapters track the materialities of land, housing, health, and work; later chapters examine movements, memory, and media, culminating in comparative reflections for planners facing contemporary displacement. While each chapter can stand alone, read together they show how rehabilitation is made and unmade across sites—border posts and city wards, training centers and riverside chars, courtrooms and cinema halls.

Our findings carry practical implications. For social historians, they offer fine-grained evidence of how policy instruments traveled from file to field, and how communities adapted or resisted them. For planners and practitioners, they highlight design principles that matter: transparent criteria for entitlements; attention to gendered care burdens; participatory land and housing decisions; environmental risk accounting; and mechanisms that allow for movement rather than coercing settlement. Above all, they insist that durable rehabilitation demands more than shelter; it requires pathways to dignity, belonging, and livelihood.

Finally, a note on voice and ethics. Testimonies cited here were gathered with informed consent and, where requested, anonymity. Place names are given as they appear in sources, with Calcutta/Kolkata used to reflect temporal shifts. The term “refugee” is employed in its historical, locally resonant sense, while recognizing that many protagonists understood themselves equally as citizens claiming rights. If this book helps readers see policy not as a distant apparatus but as a texture of everyday life—made by clerks and cooks, engineers and elders, teachers and teenagers—then it will have honored the courage and creativity of those who fashioned reinvention from refuge.

CHAPTER ONE: Partition and Displacement: The Making of a Refugee Crisis, 1947–1950

The summer of 1947 promised freedom but delivered division. As the Union Jack was lowered across the Indian subcontinent, two new nations, India and Pakistan, emerged, born from the hasty strokes of a lawyer's pen. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, tasked with the unenviable job of demarcating borders, had a mere five weeks to bisect vast territories with complex demographics. He confessed to knowing little about the regions he was dividing, a detail that would have devastating, long-lasting consequences for millions. The Radcliffe Line, announced on August 17, 1947, carved not just land but lives, families, and histories into two.

In Bengal, this division translated into West Bengal, a Hindu-majority state becoming part of India, and East Bengal, a Muslim-majority province joining Pakistan. This was more than a mere administrative reordering; it was a profound rupture in the social fabric of a region with a shared cultural heritage. The line, drawn with such haste and apparent indifference, ran through villages, fields, and even homes, immediately rendering countless individuals as minorities in their ancestral lands.

Unlike the Punjab, where a more immediate and violent exchange of populations occurred, the displacement in Bengal was a protracted and episodic affair. While some communal violence certainly preceded and immediately followed Partition – most notably the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 – the initial exodus was not as sudden or complete as in the west. Many initially believed the situation was temporary, that things would eventually return to normal, or that the governments would protect minorities.

However, the communal tensions, though not always erupting in widespread bloodshed, fostered an environment of deep insecurity, particularly for Hindus in East Bengal and Muslims in West Bengal. Both communities found themselves facing an uncertain future, contemplating the agonizing decision of whether to stay in a land now governed by a different majority, or to seek refuge in a new, unfamiliar country. The very idea of "home" was irrevocably altered, becoming contingent on which side of the arbitrary line one's village happened to fall.

The earliest waves of migration, though not as dramatic as the later influxes, began to trickle into West Bengal even before the official announcement of the Radcliffe Line. These initial arrivals were often the more affluent and educated Bengali Hindus, the 'bhadralok' and rural gentry, who possessed the means and connections to facilitate their move. They settled in and around Calcutta and in districts like Nadia and 24

Parganas, often relying on existing social networks to navigate their displacement. Their stories, though marked by loss, often involved a relatively smoother transition compared to those who would follow.

The trickle, however, soon became a steady stream. By June 1948, approximately 1.1 million refugees had arrived in West Bengal. This initial cohort included around 350,000 urban middle-class individuals and 550,000 from the rural gentry. Additionally, nearly 100,000 agriculturists and peasants, along with a similar number of artisans, also made their way across the newly formed border, driven by anxieties about their livelihoods and growing communal tensions. Their arrival began to strain the resources of West Bengal, a province itself grappling with the economic and administrative implications of partition.

The government's initial response to this unfolding crisis was, at best, tentative. There was an underlying assumption, particularly in the early years, that many of these displaced persons would eventually return to East Pakistan once the initial instability subsided. This belief influenced policy, leading to a focus on temporary relief rather than long-term rehabilitation. The concept of "displaced person" itself, as defined by the Indian government, underscored this transitional understanding, referring to those compelled to leave their homes in East Pakistan due to disturbances or fear thereof.

For many of the arriving refugees, their first point of contact with their new homeland was often the bustling, chaotic Sealdah Station in Calcutta. This major railway junction, with its connections to East Pakistan via Goalundo, quickly transformed into an impromptu transit camp. Here, thousands of new faces scrambled daily for a small space on the platforms, a stark and visible manifestation of the unfolding human crisis. The sight of these displaced masses, often impoverished and disoriented, was a constant, unsettling reminder of Partition's brutal reality for the city's established residents.

The year 1950 marked a significant turning point, escalating the refugee crisis dramatically. Widespread communal riots, particularly in districts like Barisal, Khulna, Jessore, and Faridpur in East Bengal, triggered a far more substantial wave of migration. These riots instilled a profound sense of fear and insecurity among the Hindu minority, leading to a mass exodus of peasants and lower-caste groups who had previously been less inclined to leave their homes. This influx was larger, poorer, and often arrived with less in the way of resources or connections.

Between February and April 1950 alone, an estimated 1.5 million people migrated across the Bengal border, with approximately 650,000 Hindus moving westward into India. This period saw an estimated one million more refugees entering West Bengal. The scale of this new wave overwhelmed the existing, inadequate relief mechanisms and forced a reassessment of the "temporary" nature of the displacement. The notion that these refugees would simply return was increasingly difficult to sustain in the face

of such a massive and sustained influx.

Concurrently, a significant number of Muslims also left West Bengal for East Pakistan during these years, particularly after the 1950 riots. The West Bengal government, under its first Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy, even participated in some mass uprootings of Muslims in border districts, citing national security concerns. This two-way migration, though often overlooked in historical narratives, further complicated the demographic landscape of both new nations. Many of these Muslim migrants, however, would later return to West Bengal before the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950.

The socio-economic profile of the refugees arriving after 1950 was markedly different from the earlier arrivals. These were predominantly from the poorer sections of society, including agricultural laborers, sharecroppers, and artisans, who had fewer resources to fall back on. Their arrival, often with little to no property or financial means, presented a far greater challenge for rehabilitation efforts. They congregated in already crowded urban centers like Calcutta and its peripheries, or sought refuge in border districts, exacerbating existing pressures on land and resources.

The sheer numbers were staggering. The 1951 census in India recorded 2.523 million refugees from East Bengal, with 2.061 million settling in West Bengal. This meant that by 1951, a significant portion of West Bengal's population consisted of displaced persons, most of whom had lost everything. Calcutta, in particular, bore the brunt of this influx, with 27% of its population identified as East Bengali refugees, mainly Hindu Bengalis, by the 1951 census.

This period, from 1947 to 1950, laid the groundwork for the ongoing refugee crisis in West Bengal. It established patterns of migration, shaped the initial government responses, and underscored the immense human cost of Partition in the eastern subcontinent. The spontaneous and often desperate movements of people across an ill-defined border created an urgent humanitarian challenge that would necessitate decades of complex and often contentious rehabilitation efforts. The lines drawn on a map had, indeed, unmade countless homes, and the process of remaking them would be a long and arduous journey.

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