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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 38 - REFUGEE, DESH AND NATION

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Refugee

- Udit Sen - refers to the figure of the displaced minority during the Partition as migrants, refugees, displaced persons, muhajirs and evacuees.
- “The centrality of displaced persons in histories of partition is not merely born of the scale and complexity of the refugee crisis unleashed by the hurried division of British India; it is also indicative of a peculiar feature of partition refugees. The refugees who sought shelter in India and Pakistan in the aftermath of partition claimed to be both refugees and citizens of their putative homelands. This allowed partition refugees to occupy a visible and central place in the post-partition politics of South Asia” (Sen 3).

Refugee

- Refugee in the popular imaginary have been represented as helpless and homeless, in the need of rehabilitation. The photos and descriptions of famished people in railway stations enhance this image.
- The act of cooking, sleeping, sitting with family, waiting in a queue became special refugee activities: The act of dislocation was the defining characteristic of the newcomers, and 'refugee' was the prism through which their mundane activities were described.

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- Ravinder Kaur - All previous identities and social distinctions were collapsed to constitute the 'refugee', an archetype of dislocated people in need of relocation within the postcolonial citizenry (433).
- From 'refugees,' modern citizens were produced post-healing of body and spirit.
- Kaur - "The refugee body, for the purposes of policy-making, is a dispirited male body that can be repaired successfully, while the female bodies remain mostly absent, appearing only to signify the atrocities of sexual violence and abduction by the enemy." (433).

Refugee and Citizen

- Hannah Arendt in her study of totalitarianism in Europe established the link between state formation and the flow of refugee.
- Nation formation results in displacements. Nation-state lends legitimacy to the process of getting rid of the other.
- Sajal Nag - Two centuries of Divide and Rule politics by the colonial state and five decades of communal mobilisation logically culminated in the partition of British India (1947).

The Refugee Question

- Discussions within the Constituent Assembly rapidly led to a broad-based consensus that Hindu and Sikh minorities fleeing violence in Pakistan belonged in India.
- In 1950, the refugee's right to belong to India was enshrined in the Constitution. Article 5 allowed citizenship by registration to all those who had migrated to India from Pakistan, provided they had arrived in India before the commencement of the Constitution.
- However, the influx of refugees continued well beyond 1950 and informed subsequent discussions on citizenship.
- The question of refugee belonging re-emerged as a dominant concern in 1955, molding the tenor and texture of the debate around the Citizenship Bill.



The Refugee Question

- Representatives from West Bengal, such as B. K. Das, criticized the bill for demanding a cumbersome and bureaucratic process of registration from destitute refugees, who might not have possessed the necessary papers.
- Instead of registration, Das wanted the bill to provide a definition for displaced persons that would declare all displaced persons as citizens of India.
- Pandit Pant of the United Provinces insisted that registration was necessary to avoid confusion. However, he clarified that the bill did not propose to endow partition refugees with a new right, or monitor their eligibility for citizenship.
- India's Citizenship Bill formally acknowledged the contradictory category of the citizen-refugee. For displaced Hindus from Pakistan, being seen as refugees or displaced persons by the Indian state opened up a pathway to citizenship through registration (Sen).



Refugees as a heterogenous Social Marker

- Refugee is not a homogeneous identity, but respond in different ways to the macro process. Micro factors affect the refugee's decision in settlement and in constructing the experiences and identities of the refugees.
- Factors, such as policies and measures taken by the government, the geographical conditions of migration, the class and caste affiliation — all had a combined effect on refugee experience.
- Holborn - “the refugee is an involuntary migrant, a victim of politics, war or natural catastrophe. Every refugee is naturally a migrant, but not every migrant is a refugee” (1968: 362). Difference between the two terms is based on whether someone's movement is voluntary. For refugees, the “push” factor is dominant.

- Pablo Bose - the notion of two unified, monolithic communities of Hindu and Muslim co-religionists is profoundly inaccurate and does a great disservice to the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences that characterize the adherents of these groups within the vast Indian subcontinent.
- This view also fails to recognize other communities within the Indian social fabric, from Jains and Sikhs to a number of tribal groups and many others.

- The process of the construction of a 'self' based on assumed homogeneity propelled the creation of Pakistan. Religion as a badge of Pakistani nation failed to hold and the Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis carved out a new nation for themselves- Bangladesh.
- Pakistan was still not free from nationality-based problems (Nag 2001).

- Besides redrawing the geophysical structure of a state, the aftermath of Partition permanently damaged the psychological and cultural matrix of the people.
- Some popular colloquial terms, such as refugee, udbastu, sharanarthi, bastuhara, bangal, bhogonia, bohiragoto, bideshi, malaun and wansa became part of daily vocabulary in the refugee-absorbent states. The refugees had soon discovered the issue of identity as being complex and multiple than simple and singular.
- In the process of transformation, the concept of 'self' often shifted from religious to linguistic, cultural and economic, whereby political space and the identity of the refugees became nuanced and multi-layered.

- Onus of a successful transition from refugee to citizen lay in one's resourcefulness. The core principle of official resettlement policy was self-rehabilitation.
- A study of Bengal shows how an authentic refugee type within the state discourse was fashioned after the Punjab experience, whereas this frame hardly fitted the Bengalis, discursively located outside the strict meanings of “refuge-ness”.

Thank You

