



IIT ROORKEE



NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 41 - REFUGEE, DESH AND NATION

DR. SARBANI BANERJEE

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Refugee Crisis and Partition

- The Partition of India is related with the one of the most vivid crises of Refugee problem the world has ever seen. The partition displaced between 10 and 20 million people along religious lines, creating overwhelming calamity in the newly constituted dominions. It is often described as **one of the largest refugee crises in history**.
- In India's Partition history, the refugee appears as an enigmatic construct – part pitiful, part heroic, shorn of agency yet constantly negotiating for rights – representing the surface of the human tragedy of Partition.
- Yet this archetype masks the undercurrent of social distinctions that produced hierarchies of post-colonial citizenship within the mass of refugees.

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- The core principle of the official resettlement policy was self-rehabilitation, that is, the ability to become a productive citizen of the new nation state without state intervention (Kaur, 429).
- In case of India's Partition history, the 'refugee' is a central – almost mythical – figure without which the national history of India cannot be shaped.
- The official narrative of Partition is built around an abstract notion of 'refugee experience' wherein the multitude of refugees is often articulated as a singular body with a common origin, trajectory and destiny.

The Refugee Community in Bengal

- Varied facets of refugee-ness resist merging with one another
- “Refugee community” as fictive as the category of the nation. Similar to the national community, it is artificially integrated around the aim of proliferating a political-material foundation.
- Nemai Ghosh’s film *The Uprooted* (*Chhinnamul*, 1950) - refugee groups pervading the Sealdah Station are portrayed as “politically an extremely important demographic entity... [who] take part in a reconstruction of the city” (Biswas 52).
- Moinak Biswas - the refugees are the “protagonists in the city.” The “refugee community” is unlike the peasant community described in Krishan Chander’s story “Annadata”, based on the 1943 Bengal Famine. While Chander turns a rustic man’s gaze into the gaze of a collective peasantry cast at the city, at the end of the temporary famine conditions, the peasants, unlike the refugees, return to their villages with dreams of new harvest (Biswas, “The City and the Real” 45).



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- A study of Bengali refugees shows how an authentic refugee type within the state discourse was fashioned after the Punjab experience of violence. This frame hardly fitted the Bengali refugees, whose journeys were not always fraught with heightened episodes of violence, and who were discursively located outside the orbit of authentic 'refugee-ness'.
- Ravinder Kaur - state policies of resettlement were modelled after the social norms, which perpetuated differences by way of segregating and isolating the refugees – untouchables from upper castes, single women from families, poor from rich.

Refugee and Rehabilitation

- Ravinder Kaur – In case of the making and becoming of post-colonial citizen-subjects, social, economic and cultural factors were linked to the refugees' ability to self-rehabilitate rather than depend on the state for survival and recognition.
- Self-rehabilitation symbolized a governmental technology, pursued by the Indian state, aimed at producing self-supporting citizens out of the mass of refugees.
- It can be seen as state-ordained rite of passage – from child to adult – and taking responsibility for oneself rather than depending on the state.

Refugee-ness as affirmation and non-acceptance

- The refugees mostly refused to see themselves as the ones who were at the mercy of the state charity.
- Refugees believed that rehabilitation and citizenship was a right that the State owed to them on account of the sacrifices made by them- leaving behind their homes and a way of life in their erstwhile homeland- for the sake of the freedom of their country.
- Romola Sanyal and Nilanjana Chatterjee - faced with public and governmental rebuff, the *bhadralok* immigrants who settled in the squatter colonies had often resorted to politicizing their demands as refugee citizens. In a bid to be included within the Indian nation-state, they recurrently referred to the drastic “fall” of their social and economic status.

Refugee-ness as affirmation and non-acceptance

- Chatterjee- apart from fear of physical harm, anxiety about lack of economic opportunities and loss of social standing also acted as incentives in the East Bengali *bhadralok*'s decision to migrate to West Bengal.
- Acquisition and self-rehabilitation on the part of *bhadralok* immigrants in the squatter colonies was a means to downplay their refugee identity with class-caste superiority.
- The refugees' determination not to go back to East Pakistan played a powerful role in forging their identity as claimants of legal protection and sympathy in West Bengal.



Refugee and Education

- Education helped the *bhadralok* immigrants survive the tough employment scenarios in a thickly populated and economically broke post-Partition Calcutta, as well as mark their own culture apart from the poor urban refugees.
- Sanyal - upon news of possible police raids, *bhadralok* squatters would overnight erect illegal semi-permanent structures of makeshift schools, deterring the authority from uprooting the colony on humanitarian grounds (74). Colony schools were not only signs of deep-rooted settlement, but symbolized a futuristic commitment, as initiated by responsible citizens.
- Education helped to morally justify the act of *jabardakhal* (forceful land occupation).
- Udit Sen - almost every refugee colony, essentially comprising the upper-caste Hindu immigrants, boasted at least one secondary and several primary schools, which trained the next generation for employment and economic rehabilitation, helping to maintain the educated and cultured *bhadralok's* identity (Sen 64). Recruiting teachers from among themselves served the cause of learning as well as forming a well-knit bourgeois community life.

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- Ravinder Kaur – an individual's success was depended on setting up homes, businesses and gaining employment, which was also perceived as the success of state policies, whereas failure to be self-reliant was an individual failure that the state was not responsible for.
- Kaur - one's ability to survive outside of refugee camps and state institutions was linked to one's prospects of becoming relevant and full-fledged citizens of the new nation. The emerging citizenry was shaped by the differing trajectories of movement and resettlement traced by the refugees.

Refugee-ness and the concept of Citizenship

- Citizenship is seen as a constant work-in-progress, shaped and realized in everyday life through strategies that newcomers adopt to negotiate different governmental authorities.
- Through the yardsticks set for defining citizenship, the state practices seek to classify and define displaced people.
- Shelley Feldman - a major after-effects of Partition in Bengal was the postcolonial challenge of “(re)making communities” out of the contact between the established West Bengali residents and the recently migrating East Bengalis into the new territories of West Bengal. Tensions arose due to the dissimilar essences of “Bengaliness.” These differences became visible in terms of religion, ethnicity and place, complicating the “state-making and nation-making projects” (Feldman, “Bengali State and Nation Making” 112). In addition, migration also acted towards fracturing the older relations among the village kin, altering the “imagined community.”

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- A number of pressure groups and organizations were formed with the prefix refugee, such as 'Refugee Protection Society', 'All India Refugee Welfare Association' and 'Refugees Old Motor Parts Dealers Association,' to name a few.
- They signified a moral community of victims and survivors of genocidal violence, who were rendered homeless in the making of the postcolonial nation states.

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- At the bottom of the register of social distinctions were the state-dependent refugees who barely possessed any social capital or bargaining power to gain prime resources from the state agencies upon displacement. They were often the low caste groups, the rural and urban poor, and single women, who constituted the marginalized and who, consequently, had little influence on the ongoing political processes.



Official Indian Account and the Refugee

- In the official Indian account entitled The Story of Rehabilitation, the ‘refugee’ is a generic product not of the state’s failure to protect its citizens, but of ‘a new and pernicious doctrine [that] had come to poison men’s minds ... arson, rapine and murder were let loose [and] people were uprooted from their homes’.
- The ‘refugee’ is a multitudinous body of ‘five million people crazed with fear, shattered in body and mind, most of them pitifully destitute [who] had to be fed, clothed, protected from the ravages of disease, found shelter and homes, where they could be slowly nursed back to some semblance of lost dignity’.

Refugees from East Bengal and their rehabilitation

- Renuka Ray, State Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, reported that 27 lakh refugees were living in West Bengal (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 18 November 1954). The government's inability to tackle such heavy exodus was openly admitted in official circles. Especially since 1952 the refugees were the lower-caste Namasudras and Pundra-Kshatriyas, who were agriculturists and would require some form of land to be resettled.
- In an article titled “Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons” (1958), Renuka Ray, minister in West Bengal Cabinet writes - “... With the increasing influx, by 1954, it was found that it was no longer possible to fit in the newcomers, for West Bengal was a state: which since Partition is 1/3 in its original size with a density of 806 per sq mile, which is one of the highest in India and the world. It must also be remembered that the new comers have come to a state whose economy has suffered even before partition as a consequence of a major famine in 1943 and the impact of the war and turmoil that took place on the eve of Independence.”

Thank You

