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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 44 - REFUGEE, DESH AND NATION

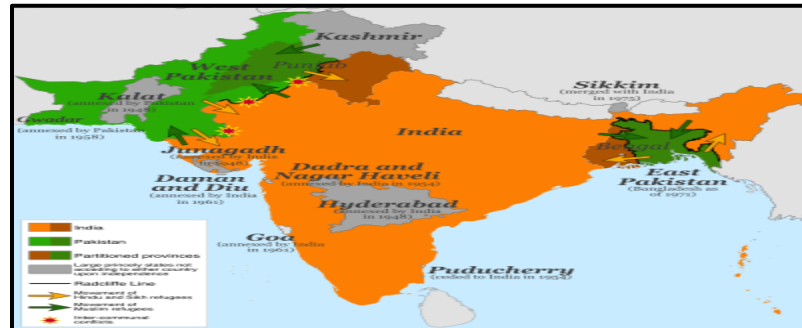
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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Punjab Partition and Refugee Resettlement

- The 1947 forced migration across the Punjab borders is one such instance wherein the notion of ‘roots’– as fixed, unchanging, and stable– is challenged.
- The role of the various state agencies in addressing the 'refugee problem' has been painstakingly recorded in the Government publication of 1948 entitled *Millions on the Move*.



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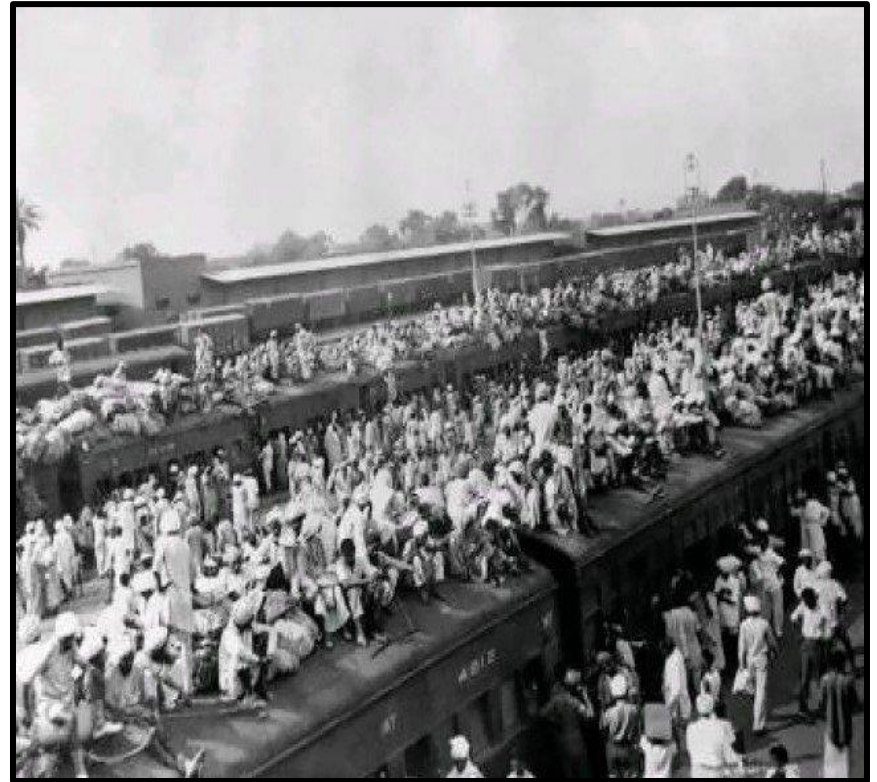


- *Millions on the Move* initiated the vision of a uniform refugee migration experience. This became associated with iconic images of *kaafilas* – Punjabi men, women and children with their heavily laden bullock carts travelling across tracks of ground inundated by the monsoon rains; of trains with running boards and roofs, packed with refugees.

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- The actual reality of Punjab was different from the standard portrayal. There was considerable anticipatory migration by the wealthy moneylenders and businessmen from Lahore.
- The poorer and less politically sensitive Hindus were left as acute migrants to scramble for safety in August, 1947.
- The British Overseas Airways Corporation transported 28,000 people from Pakistan between 15 September to 7 December, 1947. There was additional service by the Indian National Airways twice daily from Lahore to Amritsar run.
- In case of the huge refugee camps at Kurukshetra, there were different levels of provisions, depending on the refugee's status.

Partition of Punjab



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- Indication of the State's maintaining old caste and gender hierarchies in refugee rehabilitation was seen in the provision of separate colonies for Untouchables and for young widows.
- The post-Partition South Asia revived the traditional social realities through variables like religion and caste.
- Building materials were inferior for the poorer types of accommodation. Untouchable refugees were housed away from the main localities.
- Throughout the early 1950s the newspapers recount tales of building collapsing as a result of heavy monsoon rains. Fifty houses collapsed in the 1950 monsoon rains at the Haripura Refugee Colony for Untouchables in Amritsar.

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- The Story of Rehabilitation concludes with the refugee problem overcome and the displaced population now fully integrated into the nation-building activities of the Indian state. The migrants have made the **transition from helpless destitute to full-fledged citizens, in part because of their own resilience.**
- In the case of Punjab, there was a single torrent of migration rather than prolonged waves of refugees like in Bengal.

Punjab Partition and Refugee problem



- Despite its failures to address the intricacies and inadequacies of the rehabilitation process, the official account points to the fact that the solution of the refugee problem impacted heavily on nation-building and political development throughout the subcontinent.
- Ravinder Kaur - **“The duration of the journey and the means of transport used to undertake the journey are crucial indicators of the class differences that significantly alter the experiences of the displacement.”**

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- Official histories of refugee-resettlement provide a homogenized view of the refugee-state encounter. In reality this was determined by the cultural (literacy) and social capital (political connections) which refugees brought to their encounters with administrators, who were in charge of various agencies that dealt with rehabilitation (Talbot 117).
- Much of the new historical understandings of the resettlement and rehabilitation process are derived from the petitions that the relatively privileged upper-caste refugees presented to influential Congressmen and refugee representatives who forwarded these requests to the Government.

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- Ian Talbot - Partition brought increased government controls and temptations for officials with the beginnings of what became known later as the 'license permit Raj' (“Punjabi Refugees’ Rehabilitation and the Indian State: Discourses, Denials and Dissonances”).
- A large number of refugees experienced corruption and nepotism with respect to the allotment of the vast amounts of abandoned property, including shops, houses and factories.
- While some refugees sought to exploit the system by exaggerating their losses in order to receive excessive compensation, the worst abuses involved locals who sought to pass themselves off as refugees, officials who accepted bribes and politicians who tried to lay their hands on property.

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- Ravinder Kaur studies the issue of Untouchable perceptions in her work on Punjabi resettlement in Delhi. The state treated Untouchables as forming a separate refugee category.
- Chamar migrants from Lahore were provided with mud huts in a pre-existing Harijan colony called Rehgar Pura near Karol Bagh (Talbot 128).
- Untouchables were, as per the norm, given jobs as sweepers with the municipality or encouraged to set up shop as shoemaker.
- Maintenance of the traditional caste hierarchy was accompanied by poorer provision of facilities.

From refugee to citizen

- At the time of Partition, common people were mostly sympathetic in drawing popular attention to the 'plight' of the generic refugee, very few discursive fragmentations were made to highlight social differences within the migrant population.
- Upper-class refugees, compared to the camp refugees, were able not only to meet their everyday needs of food and shelter on their own, but could even afford to maintain their normal lifestyle in exile.
- They regret their losses and speculate about the 'disturbances' taking place in the plains – of which they have little direct knowledge. They appear more as spectators than actors in the Partition drama (Kaur 439).

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- The needs and strategies of the elite refugees were different from those of the ordinary refugees. The common thread was the emotive frame of being ‘refugee’, despite differing experiences, which prefaced demands for houses, promotions and easy loans.
- The idea of self-rehabilitation carried within it two seemingly complementary processes – of being made independent of the state upon the state’s insistence, and becoming self-reliant through one’s active efforts.
- Both processes worked simultaneously towards a common goal of relocating the newcomers on the citizenship map.

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- Ravinder Kaur in her paper, “Distinctive Citizenship Refugees, Subjects and Post-Colonial State in India's Partition” mentions the case of a refugee who did not have any kind of resource to self-rehabilitate himself.
- Kewal Ram belonged to the category of refugees who did not grow out of the shadows of the state. **While the officials at the resettlement office found his pleas a waste of time and categorized him a failure, it was hardly a matter of debate that the state had failed him not only by not focusing on his needs, but also by thwarting his attempts to begin small-scale independent ventures.**

Refugee, Citizenship and State

- Being labelled ‘refugee’, and a self-reliant one at that, was to be given a desirable identity that helped integrate the newcomers in the upper echelons of the host society.
- This way one could draw upon the moral capital invested in the imaginary of refugee – without having experienced the hardships and struggles popularly associated with it – and yet be seen as an ideal example of a self-reliant refugee based on one’s own social capital.
- Kaur – one’s position as a post-colonial citizen was shaped by the relationship one had with the state: the greater one’s ability to be self-reliant, the better one’s chances of gaining a firm foothold in the new citizenry.

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- Untouchables were at the bottom of the order when it came to both accommodation and employment preferences for refugees.
- Although the assistance untouchables received from the state was 'paltry', it was the first time that they had received any systematic support. In their testimonies, the credit for their social and economic success is duly given to the government.

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- The refugee problem threatened social order and the dislocation of caste, class and gender hierarchies. The early post-independence Indian state devoted considerable resources to deal with the situation.
- The production of official accounts such as The Story of Rehabilitation was crucial to this legitimization process. While such writings produced a standardized account of refugee experience which obfuscates a far more complex reality, they were not merely rhetorical productions.
- A large amount of resources devoted at the national and state level to address the Punjabi refugee crisis.

Thank You

