Politics of Partition-Migration and the Economic Instability of the East Bengal Hindu Migrants: Evidence from the Fieldwork

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Abstract: Because of the communal riots and the political partition-migration during 1946-1947, an estimated 3 million uprooted East Bengal (EB) Hindus sought refuge to West Bengal (WB), a province of India. These Bengali-speaking EB Hindus were bound to leave their homeland and eventually settled as migrants in a majority Bengali-speaking Hindus of WB. Both because of linguistic affinities and religious commonalities, the EB Hindus were intending to relocate in and around Kolkata (a primate city of WB, formerly known as one the British Presidency cities). They thought it would be convenient for them to relocate, but the negative attitudes of the WB Hindus towards EB Hindus muted their plan to a great extent. Such non-cooperation by WB Hindus was due to economic reason as evident from the field investigation. As a consequence of huge EB refugee rehabilitation efforts, the economic vulnerability in essence, indicated a kind of neo-communal contra-relations that developed between the EB and WB Hindus. It was like Bengali Hindu-Hindu conflict for economic security. This state of supposedly unstable as well as uncertain economic conditions would scarcely enhance viable mode of sustainability.

Key words: Partition-migration · Relocation · Rehabilitation · Neo-communal · Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The most vulnerable political stage in British India during 1946 until August 1947 resulted in a massive involuntary migration of both Hindus and Muslims in undivided Bengal. Severe communal strife followed by the "great Calcutta killings"[1] made sucha colossal border-crossing inevitable for the EB Hindus in particular. Second partition of Bengal and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 explicitly indicated the partition-migrationas obvious. Despite unwilling to migrate and to be uprooted from their legal proprietary homeland, the EB Hindus thought the WB would be the safe haven for them considering same religious background and similar ethnic and linguistic affinities. Though it was thought to be a Hindu-Hindu relations and community perspectives, the WB Hindus were reluctant in extending their help, assistance and cooperation to the EB Hindu refugee-migrants. As gathered from the field work through participant-observation [2], this was primarily due to the fact that the WB Hindus were not at all willing to share their economic wellbeing with that of the EB migrants. Therefore, this ‘unwilling or forced migration’ of EB Hindus has negatively impacted on their resettlement in WB, the cardinal reason being that of the economic constraints from both ends. ‘Forced migration’ in literature, also viewed as ‘involuntary migration’ that occurs due to a “catastrophic change in people’s environment and they have little or no choice but to relocate. Causes range from natural disasters to sociopolitical upheaval”… [3]. The primary focus of this research is on the migrants’ problems of economic constraints which aroused as an after-effect of forced migration and insecure resettlement attempts in an unacquainted region.

Taking into account such an indiscriment political split centering on neo-communal categorization of EB and WB Hindus, further explanation could be anticipated given the EB Hindus’ political position as ‘refugee-migrants’ [4] along with economic variability. Apart from unstable economic conditions, it is apparent that in an effort to

For a detailed focus on ‘forced migration’, refer to Robinson (1998: 180-206)

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overcome their refugee-status the EB Hindu ‘refugee-
migrants’\textsuperscript{2} initial resettlement struggle in WB are
confronted with firm regional and/or geo-political identity
[5]. Thus far, partition-migration as an historical event
revealed the refugees’ state of uncertainty which has
political connotations and cry out for thorough enquiries.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Both primary and secondary data sources were used
for the purpose of this study. Primary data were collected
through fieldwork employing a qualitative research
method including participant-observation, in-depth
interviewing and informal group discussions. Data
obtained through participant observation included EB
Hindu refugee-migrants’ economic background and
political activities. In-depth interviewing was carried out
mostly amongst first generation migrants regarding
involuntary migration and problems of relocation they
encountered. Some degree of information was gathered
from the second-generation migrants relating to economic
variability. Informal group discussions on politics of
partition and resettlement processes were also conducted
in order to collect primary data. Collection of secondary
data sources included relevant published materials on
the subject-matter, historical data, unpublished works,
government reports and excerpts on partition-migration,
resettlement and economic disparity.

**Historical Notion And Orientation of Communalism in
India:** It is a commonplace for the general populace to
perceive communalism in India as the Hindu-Muslim
rivalry and conflicts. As against this generic view, the
history of India bears the testimony that Muslims
and Hindus lived together for centuries with their
individual differences in culture, ethnicity and religions
[6]. British legacy in India with various forms of
its hegemonies (from East India Company to the
assumption of Royal authority) could successfully
implant the Hindu-Muslim divisions along ‘divide-and-
rule’ policy for the perpetuation of English colonial power.
Further to this realism, the brief historical account
addresses that the conflict between Hindus and Muslims
in India stemmed from self-styled claims of their individual
supremacy, one over the other. Muslims tended
to establish their claims of supremacy by declaring them as
being the early invaders and rulers of India. On the
contrary, the Hindus continually inclined to maintain their
claim over their proprietary lands occupied by the Muslim
intruders and therefore, they must have the responsibility
Hence, the Hindu-Muslim divide in India can be
interpreted as the scuffles between the conquerors versus
the conquered and the governors versus the governed.
Following this split in customarily enduring community
relationship, Hindu-Muslim hostility frequently occurred
in different regions of India including Bengal. As a
consequence, the social conflict and rioting between the
Hindus and Muslims became deep-rooted over the years.
Therefore, the ongoing political condition in eastern
Bengal was unfavourable for the Hindus since they
remained as minority community in the region for quite a
long time. Under such a peril of volatile social
environment, many EB Hindus were bound to migrate to
India during various episodes of communal clashes and
riots. The worst scenario of communalism was evidenced
with the deadly Hindu-Muslim conflict as a consequence
of ‘blood bath’ of these two communities in Calcutta in
August 1946 known as “Great Calcutta Killings”. Such a
dreadful outbreak of communal rivalry was flared up due
to the second partition of Bengal that literally induced
partition-migration [8] of millions from both ends of
Bengal. Nonetheless, the available information indicated
the massive migration of EB Hindus to WB, Kolkata in
particular.

**Economic Disparity and Sense of Neo-Communalism:** In
order to trace back migrants’ economic backgrounds and
the policy of the Indian Congress Government towards
their resettlement efforts in WB, it is necessary to review
political considerations that went contrary to the interests
of the EB Hindu refugee-migrants.

Once and for all, the intent of having absolute
sovereignty of nationhood by Indian and Pakistani
political leaders concluded but nonetheless climaxed
through terrifying communal riots and forced migration.
A state of mounting refugee problems grew as a result of
such inglorious politico-communal influence. It is asserted
that with all good intentions to assess, assist and tackle
the overall conditions of these huge number of refugees
from both India and Pakistan, the then prime ministers of
two new countries came in mutual agreement in extending
their political support. This pact is known as ‘Nehru-
Liaquat Agreement’ [9].

Though unambiguously proposed and based on
absolute consideration of safeguarding political and
human rights of the minorities, the ‘Nehru-Liaquat
Agreement’ supposed that on mitigation of the communal

\textsuperscript{2}Here ‘refugee-migrants’ are meant to be EB Hindus who were compelled to leave their homeland and finally settled as migrants in WB
problems in EB, the Government’s policy would be to return the migrants. In fact, this policy put them into a traumatic situation again since they had a worse experience of communalism in EB and they thought it to be more or less continuing and irreparable. Just to flashback, as a result of experiencing incessant communal confrontation and violence, EB Hindus’ crossing of the border itself was exceedingly traumatic. Under such a risk of movement, how far could it be instantaneous decision or at ease for them to go back to their parental homes in EB on government’s assurance of communal safety? Hypothetically therefore, it appeared to be a political belief that as long as Hindus would live in EB amidst majority Muslims, they would sporadically encounter communal problems. This mental anxiety impacted on them and hence, they instantly did recollect the sad memories of the horrifying communal violence and riots.

It had been observed that the Central Government of India’s plans and initiatives towards EB migrants’ rehabilitation were inadequate. Evidently, the rehabilitation program of the then Indian government exposed a differential treatment towards EB Hindu refugee-migrants as compared to that of the refugees from West Pakistan (Table 1).

According to the data sources shown in Table 1 below, refugee-migrants from West Pakistan got preferential treatment from the Congress Government but the refugee-migrants from East Pakistan did not receive any noticeable assistance from the Congress Government. Rather East Pakistan refugees were considered as a liability and hence were encouraged to return home as soon as communal problems stopped. Therefore, it was not an exaggeration to regard it as a deliberate attempt of the Congress Government towards the EB/East Pakistan Hindu refugees to motivating them in leaving West Bengal within a reasonable timeframe.

Such a debatable nature of government policies can be assessed from the sociological standpoint of the effective roles of politically dominant groups who tend to control their power over the others either through establishing hegemonic relationship or through exercising bureaucratic authority [10, 11]. In other words, the very structure of the society itself indicates the class characters of the rulers and the ruled. While expressing the scenario of Hindu refugee-migrants both from East and West Pakistan, the social class belongings and economic backgrounds of these two groups of refugees were completely different. One group represented the relatively wealthier class (WP) while the other group was practically insolvent (EP). In other words, prior to migration, the most WP Hindus belonged to landed aristocracy having ruling class and upper middle class background against the relatively agrarian and semi-rural background of the EB Hindus. That could be the reasons why the then Indian Government favoured the particular social class belongingness having strong economic standing prior to migration though it was involuntary. Given the factual considerations, arguably, it would not be an oversimplification to regard this very political scenario as the exercise of power, authority and control of the Indian ruling elites which supported the privileged and disfavoured the economically underdogged. For all practical purposes, this explanation revealed sociologically significant. Hence, it came into sight that Nehru-Liaquat Agreements for the Hindu refugees at large was not consistent enough given the fact that the rehabilitation plans for EB Hindus and Hindus from West Pakistan was inequitable.

Table 1: Indian Government’s Rehabilitation Programs and Expenses towards Hindu Refugee Migrants from East and West Pakistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Refugee-migrants from East Pakistan</th>
<th>Refugee-migrants from West Pakistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Refugees? [Here the number of refugees does not match with available data sources].</td>
<td>12 million?</td>
<td>4.74 million?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money spent for Rehabilitation</td>
<td>Rs.850 million</td>
<td>Rs.4560 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses built for refugees</td>
<td>11 thousand</td>
<td>166 thousand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created township for Refugees, which includes hospital, school, shopping centre, toilet facilities and provision for instituting industries</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed cultivable Lands</td>
<td>85 thousand Acres</td>
<td>6 million Acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs provided</td>
<td>110 thousand</td>
<td>284 thousand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got compensation for property/wealth left behind</td>
<td>Says minor amount, only a very few rich persons</td>
<td>Rs.1910.16 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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3This was a utopian idea. Communal problems can be minimised but cannot be obliterated altogether.
Despite limited scope of state relief and rehabilitation which offered to East Bengali refugees, there was unlikelihood of returning of the refugees as well as long-term duration of residence in WB posed certain significant political issues. For example, the question of citizenship entitlements, notions of nationality and identity crisis in regard to acknowledging socio-political loyalties. In rendering financial help to the EB refugees, the initial response of the central Congress government was procrastinated. The reason could be that both the state and central governments were slow and limited in their efforts to emphasise the magnitude of refugee compliance and crises [12-14]. Apparently, the government failed to concede the requirements of millions of refugees who already suffered for their changing occupational status against the over-represented professional classes of various kinds. Many refugees focused on self-rehabilitation and ‘forcibly occupied vacant lands to build their new habitats’ locally known as ‘Jabar-Dakhal Udbastu’ colony [15]. Hence, the previously marginalised groups (peasants and cultivators) developed a degree of autonomy for their future sustenance.

The foregoing discussions scarcely provide any pragmatic picture of the refugee rehabilitation given the fact that the political roles of the authority revealed a state of economic unevenness. This overtly political condition created a sense of splitting social relationships contending to economic opportunities in between EB refugee-migrants and the original local residents of WB. Having similar Hindu-Hindu ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds, these two communities’ tended to claim their superiority over one another considering regional identity, professional dexterity, educational attainment and exposure to urban-industrial metropolitan city environments. Though such tendency of differentiating each other has been more or less symbolically rooted, this particular relationship indicated a political overtone of a sort of neo-communal attitudes to each other.

**Perceived Class Contradiction impedes Economic Stability: a Theoretical Reference:** The emerging capitalist structure that already existed at the time of EB Hindus’ forced migration during and after the second partition of united Bengal (1946-1947) evidently tendered a kind of unstable economic conditions for the EB Hindu refugee-migrants in WB. Naturally, this also brought about a sense of politico-economic insecurity among the then WB permanent residents which revealed in their non-cooperative attitudes towards the EB Hindu refugee-migrants. Note that there were an unusually a huge number of EB refugees (about 3 million), for whom the least economic management assisted by the central or the state government in any form would have impacted unfavourably upon the overall economy of the province of WB. As a matter of fact, the WB Hindus were intensely opposing to share with the EB Hindus any sort of material resources with a view to maintaining their normal state of economic wellbeing as it is. The political role of the then central/congress government of India towards rehabilitation plan for the EB Hindu refugee-migrants (refer to Nehru-Liaquat Pact) in essence, tended to favour the local WB Hindu residents in sustaining their so-called economic rights. This was how the class contradictions grew between EB and WB Hindus. Under capitalist social structure, the conflicting relationship has arisen due to preferential treatment of the Hindu refugees from West Pakistan (belonged to a wealthier group). In contrast to this, the antagonistic relational features between EB and WB Hindus can be interpreted in terms of Marxian and Weberian views of class-conflict and politics and social economics under the dominance of bureaucratic authority respectively [11, 16, 17]. The political role of the state and nature of governance in a capitalist system addressed the economic exploitation of the rich ruling class over the poor classes which inevitably warrant class contradiction and struggle in order to access to all state resources as Marx enunciated. While, Weber argued that class conflict is not the only driving force in history in bringing about social change. Instead, the (preferential) role of political party, the growth of bureaucracy and the organisation of state affairs characterise modern industrial society. Weber illustrated that politics and social economics of a given society are further intensified through the process of bureaucratisation. Besides, the practical scenario of suddenly created an opposing class relationships between the two groups (EB and WB Hindus) on economic matters and the sociological explanation of the causation of conflicts as well as political relevance attributed to the fact of stagnant economic conditions in WB for a while. Thus, the sense of economic sustainability in the context of such socio-political environment has appeared to be non-existent and far from being a case of concern. For the purpose of understanding sustainability issue that involves economic equity, fairness and welfare in the society for long-term viable conditions based on unconventional, intergenerational and environmental mode of development [18]. As regards equity, fairness and welfare issues, the

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post-partition condition of WB relating to politics and social economics did not provide any optimistic picture as illustrated above. Such an unstable economic order in WB persisted for decades. A relatively stable economic condition and expanded economic opportunities are experienced by WB along with the meaningful contributions of the EB refugee-migrants at time when they could enthusiastically came out of their non-entrepreneur domestic labour force. In this instance, therefore, the influence of world-capitalist systems and the expansive roles of globalisation and consumerism must be acknowledged.

CONCLUSIONS

The political partition-migration of EB Hindus wasevidenced by communal violence and riots. Subsequently, the struggle for resettlement, neo-communal Hindu-Hindu (EB and WB) rivalry, discriminatory roles of government towards rehabilitation plans, all these factors aided to a kind of insecure environment for the EB Hindu refugee-migrants. Historically observed unsettled state of millions of EB Hindus addressed an unstable economic condition in WB which persisted for decades. This very circumstance resorted to developing an adverse relationship between migrants and locals in WB. For a considerable period of time, the adversarial association of two major communities in the society was not conducive to bring about any sustainable economic order. It may further be construed that one of the cardinal reasons for such unsustainable economic form was observant due to the tacit roles of EB Hindus domestic labour-intensive activities for their unity against WB Hindus. This contra-attitude to each other reflected in economic, socio-cultural, political and even in religious matters. Recent observation suggests that there has been an economic advancement in WB over the years. Along with WB local residents, both first and second generation EB migrants confirmed the stable economic conditions in WB as a consequence of globalisation and post-modernity approach of development [19]. The opposing relationship between EB and WB Hindus has significantly reduced with the stride of economic expansion. Currently, the sustenance of stable economy is the major concern for which both communities (EB and WB Hindus) conveniently engaged in economic prolongation regardless of their symbolically constructed difference of identities for several decades. Given the contemporary sway of socio-economic activities in WB society, the antagonistic relationship between two communities seize to continue as asserted by the second-generation of migrants and the younger-generation of local WB residents.

REFERENCES


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