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**The Railway Refugees:
Sealdah, 1950s -1960s**

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The Railway Refugees: Sealdah, 1950s-1960s

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Abstract:

This paper provides a micro-history of Sealdah Station as a halt of the refugee population coming from East Pakistan in the 1950s and '60s. The station as a site of refugee concentration was very different from a camp or a colony, yet it has received no scholarly attention in partition studies. Sealdah was the terminal station of the rail route that connected East Pakistan with Calcutta. Moreover, being the gateway of Calcutta, it provided the refugees with an easy access to the city where they hoped to find some work and a shelter. These two reasons turned Sealdah into an important space for refugee concentration. It was crucial in "housing" thousands of refugees for many years, particularly the poorer sections among them. In this way it emerged as a major site for various negotiations between the government, the city and the migrants and also as an important centre for refugee politics.

Keywords: Refugee, partition, Sealdah, Calcutta, East Pakistan.

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1. Introduction

“Sealdah station has become a veritable hell on earth; it is emitting that odour which the famished crowd of '43 used to spread wherever there was any congregation of theirs,”¹ wrote a staff reporter of *Amritabazar Patrika* in April 1950. He was at the station to see the condition of the refugees from East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh)² who was squatting there, waiting for relief and rehabilitation. There were almost 10,000 refugees occupying the station premises at that time. Seven years later, in 1957, Ila Sen, an elite woman, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Times of India*, describing the condition of Sealdah station:

Calcutta has its own Frankenstein – the four and a half million refugees ...are now holding the city at ransom. It is impossible to enter from any direction without climbing over their heads. They are in possession of the railway stations. Desperate and despairing, this is a classless society. Each one has been ground down to bear an identical face – a face from which all distinguishing marks of education, culture or occupation have been effaced. No longer it is possible to tell the school master from the postman.... At Sealdah station, on the east side of the city, the counter marked ‘Reservation’ is like some island in a vast sea of ragged filthy destitution. The clerk and his clients are separated by thick masses of humanity. At first the would-be traveler looks around a little desperately, then he picks his way over sleeping children, bags full of rags that pass for clothes, before they can possibly arrange their reservations.³

Sealdah, it seems, had emerged as a perpetual “home” for thousands of refugees coming from East Pakistan in the 1950s and early '60s. Of course their presence at the station troubled the authorities and the commuters. Perhaps, it was not only the numbers, but the fact that ‘distinguishing marks’ like culture and education had been ‘erased’ and rendered the entire population as one hapless bunch of refugees that bothered the educated elite of the city. That a school master could not be distinguished from a postman was alarming—it meant that education or culture did not matter in face of this tumultuous tragedy. Station premises became a new site of refugee concentration in Calcutta. This was quite distinct from the refugee colonies and the camps. The

station was not meant to be a place to stay. The squatter colonies were also set up on forcibly-acquired land, but they were mostly on barren or empty spots at the outskirts of the city. The government-run camps had a different logic altogether. From this point of view, the station was a completely new space. It was not an empty land; rather, Sealdah was one of the busiest nodes of Calcutta. The presence of a large number of refugees brought them to public view much more prominently than the colonies or the camps. From time to time, there were initiatives to evict the existing refugees and to prohibit new entrants. But such initiatives met with very little success. While hundreds of them left the station premises daily, everyday there were new faces scrambling for a tiny plot on some platform. The locational advantage of this station was perhaps to be “blamed” for this. On one hand, it was very well connected with various parts of East Bengal via Goalundo, the bustling river port on Padma, on the other hand it gave an easy access to the city of Calcutta, where the refugees could try to find some work and eventually a shelter.

Though the image of Sealdah platforms with teeming refugees has become an intrinsic part of Calcutta’s partition memory, so far there has been no attempt to study this station-space as a possible entry point for understanding the everyday lives of the refugees, their negotiations with the state authorities and their complex and varied relationship with Calcutta.⁴ The purpose of this paper is to address such issues.

2. Refugees in Sealdah

Towards the end of 1947, West Bengal had a refugee population of 2.46 lakh who had migrated from East Pakistan as a result of partition. In 1948, a little less than 6 lakh Bengali Hindus left East Bengal for West Bengal and by the end of April, 1949, their number was nineteen lakh and fifty thousand. Of this displaced population, nine lakhs and seventy thousand people had come to Calcutta and its neighbourhood, while other districts in West Bengal had a total of six and a half lakh of refugee population.⁵ Thus, much to the anxiety of the city authorities, Calcutta was emerging as the most preferred destination for the refugees from East Bengal. The refugee “crisis” of Calcutta and West Bengal further aggravated in 1950, when as a result of a widespread

communal riot,⁶ more than 11.8 lakh refugees entered the province.⁷ Earliest migrants from East Bengal in post-colonial Calcutta were mostly *bhadralok* – they had enough money, connections and/or education to be economically independent. With the riots of 1950, however, the social profile of the migrants became more heterogeneous. The poor, often from low caste backgrounds, were the chief victims and now they began to move out of East Pakistan.⁸ Many of them chose to come to Calcutta. But with no relatives and friends in the city and with not enough means for settling down on their own, the new refugees of 1950 began to squat on the railway platforms at Sealdah. “Sealdah is awfully crowded since the second week of March,” reported the city newspapers.⁹ On April 7, the station had about 8,000 refugees;¹⁰ by June 27, their number had crossed 9000;¹¹ 12,695 refugees were residing on the platform on July 22;¹² in the first week of August their numbers came down to around 10,000.¹³

1950 was an exceptional year and the riots triggered the massive migration. In 1951, when the situation was relatively peaceful, the



The Condition of Calcutta. Source: *Jugantar*, May 4, 1950. In this picture, a man named “Calcutta-resident” is seen on the tree because of twin fear – the tiger in the land named “Housing problem” and a crocodile in the water named “Cholera Germs”. This image reflects the predicaments of the residents of Calcutta during 1950.

refugee flow also decreased. West Bengal recorded around 1.4 lakh new refugees in 1951¹⁴ and the Sealdah premises naturally seemed somewhat “clear”. But even then, according to an official estimate, around 1500 refugees were residing on these platforms in the beginning of July, 1951, though the government was reportedly sending at least 400 of them daily to various relief camps.¹⁵ Since the pace of dispersing the refugees could rarely surpass the rate of their arrival to Sealdah, even in the less troubled times, the station premises remained crowded.

The next intense phase occurred during the first half of October. 1952. As India and Pakistan decided to introduce passport-visa system from October 15 of that year, there was a widespread panic among the minorities of both the countries. As they thought that border crossing would become immensely difficult after the beginning of the paper regime, cross border migration increased sharply between East and West Bengal. Sealdah became crowded again. More than 5,000 were staying there by the end of October first week.¹⁶ However, as there was a sudden fall in the numbers of migrants after October 15, Sealdah became uncharacteristically empty for a while.¹⁷ Renuka Ray, the State Rehabilitation Minister, announced on October 22: “the 2000 refugees who remained to be dispersed from Sealdah would be sent to various transit camps tonight and there would be no concentration at the station from tomorrow.”¹⁸ This optimism of Ray was quite premature as refugees continued to trickle in to Sealdah. The staff reporter of the *Times of India* informed that on July 23, 1955 the station had around 1,000 refugee cultivators who had left East Pakistan “due to the feeling of insecurity”.¹⁹ He also noted that on an average around 700 refugees were reaching the station daily from various parts of East Bengal. After two years, the same newspaper exasperatedly noted:

...a visit to Sealdah Station in Calcutta – terminus for the railway to East Bengal – is a mirror of wretchedness of migrants’ lot on arrival here.

How many times the station premises have been “cleared” of its refugee inhabitants is beyond count but the position seems as bad as ever for, both within and without the station buildings refugee families are living clustered together in filth and misery.²⁰

Sealdah would remain crowded till mid 1960s. Only after 1964, refugees of this station became absent from the media gaze as governmental initiatives to disperse all the “excess” migrants to Dandakaranya became more aggressive and ruthless.²¹

3. Living on a Railway Platform

Living on the platform involved severe hardship and multiple risks. First, a refugee family had to find a place in the station where they could stay for a few days, months or even a couple of years. This was not easy as they had hundreds of other refugees to compete



Congestion in Sealdah Station: Image from Millions Came from Eastern Pakistan, They Live Again, Director of Publicity, Government of West Bengal, 1953, p.11.

with, particularly when the refugee flow was high. Sealdah did not have enough room for everybody, despite government initiatives of routinely dispersing the displaced. Jatin Bala, a Namasudra refugee from Jassore, had spent a few days in the station immediately after coming from East Pakistan in mid-'50s. He remembered

After a long wait and as a result of much struggle and strategizing, we managed to occupy a tiny corner of the station. A tin roof covered a part of our plot, but most of it was just under the sky. We kept our luggage and huddled together under the shed and took a breath of relief. We had survived, at least for now. After almost an hour of fight with the fellow refugees, we had finally managed this area for the time being. In that moment of crisis, this seemed to be our last foothold.²²

After managing a place in the station, the refugees had to make arrangements for food, water and other necessities. Government provided them with some provisions. But their initiatives failed to meet the expectations of the people. Several non-government organizations and philanthropists also came forward to supply ration to the refugees for the time being and they seemed to be more effective. As *Amritabazar Patrika* reported:

The first and the immediate task confronting Calcutta citizens was to feed these people. Despite the traditional red-tapism, which did not show any sign of weak existence in the face of the emergency, the non-official Calcutta – Bengalis and non-Bengalis working in close collaboration – built up a central co-ordinating organization which is successfully doing the stupendous job of feeding 10,000 people daily. If today this non-official agency on which practically the whole burden of looking after the refugees at Sealdah falls, cannot work better, it is again due to the indifference, if not negligence, of either the Corporation or by Rly. authorities or whoever they may be, and not for any lapse on the part of non-officials.²³

The same report mentioned the names of several organizations like Kasi Viswanath Seva Samiti, Bilasrai Katra Seva Dal, Balkrishna Seva Samity and Surahmull Nagarmull Relief Kitchen who were running *langars* in the platforms of Sealdah.²⁴ The refugees clearly had been able to invoke sympathy of several

Hindu religious/charitable organizations. Wealthy businessmen like Ramkrishna Dalmia too visited them, along with the Hindu Mahasabha leader N.C. Chatterjee, to distributed clothes. He was greeted with *Bande Matram* slogan and “uludhwani”.²⁵ While the government seemed indifferent and inadequate, the “Hindu nation” came forward to help these hapless station dwellers. It is perhaps not irrelevant to mention a different set of figures here. In the third week of July, 1950, little less than 25,000 Muslim refugees left West Bengal for East Pakistan; on the following week the number of Muslims leaving West Bengal was 23,735;²⁶ between 20 and 21 July more than 2,000 Muslim refugees left from Sealdah station itself for East Bengal.²⁷ The riot of '50 had spread over West Bengal with equal intensity, displacing thousands of Muslims, forcing many of them to migrate to East Pakistan. But they remained invisible to “Hindu charity”.

The government authorities and the non-government agencies at times worked together to provide the refugees with their basic needs. But more often than not there were lack of cooperation and mistrust. For instance, in October 1952, the state government decided to prohibit ‘the functioning of all relief organization’ ‘to protect the refugees from being victims of various crimes at the congested Sealdah Station platform’.²⁸ But few years later, we learn from the memoir of Jatin Bala, the non-government organizations were once again distributing jaggery and flattened rice to the refugees.²⁹ Presence of the government was more visible in the initiatives of removing the refugees from the platform, to which we shall come back in a while.

Sealdah station, like any other railway station, was meant to be a transit point. In the early '50s, it had only two latrines for women and eight for men. There were three tube wells for supplying water. As thousands now fought for these toilets and tube wells, hygiene and privacy became major issues. Cases of cholera, tuberculoses, dysentery were reported daily. A few government ran medical units operated in the platform. But the arrangement was absolutely insufficient given the magnitude of the crisis. A *Times of India* report of 9th August, 1950 mentioned eighty-eight deaths within a fortnight.³⁰ Jatin Bala remembered,



A mute witness of the Great East Bengal Tragedy. This three-month-old baby, whose mother was murdered, is one of the youngest refugees now in Calcutta. Calcutta Relief Committee Volunteers are spoon-feeding him at Sealdah Station.—'Photo Patrika'.

Amritabazar,
March 19, 1950.



One of the huge cauldrons in which food for 10,000 refugees is cooked daily at Sealdah Station over gigantic ovens. (Pictures by a Staff Photographer)

Amritabazar,
April 21, 1950.



Destitute refugees at Sealdah Station are given utensils indispensably necessary for daily use by Bilas Ray Katra Sewa Dal.

Amritabazar, April 21, 1950.

Dead bodies of refugees were common sight at the station. Every day, the dead body carriers used to come to Sealdah station. They used to tie together four, seven or ten bodies and carried them away. We were told that these bodies were cremated together. No one could tell what happened to these bodies finally, their relatives also did not know.³¹

Life was particularly difficult for the women migrants. The everyday difficulties of women living in Sealdah were graphically described a 1951 play, evocatively titled as *Natun Yehudi* or the new Jew (written by Salil Sen). The following mother-daughter conversation is from its second scene:

Mother : ...you haven't bathed all this time?

Pari [the daughter]: Is it possible to bathe in the middle of all this? All around there are people, simply staring at me. All the time, who are you, Miss, from where have you come – how many people are there in your family? And the fight for water; i won't bathe.

Mother: All right, all right, don't bathe. You wont die if you

dont take a bath for two days. Its just your luck. we are camping in the street like gypsies – I never thought we would come to this.³²

Women disappeared routinely from the station. Many others had to regularly “satisfy” the rail-police, volunteers and guards to continue avoid eviction. As Adhir Biswas, another Dalit refugee who had spent some time at Sealdah as a child remembered,

By then we had become familiar with the ticket checkers. There were two police uncles who used to give my little nephew some bread. One day I saw them giving some money to my sister-in-law. When they were around, she always hid her face with her sari.³³

The money and the bread, of course, came in return of sexual favours.

4. Removing Refugees from Sealdah

There was a growing fear that unregulated refugee influx to Calcutta would destroy the urban infrastructure. ‘To be a good city, as well as a well run city, both its size and its density of population must not exceed a certain limit,’ observed one of the retired chief executive officers of Calcutta Corporation.³⁴ Calcutta, with partition and the subsequent increase of population, was no longer a “good city”, in his view; it was degenerating into a ‘permanent concentration camp.’³⁵ To make the situation worse, many of these new comers had never lived in cities before, they did not know the mode and discipline of city life, observed the officer.³⁶ The middle classes and the government were becoming more and more anxious about the rapidly increasing numbers of destitute. The class nature of the new influx bothered them as well as their numbers. A consensus was emerging between the ruling party and the city elite that the influx of the refugees to the city would have to be restricted, if not altogether stopped. Thousands of refugees spending days at Sealdah station posed risk to the city administration and the urban infrastructure. Moreover, they were a threat to the law and order, public health and regular functioning of the railway logistics. Since the refugees were living without any basic amenity and on meagre relief, arranging proper rehabilitation was urgently needed on humanitarian grounds as well.

Removal of refugees from Sealdah began quite early in 1950.

Registration desks were set up where the refugees would be asked their names, family details and occupational history. They would get a registration card and then they were ready to be dispersed to various camps.³⁷ Special trains and trucks were arranged to shift thousands of them from the railway platforms to various camps within and outside West Bengal. However, “speedy dispersal of refugees to camps” seemed difficult at times “as the camps were found to be filled to capacity” and because of “heave rainfall accompanied by squalls”.³⁸ Even then, from a press note issued by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, we learn that by July 14, 1950, 4000 refugees had been taken to Orissa and Bihar from Sealdah Station. But, there were around 13,000 more, squatting at the station, informed the same note.³⁹ They would be taken to the neighbouring states immediately, it promised. Moreover, truck load of refugees were shifted to districts like Bankura, Midnapore, underdeveloped areas of Hooghly and Murshidabad — regions that had received very little refugee population as yet. Such initiatives had twin objectives: a) reducing congestion of Sealdah and Calcutta, and b) supplying cheap labour to underdeveloped and scarcely populated areas. Nehruvian India required labourers to take forward its developmental goals. For these activities, the government realized that the refugees could be used. Thus it aimed to merge the twin objectives of development and rehabilitation.⁴⁰ In this scheme of things, the refugees, needless to say, did not have any voice. They could not choose their destinations, often were separated from their friends and families and, once dispersed, had no legal right to return. “We were a joint family when we came to Sealdah”, wrote Jatin Bala, “but the government sent my barda (elder brother) and mejda (next to elder brother) to two separate camps. Mejda and his wife had 6-7 minutes to prepare. They took a few utensils and boarded the truck with tears in their eyes. We boarded a separate truck with barda.”⁴¹

To reduce pressure on Sealdah, the government also began to stop the refugees entering to West Bengal at the border railway stations like Bongaon and Ranaghat or at the river port near Howrah. They were asked whether they had any close relative at any part of West Bengal. If they had none, they were taken to the nearby transit camps and then sent off to Orissa and Bihar in special trains. Calcutta had to be protected and that required multiple check points. Despite such attempts, Sealdah remained crowded. In 1952, the desperate State Deputy Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation, Purabi

Mukherji herself started staying at the station for a few days to supervise the “new plan” of moving “trainloads of migrants...to the work-cum-rehabilitation sites in Birbhum and other western districts of the State.”⁴² But no strategy seemed effective enough.



Refugees getting into the waiting trains, which took them to Amarda camp in Orissa.



Milk is being given to children before refugees got on the train which took them to Amarda camp in Orissa.
Photos by "Patrika" Staff Photographer.

Refugees being taken to Amarda Camp of Orissa from Shalimar, Amritabazar, April 9, 1950.

One of the major reasons for the failure of the government, as already mentioned, was the sheer number of the displaced population. But there were other reasons too. Despite immense hardship and multiple risks, many refugees preferred to stay put at Sealdah instead of going to different government relief camps in and outside West Bengal. Sealdah gave them an access to a city where they could find some work. Some of them opened cigarette and *bidi* shops or *bhaater* hotel (cheap eateries) around the station. Hawking on the streets and railway compartments was another option. Sadananda Pal, a Dalit refugee from East Bengal, observed that outside Sealdah station, there was a “mini East Pakistan”, with shanties and shops ran by the Bangaali speaking [the dialect associated with eastern Bengal] refugees.⁴³ They also looked for lands in the city that they could occupy or houses in slums available for rent. Instead of depending on doles and loans, some of them were desperate to live on their own. Many refugees, after spending some time at various relief camps and rehabilitation centres, realized that railway stations like Sealdah and Howrah were actually better than settling down in these remote areas. Quality of life was hardly at all superior in these ill-organized relief camps⁴⁴ and under developed rehabilitation sites.⁴⁵ As a result, they “deserted” the camps and

colonies of Orissa, Bihar and later Dandakaranya to return to the railway platforms. By the end of September, 1950 the press was reporting about this return trek of the refugees:

Scarcely has Calcutta's Sealdah station been cleared of the refugee squatters from East Pakistan leaving their tragic trail of disease and death, particularly among infants, who died in scores when the city's more important and other railway terminus, the Howrah Station, has since Friday, become the scene of a similar assembly of refugees. They are returning from Cuttack...⁴⁶

By the first week of October, 1950 around 700 "deserters"⁴⁷ from Orissa were squatting at the Howrah station.⁴⁸ Since the trains from Orissa and Bihar came to Howrah, the primary crowd of "deserters" was in this station. But Sealdah could not escape the brunt in the long run. Towards the end of 1954, among the 1400 refugees at Sealdah, 200 were "deserters". By 1964, according to some estimate "six thousand East Bengal refugees...had made Sealdah station their home for the past several years...technically known as "deserters" from other camps, these people have been living near Sealdah station for the past ten years..."⁴⁹

Removing the "deserters" from the station premises proved to be the most difficult task. Disillusioned with the government, most of them were determined to live on their own. Becoming precariat⁵⁰ seemed preferable than surviving on paltry government relief or at obscure rehabilitation sites. Therefore, despite the threats from railway authorities and persuasions of the Orissa and West Bengal governments, only 380 out of almost 700 "deserters" agreed to return to Orissa in 1950.⁵¹ Similarly, when in July 1951, a special train was arranged to shift 1,300 "deserters" from Howrah station to a camp in Bankura, they simply refused.⁵² Their stories inspired others, and many resisted state's dispersal initiative, particularly going to other provinces. Consequently, the station remained crowded for years to come.

5. Refugees and the City

We were staying at platform number 5 of Sealdah Station...so many people were there and different types of food were available. I used to take my nephew with me and would walk out of the station to see the buses, trams

and taxis. I used to marvel at the double decker buses....I wished my mother was alive. She had always wanted to see the Kalighat temple. A shopkeeper uncle of the station had told me that Kalighat was not very far from Sealdah. If she was there, we could have gone...⁵³

These are the words of Adhir Biswas, describing his first encounter with Calcutta as a refugee child from a remote village of Jessore. From the gates of Sealdah station he could peep into Calcutta – a city of many joys and miseries. While he was stealing a glance of the city, his father and elder brothers were looking for a plot of land somewhere in the city or in the suburbs at affordable prices. The police would evict them at any point, they would not go to Dandakaranya – the only option was to get a foothold in or around Calcutta. Sealdah provided them with the initial base. Biswas's family found a rented room in a slum near Dumdum and shifted after a few days. But for many like him, the wait was longer. They commuted daily to the city to look for shelter, work or entertainment only to return to station at night.

The refugees of Sealdah also entered the city as political subjects demanding ration and rehabilitation. They were not prepared to go to far off places, but Sealdah could not be their permanent residence. United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), the main refugee organization dominated by the Communist Party of India (CPI), had a Sealdah unit that took the primary charge of mobilizing the station refugees. The very existence of a separate Sealdah unit shows the increasing importance of the railway platforms as sites of refugee mobilization. Moreover, now the station had a somewhat stable resident population who could be the channels between the leaders of UCRC and the fleeting refugees of the platforms. As the government became aggressive in dispersing the refugees to Dandakaranya towards the end of 1950s, UCRC's activities on the station premises increased. On a sultry day of August in 1957, hundreds of the Sealdah refugees marched under their leadership to the residence of the chief minister, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, demanding food and shelter. The police arrested 200 of them. Most of these arrestees were women and children.⁵⁴ Two months later, the Sealdah unit held a meeting at College Square attended by 500 refugees from the station. Once more, women and children were particularly visible among the audience. Ambika Chakrabarty, CPI

leader and the general secretary of UCRC, attended this meeting where the following demands were made – a) immediate relocation of the Sealdah refugees in various camps within West Bengal, b) provision of food and clothes for them, c) an enquiry committee in consultation with UCRC leaders to find out about the distressing conditions of Sealdah refugees. They also threatened the government of a bigger movement unless their demands were met.⁵⁵ A protest demonstration under the banner of “Sealdah Bastuhara Sangram Parishad” was also planned on December 24 of that year when Jawaharlal Nehru was supposed to visit the city.⁵⁶ Meetings, procession and street corners with specific demands of the refugee population staying at Sealdah became increasingly frequent in the next few years, particularly when in a high profile ministerial meeting in the middle of 1958, the Government of West Bengal announced its decision to close down all the relief camps by July 31 of 1959. The refugees in various relief camps awaiting rehabilitation were given two “options” – they could take a one-time payment equivalent to their six months dole or they could go to Dandakaranya for rehabilitation.⁵⁷ The refugees of railway platforms did not feature in this scheme of things. Many of them had refused government aid by “desertion” and most of them now fended for themselves by doing odd jobs. Perhaps, these factors made them “invisible” in such government discourses. They fought back by organizing rallies and demonstrations asking for immediate relocation in the relief camps, if not permanent rehabilitation within West Bengal. They added a new angle to the refugee politics of the city. Till mid-’50s, the *bhadralok* refugees from squatter colonies had dominated this politics. Their principal demand had been for regularizing their squatters. Sealdah refugees were in a way “lagging behind” as they were yet to find a residence. As they participated in the street politics in large number, the composition and the tone of city-based refugee politics became more heterogeneous.

Sealdah migrants were very different from the *bhadralok* refugees living in Bijoygarh or Azadgarh.⁵⁸ They were mostly (though not entirely) Namasudra cultivators who had migrated in or after 1950 with very little capital. But in their politics, they remained ‘refugees’ and resisted any attempt of foregrounding other identities (like that of dalit) for mobilization. A detailed report of an IB inspector from Sealdah would illustrate my point. A refugee procession between Raja Subodh Mallick Square and the Writers’ Building had been

scheduled by several political parties on 5 February, 1958. To ensure maximum participation from the platform refugees, Dharendra Bhowmik of Praja Socialist Party (PSP) visited Sealdah on the morning of that day. Some of the representatives of these refugees promised Bhowmik maximum participation. However, the situation suddenly took a different turn when the famous Dalit refugee leader Jogendranath Mandal reached the station in few hours. While requesting the refugees to participate in the proposed rally, he blamed the caste Hindus for partition. Mandal's line had very few takers. Rather it infuriated the refugees who saw in Mandal an attempt to create division among them along caste lines. They decided against joining the scheduled rally. Deeply worried by these developments, Mandal and Bhowmik, desperately tried to make amends. But they had little result. They could win a few Namasudra refugees like Bhajan Halder and Madhusudan Biswas. But most of them disagreed to participate in the procession. Haridas Mitra, the member of the Legislative Assembly, came to the station at noon to take charge of the situation. He too could not win over many. The refugees were angry with the leaders in general and with Mandal's "divisive" politics in particular. Apart from a couple of them, no one joined the rally. This was of course a setback for UCRC. In the evening, Sudha Roy of Bolshevik Party of India (BPI) and Chitto Nath of UCRC reached Sealdah to talk to the refugees. They condemned Mandal's brand of dalit politics, but requested the audience to turn up for another procession, which was scheduled the next day. "...[Sudha Roy and Chitto Nath] advised them to be united and not to lend their ears to such remarks of Shri Jogendra Nath Mandal", noted the inspector.⁵⁹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury have recently argued that in postcolonial West Bengal, the struggle for rehabilitation created a discourse of victimhood and protest where the "Dalit became 'refugees'—or the refugees became the new Dalit. While the 'refugees' were never a homogeneous category, yet in the interest of a united struggle, the vocabulary of caste was deliberately purged from the discourse of this movement."⁶⁰ Partition had reduced the political space of Dalit mobilization in Bengal. Refugee politics, at least for the time being, appropriated such spaces to a large extent.

6. Conclusion

There is a rich literature on the experience of Bengali Hindu refugees in India. The scholars of partition have paid close

attention to policies and politics of refugee rehabilitation⁶¹ in West Bengal as well as in Andaman and Dandakaranya, the role of refugees in oppositional politics of Bengal, complexities of refugee memories⁶² and lived experiences of camp and colony refugees. Autobiographical writings of the refugees themselves have complemented and further complicated these scholarly accounts. However, Sealdah remains largely absent in both these branches of writings around partition. While many of these accounts, be it scholarly or autobiographical, mention the presence of huge number of displaced people at Sealdah, there is no serious attempt to understand their everyday experiences, their negotiations with the city, the government and the commuters and the modes of governing them. How can one explain this silence?

Sealdah's absence from partition literature can perhaps be best explained if we remember that it was *essentially* a railway platform, where people were supposed to spend short period of time. No one was supposed to stay at Sealdah and the refugees had no such intension. They waited for their turn to go to the relief camps or looked for the right opportunity to leave the station on their own. Either way, Sealdah was temporary. It constituted the prehistory of their experiences as refugees in India. On the other hand, the refugees squatting at Sealdah, were either refugees who had to be relocated and rehabilitated, or were the "deserters". In the case of the "deserters", the government could be indifferent. *They* had refused what the government had to offer and therefore they were no longer eligible for further assistance. Others were the responsibility of the government and the primary task was to shift them to camp sites as soon as possible. In government accounts of rehabilitation too, Sealdah occupied the moment prior to the actual process of rehabilitation. Therefore a cursory mention was enough.

But understanding Sealdah remains important for multiple reasons. It continued to provide the displaced with an initial refuge for almost two decades; it emerged as a crucial site of refugee politics; it was a major catchment area for cheap labour. Sealdah, in many ways, emerged as a border-space – a space in-between East Pakistan and Calcutta, only far off from the Radcliffe Line. Porous yet policed, a gateway and a point of exit, a transit and a home for many – Sealdah, like any borderland, was the combination of opposites.

End Notes

- ¹ *Amritabazar Patrika*, April 21, 1950.
- ² I will be using East Pakistan and East Bengal interchangeably as both these terms were officially in use till 1956. After that East Pakistan became the official term.
- ³ *The Times of India*, (hereafter *TOI*) July 14, 1957
- ⁴ In contrast, camps and colonies as sites of refugee rehabilitation have been studied quite extensively. In the context of West Bengal, we may mention the works of Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men*, Kalyani, 1990; Joya Chatterji, 'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41 (5), 2007, 995-1032; Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50', in Suvir Kaul (ed) *The Partition of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Delhi, 2001; Udit Sen, 'The Myths Refugees Live By: Memory and History in the Making of Bengali Refugee Identity', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:1, 2014, 47-76; Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita De, *Citizen, Non-Citizen and the Camp Lives*, Policies and Practices 21, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2009; Manas Ray, 'Growing Up Refugee: On Memory and Locality', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 28:2, 2001, 119-137. Edited volumes like Pradip K. Bose (Ed.) *Refugees in West Bengal*, Kolkata, 2000; Semanti Ghosh, *Deshbhag: Smriti O Stabdhota*, Kolkata 2007; Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (Eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Vol 1 & 2), Kolkata, 2003 and 2008; have many important articles reflecting on refugee experiences. They also have good collection of interviews and autobiographical writings. Apart from that autobiographical writings like Indubaran Ganguly's *Colony-Smriti*, Kolkata, 1997; Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jibon Part I*, Kolkata, 2012; Sadananda Pal's *Eka Kumbho*, Kolkata, 2009; reflect on the experiences of camp and colony refugees. Sealdah's mentions in these writings are few and far between. The above list is only indicative and not exhaustive.
- ⁵ *Amritabazar Patrika*, August 27, 1949.
- ⁶ The riots of 1950, known as the February Riots, affected large parts of East Pakistan, West Bengal and Assam. It was comparable to the Great Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali Riots of 1946 in brutality and intensity. But it has not yet been adequately studied by historians. A few articles on this riot include Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'The Minorities in Post-Partition West Bengal: The Riots of 1950' in Abhijit Dasgupta et al. (eds), *Minorities and the State*:

Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal, New Delhi, 2011, 3-17; Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Remembering the Communal Violence of 1950 in Hooghly', *Journal of Borderland Studies* 27-1 (2012), 45-59.

- 7 Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, New Delhi, 2008 (First South Asian Edition), 112.
- 8 Till 1949 April, the composition of the refugee population was somewhat like this: 6.4% farmers, 6% weavers, 2.3% tailors, 1.5% fishermen, 1.3% labour. *Rehabilitation Review* (New Delhi, 1949) had a category 'other' where the percentage of population is 7%. Moreover, 10.6% were categorized as landowners. The rest were white collar workers including doctors, lawyers, professors or school teachers, clerks and also businessmen and traders.
- 9 *Amritabazar Patrika*. April 21, 1950.
- 10 *TOI*, April 8, 1950.
- 11 *TOI*, June 28, 1950.
- 12 *TOI*, July 23, 1950.
- 13 *TOI*, August 8, 1950.
- 14 Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition*, 112.
- 15 *TOI*, July 12, 1951.
- 16 *TOI*, October 7, 1952.
- 17 Between 11-12 October, 1952 11,917 Bengali Hindus reached West Bengal by train, whereas no more than 40 Bengali Hindus came to West Bengal by train on October 16, 1952. These numbers show the panic that was created by passport. *Jugantar*, 13 October and 17 October, 1952.
- 18 *TOI*, October 23, 1952.
- 19 *TOI*, July 23, 1955
- 20 *TOI*, November 5, 1957.
- 21 This is true at least for *TOI* which carried no major news on refugees of Sealdah after 1964.
- 22 Jatin Bala, 'Jashorer Smriti O Udbastu Camper Jibon' in Manankumar Mandal (Ed.), *Partition Sahitya: Desh, Kal, Smriti*, Kolkata, 2014, 264. [Translation mine]
- 23 *Amritabazar* April 21, 1950.
- 24 *Amritabazar* April 21, 1950.
- 25 A sound made by Hindu women with their tongues on an auspicious moment like marriage or puja.
- 26 *TOI*, July 24, 1950.

- 27 *TOI*, July 22, 1950.
- 28 *TOI*, October 13, 1952.
- 29 Bala, 'Jashorer Smriti', 263.
- 30 *TOI*, August 9, 1950.
- 31 Bala, 'Jessorer Smriti', 263.
- 32 Salil Sen, 'Naton Yehudi' in Bagchi and Dasgupta (Eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph*, Vol.1, 210.
- 33 Adir Biswas, *Amra to Akhon India-e*, Kolkata, 2005, 32.
- 34 *Amritabazar*, November 1, 1950.
- 35 *Ibid*.
- 36 *Ibid*.
- 37 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhuri, *In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition*, Policies and Practices, No. 59, Kolkata, February 2014, 7.
- 38 *TOI*, June 28, 1950.
- 39 *Amritabazar*, July 15, 1950.
- 40 For a detailed analysis of dispersal policy please see Chatterji, "Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation'; Udit Sen, *Refugees and the Politics of Nation-building in India: 1947 – 1971*, Unpublished Dissertation submitted to Clare College, Cambridge, 2009, particularly the chapters on Andaman. I have also discussed certain aspects of dispersal in some details. See, "They must have to go therefore, elsewhere': Mapping the Many Displacements of Bengali Hindu Refugees from East Pakistan, 1947 to 1960s, *Public Argument* 2, TISS, January 2017, <https://www.tiss.edu/uploads/files/PublicArgumentsSeries2.pdf>.
- 41 Bala, 'Jashorer Smriti', 263-264.
- 42 *TOI*, October 8, 1950.
- 43 Sadananda Pal, *Eka Kumbho*, Kolkata, 2009, 57.
- 44 For instance, there was a refugee camp 6.5 miles away from the town of Bhadrak in Orissa where around 1800 refugees were residing in mid-1950 and "at that time only one tube well was in existence and two wells were being dug and another tube well was being repaired. Due to scarcity of water and immense heat, some began to leave the camp shortly after arrival." There were numerous cases of pox and bacillary dysentery and "average attendance at the hospital out-door [was] about 200 daily." According to the official estimate, between end-March and end-November, 1950, 776 refugees had died in various camps of Orissa. See, Note by Nihar Kumar Bose, S.P Mukherjee Paper, 1st

Installment, subject file no 34, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi.

- 45 A few examples would illustrate the condition of the government sponsored colonies in Orissa and Bihar. Four refugees in Idga urban colony near Cuttack (Orissa) began indefinite hunger strike in February, 1952 with a “ten-point demand”: they were petty traders but the location of the colony was not suitable for any enterprise, there was acute scarcity of drinking water, immediate cash dole was required for several families in the colony and so on. [Amritabazar, February 22, 1952]. The refugees of Palasy Colony in Bihar complained about the local population to the District Magistrate:

We are all cultivators and we have no other source of income except cultivation. But the lands which are allotted to us in Chakardaha Mouza, are beyond our control to protect the crops as it is far away from our home stead. We have to go there by crossing two rivers. It is impossible for us to watch the lands always and taking this advantage the villagers residing close to our above lands are grazing their cows and buffaloes and destroying our crops in our absence. [Letter dated 20 October, 1952, S P Mukherjee Papers, II-IV Installment, Subject File No. 187 (Part 1), NMML, New Delhi.]

In the same letter they informed the District Magistrate that they had attempted to negotiate with the local villagers and also tried to teach them ‘a lesson’ by detaining their cattle – but all these attempts had failed. The other source of trouble was “the previous owner of the land from whom the Government acquired land for us”, wrote the refugees. Because “at the time of harvesting Bhadaï crops... [He] began to reap the crops...”

- 45 Thus the refugees were victims of limited (or no) opportunities, flawed planning, local resistance and un-sympathetic authorities.

- 46 *TOI*, September 25, 1950

- 47 Deserter is a term that is generally used to denote military personnel leaving their duty without informing the authority and with no intention of returning. This is a punishable offence. This term was used to denote the refugees who fled the camp or government colonies.

- 48 *Amritabazar Patrika*, October 11, 1950.

- 49 *TOI*, February 1, 1964.

- 50 For a discussion on who is precariat refer to Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London, 2011, 1-25.

- 51 *Amritabazar Patrika*, October 11, 1950.

- 52 *TOI*, July 14, 1951.

- 53 Adir Biswas, *Amra to Akhon India-e*, 30-33.
- 54 *TOI*, August 10, 1957.
- 55 'Secret Zone Duty at Central Calcutta', 29.10.1957, File on Sudha Roy, F. No -67/39; Part III, Intelligence Bureau (IB), West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Kolkata.
- 56 'Copy of I.B. Officer's Report', 2.12.1957, *ibid*.
- 57 Babul K. Pal: *Barishal theke Dandakaranya* [From Barishal to Dandakaranya], Kolkata, 2010, 85.
- 58 According to many popular histories of Bijoygarh, the earliest inhabitants of this colony were few families who had spent days at Sealdah. However, as Udit Sen mentions, "the stereotypical refugee, driven to illegally occupy land to escape the degradation on living on pavements and railway stations, was historically a marginal figure in the squatters' colonies. The vast majority of the squatters either left rented accommodation, or the temporary shelter of friends and relatives, to lay claim to their own plot of land in the outskirts of Calcutta. none of the middle class refugees, who waxed eloquent on the dehumanizing congestion of camp life and the ignominy of weeks spent on the platform, had actually had experience of either. The very real fear of being reduced to such destitution acted as a powerful motive for *jabardakhal* among refugees who had limited means. The very experience of camps and platforms were reserved for the poorer refugees who lacked the cultural capital, education and bureaucratic know-how that characterized the colony dwellers." See Sen, 'The Myths Refugees Live By', 69.
- 59 Copy of Secret Report No. Nil dated 6.2.58 from R.I.O Sealdah, File on Sudha Roy, F. No -67/39; Part III, Intelligence Bureau (IB), West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Kolkata.
- 60 Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhuri, *In Search of Space*, 1.
- 61 For a recent study on refugee politics see Sucharita Sengupta and Paula Banerjee, 'Refugee Movement: Another Aspect of Popular Movement in West Bengal', *Policies and Practices*, 80, Kolkata, 2016.
- 62 See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31:32, 1996, 2143-2153; Ranabir Samaddar, 'The Historiographical Operation: Memory and History', *EPW*, 41:22, 2006, 2236-2240.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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