

“Let’s return to our own Home”

Muslim Return Migrations in Post-Partition Bengal, 1947-1964

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Abstract

The Bengal Partition of 1947 forced a huge two-way exodus of the religious minority groups. By 1970, West Bengal had received little less than 53 lakh Bengali Hindu refugees.¹ After partition, a significant number of Muslims left for East Pakistan.² Often, the initial decision to migrate or to stay was changed and many Muslim refugees did return to West Bengal after a while, whereas many Muslims who initially decided against migration did eventually leave for East Bengal. Many migrant Muslims did return as they preferred becoming a minority after their experiences of being a refugee. Being a refugee often meant living on footpaths, railway stations and slum-like refugee camps, depending on minimum doles for survival and facing constant threat of further displacement. After the Delhi Pact of 8th April, 1950, daily a large number of Muslim refugees returned to West Bengal from East Pakistan. In February 1951, the Governor said in the State Legislative Assembly that 11 lakh Muslims left from West Bengal but 7.5 lakh Migrant Muslims returned.³ According to the data presented by Renuka Ray in the State Legislative Assembly in 1953, after the introduction of the Evacuee Property Act (1951), 12320 of the returned Migrant Muslims had applied for the return of property, 1547 were rehabilitated in their abandoned property and 4933 rejected the application.⁴ The newspapers of the time also confirm that parallel to fresh migration of the Hindus from Pakistan and Muslims from India, a considerable number of already displaced minorities were doing the reverse trek. According to the *Jugantar* between February 1950 and May 1950, 3 lakhs 60 thousand Muslim refugees came from West Bengal to East Pakistan. On the other hand, about 45,000 Muslims returned to West Bengal till 5th May 1950.⁵

The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) under its provisions on the right to freedom of movement (Article 12.4) says that *No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country*. India became a party to this covenant on April, 1979 and Bangladesh did the same on December, 2000. However, the right to return to one’s own country was recognized in partitioned India from the beginning for the people who were displaced by the communal violence of the time. After partition, India and Pakistan both governments were actively involved in ensuring the rights of minorities in their respective countries as well as refugees who had left the country to return to their respective homeland and to bring self-confidence back. This context was highlighted in the Nehru-Liaquat Pact signed in 8th April, 1950.

¹ Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men*, Kolkata, 1999, p.464.

² According to 1951 Pakistan Census East Bengal had 700,000 Muslim refugees of which 486,000 were from West Bengal. By end of 1960s, according to Joya Chatterji, around 1.5 million Muslims had left West Bengal for East Pakistan. See Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-1967*, New Delhi, 2007, p.166.

³ ‘Speech by His Excellency’, K.N.Katju, West Bengal Legislative Assembly Debates, 8th February, 1951, p.3.

⁴ Renuka Ray, West Bengal Legislative Assembly Debates, 7th February, 1953, p.304.

⁵ *Jugantar*, 25 May 1950

According to the logic of partition, a Muslim always had less right to enter India than a Hindu, even if the former was from India and the latter was a refugee to India. As returnees in West Bengal, the Muslims had to face many social, political and economic difficulties. They negotiated with the government in different ways. Being a returnee was more complicated as their religion and their initial decision to migrate to Pakistan. This made them suspects in the eyes of the state. In this paper I intend to understand the logic of the return migration in the context of the partition of British India, with a particular focus on West Bengal. It will raise the following issues: Who returned and why? How were their lives after return? What were their expectations from the governments? How did the Government of West Bengal perceive the 'returnees'?