

# Partition: Everyday Lives and Loyalties in West Bengal

Written by Ella Moore

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### **Partition, Politics to People: a study of the high politics of Partition and its impact on the everyday lives and loyalties in West Bengal**

#### **Introduction**

The 1947 partition of India set in motion the largest human migration in history, skewering notions of nationality, citizenship and identity and further subjecting migrants to shocking violence and exploitation as they became refugees within their previously unified state. The effects of partition were, and remain to be, ubiquitous, resulting in a vast overhaul of society from the realms of high politics to the grass root community. The Radcliff Line implemented under British colonial authority created two new independent sovereign nations with membership of the British Commonwealth. On withdrawal, Britain left in their wake a crisis which led to the uprooting and displacement of over eight million Indian and Pakistani refugees. Communal tensions ran high as 'humanity was attacked'[1] and partitioned states the Punjab and Bengal suffered the worst effects of migration. Devastating levels of violence forced government attention onto the Punjab, resulting in an exchange of populations among communal lines. Problems in Bengal remained largely neglected, prolonging identity crises as migrants renegotiated local and state loyalties. This dissertation will focus on the area of West Bengal with particular emphasis on the refugee influx from East Pakistan. The prolonged refugee crisis and extended period of migration ebbed and flowed over several decades with significant social effects, completely undermining how individuals defined themselves in relation to the nation and state, to their race and ethnicity, to their religion, their family and neighbours, and finally to themselves. Partition politicised identity, establishing labels which created inflexible boundaries that were enforced upon individuals, restricting and oppressing individual character and destroying traditional means of assimilation.

In considering the effects of partition in Bengal, it is clear that there are two groupings of somewhat conflicting evaluations of events which represent hugely contrasting perceptions; those at the level of high politics in comparison with grass-root experience. An assessment of the politics of partition is possible though the use of sources such as state archives and official documents, which circumscribe post-independent political events and create a picture of Congress-led government policies. The limitations of such documents lie in their inability to reflect mass sentiment, therefore it is important to evaluate grass root evidence alongside official discourse to humanise the tragedy of the event and to gain some insight into the social repercussions which faced the average Bengali citizen. Traditionally, histories of partition have silenced the voices of the marginalised, however using oral histories, newspapers and memoirs it is possible to retrieve a more compassionate, albeit fragmented, picture of post-partitioned Bengal. Difficulties can arise from grass root analysis as few oral histories have been conducted in the area and those that have remain problematic and selective, as many people who lived through partition have been silenced, through choice, trauma, or tradition. The strong traditions of Indian society and the patriarchal nature of the family unit have limited discussions of female experiences of partition. Silence has also been the choice of those who do not wish to recount the atrocities which they lived through and simply wish to negate the trauma of separation. My dissertation will consider the social effects of the partition of Bengal, with a strong focus throughout on the consequent changes to identity and individual affiliation to the state.

Chapter one explores the effects of partition as a two-sided story and juxtaposes high political accounts of Congress and the West Bengal government with localised personal accounts of East Bengali refugees. This distinctly two-sided

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narrative of partition begs the question of whether traditional history is enough to evaluate the aftermath of independence. The scale of human suffering simply cannot be conveyed through official letters, statistics and documents therefore the everyday effects of partition cannot be archived. As Uravshi Butalia comments in *The other side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, 'what could documents tell me about... feelings, emotions, and those indefinable things that make up a sense of an event?' [2] Government documents considered in isolation cannot therefore be considered to be representative of the masses; however, there are also limitations in using personal grass root accounts, which are highly emotive, entrenched with subjectivity and partiality. History as discourse runs the risk of trivialising the individual; most historiography surrounding the period focuses on political aspects of partition and its economic repercussions, often disregarding important social changes which influenced a multitude of identities. Evaluations of independent Bengal should be extended to include the three-fold effect of partition which influenced the nation, the state and the individual in terms not only of their economy and politics but their anthropology, sociology and psychology.

Chapter two explores notions of identity and refugee agency whilst considering whether 1947 ought to be considered a turning point in identity formation. Partition was a cataclysmic event in Indian history which irrevocably altered the everyday lives of Bengali citizens, however for many refugees migration did not dismantle identities which had been formulated through years of tradition and some consistencies remained. Partition led to an overhaul of daily life disturbing occupational structures and kinship ties which forced a re-evaluation of social roles. Regional identities remained strong throughout and many Bengalis retained an attachment to their local culture and language following rehabilitative displacement. An overarching sense of loyalty and familiarity often survived partition with kinship bonds now taking precedence over issues of nationality and religion. It would be an oversight to neglect the history which existed prior to independence and before British colonial rule. For centuries, Hindus and Muslims coexisted simultaneously without identity markers creating entrenched divisions. Personal relationships and kinship loyalties were not destroyed by partition but underwent forced readjustments as refugees adapted to the new parameters of their lives. Common linguistics and culture aided assimilation; however difficulties posed by the refugee crisis led to a re-evaluation of identity classifications and created a struggle to survive, rather than to belong.

Chapter three explores refugee existence, the conduct of the state, and individual displacement and survival. Everyday existence is explored through accounts of conditions within the government-run camps which affected refugee mentality. Hard statistics are used to enumerate the scale of the crisis and illustrate its pervasiveness. State reception to the refugees permeated through layers of social personas to strike at the core of identity in effecting notions of belonging. Partition led to an overhaul of personal relationships to the state and many refugees felt abandoned, neglected and ostracised by government policies which focused on the 'bigger picture' of successful nation-building, securing an international platform in world politics. Confusion surrounding notions of belonging became more acute with the introduction of visas and passports for travel between India and Pakistan, which solidified grass-root recognition of the permanent international character of the border. The crossing of the border itself was often traumatic as migrant flows of different directions came into opposition resulting in incidents of confrontation and violence. Women were more often the victims of such encounters and their migrant experiences marked affected their future potential for successful rehabilitation.

Finally, chapter four investigates state relief and rehabilitation offered to East Bengali refugees, questioning citizenship entitlement and notions of nationhood which now affected everyday lives and loyalties. Initial government response to the rehabilitation of refugees was one of denial and delay. Eventual recognition of the Indian Government's responsibilities came in response to repeated appeals from the West Bengal Government for financial help and direction. Dr B. C. Roy successfully nationalised the problem in 1951 when Central Government took charge of distributing relief. The state and central governments were slow to react to the crisis, and to an extent were limited to what they could achieve according to the degree of refugee compliance. To ease the rehabilitation process, the government implemented a system of categorisation according to levels of entitlement to aid. The system failed to recognise the needs of millions of refugees who already suffered from the change in occupational structure which left professional classes over-represented and rendered many migrant vocations obsolete. Many refugees focused on self-rehabilitation and occupied vacant lands to build new homes. Previously marginalised groups developed a degree of autonomy and women increasingly became agents of their own future.

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Most discourse on the partition of India focuses on the lead up to the event and the partition itself but fails to examine its effects, however mounting research is being conducted into the area of partition refugees with an increased focus on reclaiming the voices of the marginalised and reaffirming the importance of the individual. Joya Chatterji's *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947- 1967* is the most recent publication to study the plight of refugees in West Bengal and its approach is ground-breaking, bringing an entirely new light to the study of the lives affected by Bengal's partition. Yasmin Khan's recent publications have also focused on the roles of the individuals, casting greater personal agency in the articulation of identity. The study into the refugees of West Bengal is expanding and although there is still much more ground to cover, recent publications have made a significant move towards uncovering everyday refugee voices and experiences.

This study does not claim to be conclusive and the focus throughout remains on the immediate aftermath of partition up until the late 1950s with emphasis on the experiences of Hindu migrants from East Bengal who were rehabilitated within the West Bengal state. There is a wide spectrum of affected peoples I have not been able to include in this study, for example the remaining Muslim minority population of West Bengal, the Sikh community and the refugees rehabilitated outside of West Bengal who were settled in the areas of Orissa, Bihar, the Andaman Islands and further those who were relocated under the failed Dandakaranya Project. It is therefore important to bear in mind that this study reflects only a proportion of the numerous and diverse peoples whose lives were overturned and uprooted by partition.

## Chapter I- Partition as a two-sided narrative

There are two distinct narratives which attempt to unfold the social complexities of post-independent West Bengal. First to consider is the official discourse of the central Indian Government in the realm of high politics, countenanced by Congress politician and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Secondly we must consider a grass root analysis of the ordinary citizen to understand the distinction between official policy and personal social sensibility. These narratives, drawn from opposing levels of society provide two distinct accounts which if read in isolation of the other paint entirely different pictures of the effects of partition. Historiography tends to focus on the 'power games of partition'[3] and the official archival voice has remained dominant, with limited and peripheral consideration of individual experiences amongst the masses.[4] Historiography of the 1960s and 1970s focused on high politics, accrediting great significance to key political players, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, to the exclusion of the masses. However, from the 1980s there has been an increased move towards a 'return of the repressed'[5] with greater emphasis placed on the ordinary masses, their experiences and agency. Marginalised voices have often been overlooked due to the unreliability of sources and the difficulty of memory as a discourse. Hasan suggests that great difficulties arise from the selectivity of memory, 'of what people do not even wish to remember, the forgetting that comes to our aid in dealing with pain and unpleasantness in life'.[6] Further difficulties arise when using individual accounts to analyse social effects. Personal narratives are fundamentally subjective and fuelled with contextual connotations such as gender and class.[7] Social classifications dictated the level of exposure to the effects of partition. Moreover, oral sources are often obtained through interviews and as such the focus is formed by the interviewers, their interests and their relationship with the subject. However through personal interviews it is possible to develop a much more tangible sense of partition, including its 'nuances, subtleties and intricacies'.[8]

Part of the reason why grass root narratives are difficult to obtain is due to the regime of silence which continues to blanket India. Traditionally, oral discourses are difficult to attain due to the sense of trauma surrounding partition and the resistance of persons to relive an experience which many wish to forget. The attempt to give voice to the marginalised came too little too late and for many in West Bengal more recent events, such as the creation of Bangladesh, block memories of the 1947 partition.[9] Recent scholarship has dedicated increasing amounts of time to uncovering the experiences of grass root peoples and as such the regime of silence has recently begun to 'crumble'.[10] However recovery of everyday experience is difficult due to the multiplicity and sheer diversity of peoples and their lives. Some elements of society are more inclined to publicise their experiences, such as the affluent *bhadrolak* class, of which many individuals have penned memoirs on their experiences following independence. This is contributable to their high class status afforded under colonial rule which privileged *bhadrolaks* as natural collaborators and hence invested in their education and high social status. As high class educated citizens the Hindu *bhadrolaks* were able to record their own experiences, a privilege not afforded to the

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mass illiterate population of whom little paper records are held. Therefore there may be a wealth of perspective that is yet to be explored as voices of women, peasants and children remain silenced, unexplored and to some extent lost and irretrievable. The regime of silence also effected official government accounts. India lacks institutionalised memory of the partition. No statues or plaques have been erected, and no commemorative silences awarded. There is a startling lack of literature and historiography on the subject and the state itself seems a victim of selective memory. Tathagata Roy has commented that 'one is greeted with a stunned, eerie silence. The subject is never discussed in polite society, never debated, never written about'.<sup>[11]</sup> Sunil Ganguly has ventured so far as to suggest that 'such a novel can provoke a communal riot'<sup>[12]</sup> highlighting the continued relevance of partition today and its effects on the social fabric of India.

If partition is to be considered in two disparate groupings of narratives then it is imperative to establish to what extent Central Government was in control of events in Bengal. At the time of partition, central authority had little focus on Bengal as its main efforts were directed at the Punjab due to the unprecedented scale of violence and subsequent refugee crisis. Central Government remained ignorant of the growing tension in Bengal. An outbreak of rioting in 1950 spurred the centre to act, however policy was limited to refugee relief and did not entertain issues of rehabilitation which were deemed to encourage migration.<sup>[13]</sup> The Central Government aimed to restrict its responsibilities through limiting its official definition of partition to 'occurrences' which began in June 1947 and ended exactly one year later.<sup>[14]</sup> The bureaucratic machine was struggling to deal with the influx of migrants. The government therefore controlled refugee identity by narrowing classification qualifications hence restricting eligibility for government aid. However the government could not predict the scale of the problem and were forced to reconsider their position. Survil Kaul has suggested that 'Bengal's leaders were staggeringly myopic'<sup>[15]</sup> and unprepared for the continuing problems borne out of partition. Solutions were delayed, short-sighted and often ineffective. The crisis shook to a 'severe extent the very foundation of the cultural, social, economic and political structures of the State'.<sup>[16]</sup> The government hoped to have the refugee crisis under control by 1957 and on the 31st March 1958 all relief camps in West Bengal were closed down. Such action was premature and camps were forced to reopen due to a surge in migration in 1964.<sup>[17]</sup> Government actions were reactionary, not pre-emptive, suggesting that they had little control over events in the states, especially in regard to the refugee influx in West Bengal. A Bengali citizen who lived through partition conjectured, 'they [the government] were worse than my little child; they did not know what they were doing... like little children they broke it'.<sup>[18]</sup> The peace and unity of Bengal was destroyed. General Francis Tuker wrote at the time, 'we did not expect that in the end the partition or integration of Bengal would have a fatal bearing on India's future'<sup>[19]</sup>, which it inevitably did. This is reflected by the late framing of the Constitution which did not come into effect until January 26<sup>th</sup> 1950, proclaiming Bengal to be part of the Union of India.<sup>[20]</sup>

To ascertain whether the centre was in control of the refugee situation in West Bengal it must be established to what extent the Central Government and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru were aware of the severe conditions, and further the extent to which they sought information. The partition of Bengal led to widespread atrocities, mass migration and a destabilised economy. Affects were felt firmly on the ground as lives were uprooted and social hierarchies inverted, but 'the government was still sleeping over the growing crisis'.<sup>[21]</sup> There remained a feeling that partition would not last and Nehru continued to entertain possibilities of future reunification, thus overlooking the urgency of the mounting refugee crisis. Bose has suggested that the government was guided 'solely by the economic criteria and in the process neglected some crucial set of issues'.<sup>[22]</sup> Such issues included the social effects resulting from unprecedented upheaval and migration which severed many loyalties and reshaped identities. It is questionable whether Nehru was aware of the full scale of migration in Bengal as he refused to sanction an exchange of population, a policy which was successfully implemented in the Punjab. Bengal had an international strategic value and Nehru was concerned that an exchange of population would ruin India's image as a secular nation and jeopardise the position of Kashmir.<sup>[23]</sup> Chakrabarti further points to the 'stony indifference'<sup>[24]</sup> of Central Government, however this judgement seems overly harsh as the new government had no previous experience and were placed in an emergency situation. Regardless of this, the government was slow to react and appeared both disinterested and detached. Correspondence between Nehru and B. C. Roy illustrates a distinct sense of disengagement as Nehru's responses are vague and evasive, giving little assurance regarding the problems of the West Bengal government. In 1948 he stated 'we might well have to face a crisis of unprecedented proportions which might well overwhelm us'.<sup>[25]</sup> It must be considered that although Nehru's response was wanting, it is possible that

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inadequate policies were all that he was capable of offering Bengal. On June 15th 1949 Nehru accepted some responsibility for negligence, stating:

'We grow smug and self-complacent in the firm belief that we are doing good to our people and making them better in every way. That belief of ours is not sufficient if it is not felt by the people concerned. We have tended rather to isolate ourselves and sometimes to be a little soft to the wrong done on our side'.[26]

However, Nehru generally showed little awareness of the gravity of the situation and appeared to be content with remaining ignorant of its urgency, suggesting 'We earnestly trust that when present passions have subsided our problems will be viewed in their proper perspective'[27] and later stating, 'personally I feel that that most of them [refugees] should go back to their own homes'.[28] The problem outlived the 1940s and 1950s and in 1964 S. K. Gupta, chairman of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) stated that across India 'human distress on a large scale is much too serious a matter to cover in silence either to feed official complacency or to save reputations'.[29] This illustrates that even if Central Government were aware of the inadequacy of their policies, it is unlikely that they would have officially recognised their own failings.

The alternative narrative of partition concerns how the demarcation of Bengal affected the voiceless. This is difficult to analyse due to the vast scale of voiceless citizens caught up in India's partition. A significant majority of the population were illiterate and therefore unable to write any paper memoirs. Further, marginalised groups such as women had traditional roles which were dictated by a paternal authority within families, limiting their freedom of expression. Experiences were not only shaped by questions of class and gender, but through negotiating generational differences which shaped experiences of partition. As Bidyut Chakrabarty comments, it is 'evident that the high politics of partition constitute the background of the majority of the stories',[30] however political accounts are often focused on the upper and middle classes with reference to the family unit. Within the new context of independence, family units themselves were renegotiated and open to change, severing customs and traditions of extended family residing close together. A refugee was more than an economic unit, and feelings of nostalgia, resentment and fear were prevalent amongst migrants who suffered a 'near – annihilation of a people and their intellectually and emotionally vibrant sub-culture'.[31] Anthropologists have suggested that identity is formulated by past experiences, indicating that 1947 was not a turning point in identity but simply a continuation of lives and loyalties in a different environment. However, everyday lives were profoundly shaped by new territories and social landscapes which in turn altered identities.[32] Little information is known about those who settled without government help, or of those who settled outside of urban Calcutta. Many refugees fell between categories and it is important to consider not only the dominant social groups represented by the large political parties, the League and the Congress, but to those individuals and groups who were not represented by the majority and had their own peculiar concerns and interests.[33] The voiceless and marginalised were largely helpless and the border line meant little in terms of nationhood and identity but became increasingly real through daily hardships. Following independence, news was spread through posters and proved difficult to spread to villagers and peasants, even in urban areas the illiterate majority of the population were forced to depend on others for news and information.[34] As Gyanendra Pandey suggests, 'partition was accompanied by an acidic paper trail of pamphlets, letters and newsprint that created a sphere of paranoid and partial knowledge'.[35] Such propaganda and false rhetoric wrought confusion in ordinary everyday lives.

The opposing narratives of partition suggest there was a significant degree of dislocation between the centre, the state and the individual. Triguna Sen has suggested that there was a distinct failure across the three levels as all failed to respond with the seriousness or urgency required. She suggests that the process was like a 'wasting disease'.[36] Response across all levels was stagnant due to a severe lack of communication and articulation of responsibility. The West Bengal government believed that responsibility should be shared between Bengal, its neighbouring states and Central Government. Confusion clouded accountability and as the West Bengal government struggled to handle the crisis, the Central Government was preoccupied with the rest of the nation, and in particular the Punjab. In 1948 Nehru wrote to B. C. Roy suggesting that intelligence reports had concluded that 'there was not much alertness or efficiency at the top'.[37] However, instead of extending advice he simply suggested that he was drawing attention to the problem, expecting it to be solved. During August 1948, in further correspondence with Dr. B. C. Roy, Nehru stated there was 'no reasonable solution'[38] to the refugee crisis and offered little guidance or

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oversight. He commented that it would be better for migrants to return to their home, but offered no method of implementation for such a scheme, or a realistic alternative. Within the same month Nehru wrote that the cabinet 'have to pick up news casually', [39] as decisions made at the Premiers' Conference were not sanctioned by the centre, illustrating a lack of productive communication. There are discrepancies within the correspondence as Nehru writes to beg Roy to delay no further in dealing with the crisis; however Chakrabarti suggests that 'Dr Roy literally went with a begging bowl from one Central Ministry to another. But to his chagrin he found that the Central Government behaved as if the East Pakistan refugees did not exist'. [40] An acknowledgement of sole responsibility was evaded by both governments but it was eventually decided that relief, decided at the centre, was to be distributed by the state government. [41]

A huge dislocation also existed between the government and the people of West Bengal. Nehru relied heavily on figures and statistics to gauge the situation, although in 1952 he stated, 'we must always remember, however, that there is such a thing as the people of a country and ultimately they count'. [42] This suggests that Nehru had spent little time considering the social effects of partition, overlooking the people to focus on the nation as an economic and political entity. Experiences of partition at different levels were often entirely separate with little overlap. As the refugee influx reached crisis proportions, the bureaucracy and administration of West Bengal began to fail. Bose suggests that the crisis was created by the ruling elite and was therefore of national character, however 'it has conveniently passed the buck to the state government'. [43] This is a fair assessment, as Central Government failed to support the West Bengal government, which was unprepared and unequipped to deal with the growing number of migrants. Although significant disengagement was apparent between the two governments in terms of policy, official actions continued to have an important effect on the localities. Communicative problems were prominent between governments; however the post-partition transition was much smoother for the bureaucracy than for the people. [44] Decisions made at national and state levels had a significant impact on the localities, affecting daily life. In contrast, the Central Government often had little awareness of problems in the localities as many issues were not related to nation-building but were problems of displacement, dislocation and survival. The government remained predominantly concerned with economics to the neglect of sociological problems. Nehru had suggested that the greatest cause of weakness was parochialism and communalism and more often than not, the ordinary Bengali citizen had little interest in India as nation when crisis was on their doorstep. [45]

This double-edged narrative of partition suggests that the government were in control of manipulating the narrative of partition which they wanted to be articulated and memorialised, as Yasmin Khan comments: 'Partition had to be integrated, in government eyes, into the bigger story of nation-building'. [46] Much was at stake for the newly formed independent nation and great pressure was piled on its fledgling government. The perception of Indian in the global arena had huge repercussions for its international personality and subsequently effected how leading politicians dealt with the repercussions of partition. The government were not therefore free to act without restraint and found themselves bound to 'operating within the parameters set forth by the imperatives of the state and nation building exercise and functioning within complex ideological and pragmatic considerations'. [47] The role of Central Government is to care for the nation as a whole and the complex interplay of Independence and domestic crises led government to downplay the urgency of the situation to concentrate on solidifying India's status on the world stage. Grandiose notions of nationhood had little solid meaning for the everyday Bengali and identities were not immediately reformulated following partition. Notions of identity were made more complex by India and Pakistan's membership of the Commonwealth, which retained all citizens as British subjects. How was one to cohesively define one's own identity through the conflicting stratifications that colonialism, Independence and nation-building had developed? Central Government also faced a major social conflict between 'two founding principles of society, the belief in the universal human rights and the sovereignty of nation states'. [48] India was in the midst of a humanitarian crisis but would not request international aid in the hope of concealing the on-going difficulties in West Bengal and in doing so deprived the refugees of the recognition they desperately needed. 'No foreigner was allowed to penetrate the iron curtain' [49] hence government continued to control external perceptions of partition. Identities became entrenched in the division, affecting both hearts and minds and challenging long-standing traditions of kinship and parity. The act of partition and the demarcation of boundaries had been decided on a demographic basis using colonial censuses to identify groups; however these simplified and fixed identities failed to reflect the complex reality of society, resulting in the disturbance of cultural harmony and the imposition of a fragile national reformulation. As Yasmin Khan suggests, 'few had turned their minds to the nations' most precious asset: their people'. [50]

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The brutality and tragedy surrounding partition, coupled with the difficulties regarding the availability of sources suggests that traditional history is not enough to analyse or understand the event. Official archives and documents offer little insight into the emotions of partition, the devastating psychological and sociological upheavals and the resounding tragedy of the refugee crisis. Evaluation of changing identities is not possible from state documents and official records. History as a discourse is necessarily detached, it is objective and analytical, however in relation to humanitarian crises there is a risk of overlooking the individual. The scale of suffering is difficult to imagine and tragedy pervades partition. Sisir Mitra, a Bengali who was uprooted by partition suggests that the event was almost too awful to comprehend or to attempt to recreate through memory, stating that 'nobody could imagine the proportions... a holocaust'.<sup>[51]</sup> The experience of violence supplanted any notion of identity and the trauma led many to become severely disheartened. Another Bengali citizen commented that 'those who are dead, they are the blessed people, but we the living, and carrying the memory... were actually dead'.<sup>[52]</sup> It is difficult to convey suffering through text, however Deschaumes has also warned that 'history that focused on communal passion and deep-rooted resentment, in religious zeal, reduced history to vendettas'.<sup>[53]</sup> It is difficult to detach from the suffering to gain clarity of analysis. Objectivity is vital, but perhaps more could be drawn from anthropological and sociological studies to give some life to analysis and to promote its continued relevance. Partition has been described as a tragi-comedy with the state responsible for uprooting over eight million people and 'in fact denying history'.<sup>[54]</sup>

In viewing partition as a two-sided story, it is necessary to consider whether the two sides can be reconciled to provide a more inclusive analysis of the effects of partition from high politics to grass roots. It is easy to suggest that the accounts of Central Government lack depth and perception and that personal accounts lack perspective and clarity of assessment. Both accounts rely on the word of a single person to give voice to the masses, the eight million affected by the West Bengal refugee crisis. Some reading against the grain is necessary and the other side of partition must be considered. Did the government in fact do all that they could? Have continuations and stories of friendship been overlooked? Deschaumes suggests that 'clearly there was another past- a past which was harmonious and harmonising, even during the moment of communal frenzy- both before and after partition'.<sup>[55]</sup> Accounts of solidarity and friendship are less widely recorded however they are important in considering the continuation of bonds and ties which undoubtedly affected identity. The government was not insensitive to the crisis of West Bengal, and although slow to react, policies implemented were intended to reduce the influx and allay fear. However the government had inherited a ticking-bomb and leaders with little experience as Congress politicians had been in jail for the best part of late British rule.<sup>[56]</sup> Little infrastructure remained and Central Government found themselves with no blueprint and no idea of how to negotiate the mounting crisis.

## Chapter II- Refugee identity and agency

Refugee identities underwent a significant transformation dictated by the changing landscape of West Bengal. The geographical division of land drew a political boundary through a previously unified people creating social divisions and a reformulation of loyalties. Previous to partition, identities were often in flux, layered and multiplicitous. Socially diverse Bengalis were forced to 'put aside markers of identity such as cultural, linguistic, geographical and economic to privilege only religion'.<sup>[57]</sup> This was the politically accepted social transformation which set regional and national identity in opposition across Bengal. The formation of a national identity drew into question existing relationships and local affiliations and loyalties through the political construct of new dominions disputing citizenship and loyalty. India's leaders proclaimed that regardless of the creation of Pakistan India would remain a secular state; however religion increasingly became the dominant identity-marker. Independence created an overarching national identity for its citizens, categorising and simplifying social variants. In political and statistical terms the cursory reduction of complex identities to ostensibly superficial categories may have been deemed necessary to attend to the situation on a national scale. Identity markers included linguistic, regional, religious, familial and caste identities.<sup>[58]</sup> Different identities were evoked during different situations; however no one classification was dominant, but dependent on changing contexts. The imposition of a national identity was government initiated, but proved difficult to filter down to affect every day lives. As Pandey suggests, 'no nation, no state is natural', and to suggest that one facet of identity defines a person politically and socially is disingenuous.<sup>[59]</sup> A West Bengali citizen stated their view on changing identity:

'We are the same we are not different... religion is something private, like loving your son or loving your husband you

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worship your god in your own way... why make a display, why make it an issue, religion?'[60]

This suggests that government initiatives impacted on grass root citizens but did not hold firm or override existing bonds of attachment or invert allegiance. Was religion being used to mask more fundamental differences such as class, gender and occupation or was the idea of the distinct other a government construct utilised by the state to homogenise national populations? As Sandip Banjee, a West Bengali citizen argued, 'if we have lived with the British so long why shouldn't we be able to live with the Muslims? They're not more alien than the British, are they?'[61] Personal identity was never overtly equated with religion; however the formation of two nations had distinct psychological effects which to some extent determined individual re-evaluation of roles, loyalties and a feeling of belonging.

The effects of partition bring into question changing notions of refugee identity and loyalties. Identity reformulation was often a product the uncontrollable effects of partition and hence refugees had little authority over the reshaping of their everyday lives and loyalties. Although for the most part refugees were victims of circumstance, many migrants in fact chose to cross the border before the crisis took root. These refugees were often high-caste affluent families with existing ties in West Bengal. Such refugees saw the decision as an opportunity to establish themselves in Calcutta and were rehabilitated without government aid. Joya Chatterji suggests that around 60% of refugees were high caste, meaning that only 40% of refugees were peasants even though they accounted for three-quarters of East Bengal's Hindus.[62] Peasant groups were less willing to migrate as they had fewer transferable skills or assets and few peasants crossed the border before the 1950 riots which questioned their safety in East Bengal.[63] Refugee agency is therefore important in considering to what extent personal loyalties were moulded through circumstance or controlled by choice. Independence partitioned Bengalis minds, but for many, hearts remained rooted to the land with continued loyalties to their neighbours. Those who did choose to migrate were from high caste groups and the decision was 'often inspired by an idealistic enthusiasm for the new state'.[64] This enthusiasm led to inflexibility of migrant willingness to be rehabilitated outside of the dangerously overcrowded West Bengal state. Idealistic aspirations resulted in a lack of complacency when the reality of migration fell short of a welcome reception by their home nation. Migrants who came to Bengal prior to the 1950 atrocities tended to be 'agentive subjects'[65] who independently negotiated state loyalties.

Although many migrants prior to 1950 exercised a degree of agency, as the situation deteriorated, personal discretion was expunged as many Bengali Hindus were driven out of East Bengal following outbreaks of communal violence. Nehru showed little empathy towards the refugees suggesting that they had the option to remain despite the terror, demonstrating gross misconception of the situation in Bengal.[66] Hindus who remained in East Bengal felt they had been stripped of citizenship and nationality, 'rendered "stateless" in their own houses'.[67] Many abandoned their homes for fear of survival, not out of an idealistic longing for the nation state of India. Many refugees were swept up in events and fear incited many to flee across the border. Some fled to escape religious persecution and for the safety of their women, challenging their social roles and forcing them to 'make themselves all things to all men and to agree with the changed circumstances in post-partitioned years'.[68] East Bengali refugees increasingly saw themselves as 'victims' of partition, whose lives were overturned by a distant political debate.

Refugee identities were fluid and malleable, adjusting to changing conditions and landscape. Identity was not static, but a 'mode of being'[69] subject to continuous re-negotiation and adjustment. Partition led to unprecedented uncertainties and a conflict of past and future loyalties. Identities were re-ordered on a day to day basis and became increasingly politicised as refugees adjusted to the parameters of the new nation state. For many, 'those whose bodies were whole had hearts that were splintered'.[70] Many were torn from their ancestral homes and had difficulty in redefining their roles both locally and nationally. The transformation of relationships was tested at social, economic and political levels as communities and individuals sought to redefine their social positions. Processes of assimilation were delicate and complicated. Recovery was subject to state expectations and necessary survival. Border assigned identities implemented by the Central Government were often contested on the ground as irrelevant. However, the extreme difficulties of the situation meant that rights, loyalties and notions of belonging were constantly re-evaluated.

The birth of India and Pakistan as separate sovereign nations had a profound influence on identities, affected by imagined characteristics of nationhood that had been constructed and sustained by colonial rule and mobilised in the



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struggle against imperialism. The Indian nation was borne of western models, problematised by India's diverse population across a significant land mass, making a homogenous national identity unrealistic. Under British rule the Bengal state was a focus for concentrated colonisation, increasing exposure to western influences with a strong focus on the education of an elite class of collaborators. This education afforded the indigenous professional class greater awareness of the possible effects of partition. Antagonistic interest groups formed as Bengalis were encouraged to realign identity primarily through religion. Religious segregation was initially encouraged under colonial powers, who identified communal identity as 'simply religious', creating essentially opposing identities.[71] Group identities became less parochial and increasingly apathetic to regional ties as a result of increasing national patriotism. However, personal loyalties entrenched in kinship bonds and a shared future often remained unaffected by political notions of national allegiance. Salahuddin Ahmed, a teacher at Dhaka University in 1947 stated that:

'Pakistan was created on the basis of a myth, the myth was that Indian Muslims are one nation, one culture, but when Pakistan was created, it did not solve the problem'.[72]

Citizens were increasingly being asked to define themselves through group classifications. The most important categorisation became religion, which many regarded to be the foundation of nationhood. The Indian government however were expressive in their policy of maintaining a secular state. In December 1947, Sardar Vallabhan Patel Deputy Prime Minister of India publicly stated in a national newspaper that:

'Government could not make a declaration on behalf of any group, nor was Government prepared to consider that the people of any particular religious persuasion should necessarily be citizens of a particular country, nationality and religion were not synonymous'.[73]

The government adopted this policy in handling East Bengali Hindu migrants who considered themselves Indian nationals and not as refugees and expected to be treated as equal citizens of the state.[74] The reception which they received was far from a home-coming as the government suggested that they return to their ancestral homes and remain in East Bengal. In *The Great Partition: the making of India and Pakistan*, Khan comments that 'like a distorted fairground mirror, India and Pakistan became warped, frightening, oppositional images to one another'. Previously imagined loyalties to Indian and Pakistan now became real in the creation of the two sovereign nations. [75]

Bidyut Chakrabarty has argued in *Indian Politics and Society since Independence: events, processes and ideology* that identity is formed through the interplay of ontological and epistemological factors.[76] Ontology refers to the essence of being, who an individual is, whereas epistemology is a philosophical study into who an individual thinks they are. Projected identity is the intermeshing of the two. The partition of Bengal forced individuals to re-evaluate their imagined identities through the uprooting of established social identity markers. The customs of everyday life were impacted by changes to individual perceptions of self. Intizar Husian, an Indian writer explores this difficulty, commenting:

'When my critics object and tell me that I am obsessed by the experience of the partition, trapped in it, my response is that what happened in 1947 was so complex, so devastating, that I have yet to understand it fully. How can I get away from it?'[77]

This demonstrates the difficulties in negotiating everyday lives in the wake of partition as all that a person has thought that they are has been destabilised and more often destroyed by events beyond their control.

The act of severing communities had a massive impact on personal identities and perceived social roles. Identities now became overtly politicised and collective identities were re-evaluated within new national parameters. The breakdown of community rendered individual identities in flux. The post-independent imagined collectivity was a political construct borne of nation-building and used as a platform for social mobility under the circumstance of extreme difficulties resulting from the refugee crisis. Community, as had existed within unified Bengal disintegrated, becoming 'diluted, eroded, corrupted or confused'.[78] Re-conceptualisation of the self was determined by the complex relationships between religion, caste, gender and language and the dissolution of traditional local kinship

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bonds. The reformulation of community left many clinging to old traditions whilst faced with the choice of which nation to belong to, a decision complicated by pressures to demonstrate state loyalty and rights to citizenship.[79] Reformulation of communities in West Bengal was difficult due to the distinction upheld between state citizens and refugees. Migrants from East Bengal had created a problem group within the state and were viewed as undesirable by existing citizens for whom a common culture and linguistics did not constitute community relations. This devastated the refugee perception of their right to belong and destabilised the validity of their self-perceptions. Throughout the years following partition incessant re-categorisation and reorientation of identity markers meant that communities and individuals were subsumed by change as social identities were mobilised around the political boundary of partition.

Although the politicisation of identities created entrenched divisions within communities, at grass root localised levels the significance of nationality had limited effects on the processes of everyday life. Indeed for many the upheaval of partition was so profound that any organic bonds were irreversibly destroyed, however there is also a great deal of evidence to suggest that unifying cultural and linguistic ties were more deep-rooted than political elements. In many cases, old friendships and neighbourly loyalties weathered partition. Religious differences were also overcome to lend a hand to ease human suffering. Bhasham Sahni, a Bengali citizen explained:

'It is not that the people who protected us were non-communal. They could be very rabidly communal. But not with us. They protected us because when it came to their neighbours, a different value system prevailed.'[80]

Assimilation of the new nation states was made more difficult by continued feelings of affiliation. People remained the same, but with new labels, new demands on their person. Ammar Rizvi former state minister noted,

'A home has been divided, culturally, geographically... we are one, but we are a divided house, we have the same music system... culture... judicial system, military system, but it's a divided country.'[81]

Bengali heritage remained strong throughout political division and following partition Bengali identity became trans-national due to deep-rooted traditional commonalities in Bengali culture and history which they maintained 'complementarily'.[82] A degree of social symbiosis therefore remained through common practices which were retained following territorial displacement due to a distinctive 'culture-consciousness'.[83]

In the immediate aftermath of partition, Indian newspaper publications sought to court an atmosphere of stability and continuity in Bengal, overlooking the onset of social crisis. On September 1st 1947 the *Times of India* published:

'Bengal must set an example by preserving their equanimity intact and demonstrating by their unbreakable friendship, the way for all communities to live happily and in harmony'.[84]

In October of the same year the *Star of India* published a speech by Mr Suhrawardy, former Premier of Bengal:

'We were one country and now we are two States, but the life and interest and culture of the people in both States are so intermingled that it will take considerable time to conceive of ourselves in the light of foreigners to each other.'[85]

Such a statement was proved false and although a sense of kinship was harboured through cultural and linguistic ties, West Bengali citizens became increasingly less receptive to the growing influx of refugees, regarding them as 'intruders' and 'loathsome creatures' resembling 'a swarm of locusts eating away the already scarce foodstuff in West Bengal'.[86] Loyalties were also deeply affected by Indian high politics. Bapsi Sidhwa, a West Bengali citizen claimed that 'We, Indians and Pakistanis alike, are always emotionally involved in our politics... I should add that politics in the subcontinent touches each person's life'.[87]

### Chapter III – Refugees

The partition of Bengal resulted in great numbers of Bengali citizens crossing the international border to return to

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what they considered their national homeland, territory they believed they had an intrinsic right to live on and belong to. The sheer number of migrants from East Bengal led to an overwhelming refugee crisis, whose dependency on the state enforced the need to limit government responsibility through the articulation of an official refugee definition. On 28th May 1948, the Government stated that:

'A refugee is a person:

- a) Who, being displaced from any area outside India on account of civil disturbances, has settled and is engaged or intends to engage in any business or industry in India; or
- b) Who, having had his business, industry or property, wholly or partially outside India, has lost, wholly or partially, such business, industry or property on account of civil disturbances and who is engaged or intends to engage in any business or industry in India'.[88]

The West Bengal Government further maintained that persons crossing into West Bengal after 25<sup>th</sup> June 1948 would be denied refugee status, this was due to the changing rationale behind migration which moved from fear of communal persecution to the hardships suffered under the failing economy of East Pakistan.[89] Entitlement to government aid was ascertained by the first scientific survey in May 1948 which questioned refugee families on issues such as age, sex and marital conditions of family members, caste group and access to economic resources. Pakrasi suggests that migrants from East Bengal were not truly refugees, but 'displaced people from one socio-political environment to another'.[90] However, the East Bengali refugees were not received as displaced Bengalis but as foreign aliens with no guarantee of citizenship or government assistance.

The State's failure to adequately and legally define migrants meant that their status and the ensuing crisis was not internationalised, therefore limiting government obligations to protect refugee rights as were globally established by the 1951 United Nations Convention, which stated that a refugee included:

'any person who is outside their country of origin and unable or unwilling to return there or to avail themselves of its protection, on account of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group, or political opinion.'[91]

The Convention also outlined the responsibilities and procedures state governments should adhere to, however in the case of the Government of West Bengal internationally adopted guidelines were overlooked for a more discriminatory policy which limited governmental acceptance of what it acknowledged to be the effects of partition. Socio-economic problems were not recognised and a government 'desperation index' was initiated whereby the state claimed that refugees in desperate need would have registered before mid-January 1949, a hugely unrealistic policy which highlights the inability of the government to gauge the scale of the situation and the gravity of refugee deprivation.[92] Government refusal to recognise refugee status resulted in migrants becoming the 'illegitimate children of modernity'.[93]

There are no universally accepted statistics for the number of refugees who migrated following the partition of Bengal however many estimates have been made. The exodus began prior to formal partition, following the 1946 Noakhali disturbances and continued beyond the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Dr Manesh Deb Sarkar estimates in *Geo-political implications of partition in West Bengal* that by June 1948 1.1 million refugees had crossed the border into West Bengal, 350,000 from the urban middle class; 100,000 agriculturalists and nearly 100,000 artisans. He suggests that by 1951 this number inflated to at least 3.5 million refugees, a figure which rose by a further million in the following decade.[94] By 1948 total migration following partition accounted for 3% of undivided India's population, demonstrating the impact on India a nation.[95] A total of over six million Bengalis were uprooted with 3,964 citizens reported missing in 1951, 1,004 of whom remained unrecovered in 1961.[96] The Government of West Bengal's Refugee Rehabilitation Committee estimated that the uprooted accounted for one-sixth of the total state population of Bengal, illustrating the pervasive social affects felt across the state.[97] Refugee numbers were simply staggering and did not account for those who lost their lives crossing the border, many of whom were assaulted, pillaged and raped.

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Government policies restricted refugee autonomy through the established perception of migrants as foreign aliens unentitled to assisted recovery and citizenship. The Central Indian Government maintained the belief that as conditions following partition settled, refugees would return to their ancestral homes regardless of the politicised boundary. An attempt to prevent continued migration was made through the 1950 Nehru-Liaquat Pact which pledged to protect minorities and encouraged repatriation of refugees. Nehru opposed government endorsement regarding migration, suggesting that it may lead to 'disastrous consequences'.<sup>[98]</sup> The Pact failed to ease migration as protection was not adequately extended to minorities in Bengal who faced dangers which were unfairly downplayed by Nehru:

'Refugees flee from a situation which they consider as full of danger to them, and are not the best eye witnesses, even though some of them have been eye-witnesses of a particular occurrence. They were and are much too excited and worked up to see an event in proper perspective, and in any event they only see a small part of the picture'.<sup>[99]</sup>

Nehru continued to demonstrate gross misunderstanding of the situation suggesting, 'if they have migrated, they should be invited to go back to their homes'.<sup>[100]</sup> Nehru refused to sanction an exchange of populations in order to protect state secularism and the position of the Congress Party in India. In March 1950 Nehru commented on the Bengal crisis stating, 'I am filled with deep distress and a sense of failure'.<sup>[101]</sup> However the Central Government, occupied by the Punjab, delegated responsibility to the state government and refused to accept responsibility until 1955 when it finally became clear that the refugees were not going to return to East Bengal.

Government response to the refugee crisis resulted in an overhaul of perceived relationships to the state. For many refugees, migration was not connected to high political ideologies but was instead necessary action for survival. Some chose to migrate, hoping for a better life, or simply followed family and kin. A sense of nostalgia was common as refugees lacked direction and leadership, stripped of their relationship to the state. Some refugees saw migration as a home-coming and considered their suffering sacrifices to the great nation, whom on arrival recognised them as aliens.<sup>[102]</sup>

The introduction of passports on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1952 formalised citizenship entitlement and legally solidified refugee identities. Prior to 1952, borders between the two Bengals had remained open as central powers did not want to restrict movement between the localities, failing to anticipate the mass exodus which was to follow partition. News of the initiative proceeded formal introduction of passports, and created mass panic as identities became geographically aligned and incited those who found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the border to migrate whilst the opportunity remained. Hindus in East Bengal fled over the border for fear of the government 'plugging the escape route to freedom'.<sup>[103]</sup> The introduction of passports by the Government of India came in response to the initiative of Pakistan. In letters to the Chief Ministers, Nehru suggests the government were 'perfectly prepared to scrap the passport system completely' and complains of the 'inconveniences' resulting from the policy.<sup>[104]</sup> Inconveniences included the evolution of an underground network to provide illegitimate crossings for the many who still regarded themselves as trapped by national boundaries which misrepresented their identity. The Indian Government offered little support to those trapped by the borders of partition and Nehru abandoned responsibility to the Pakistani state.

Refugee women were among the worst affected demographic group. Deschaumes estimates that around 100,000 women were 'abducted, raped, killed, sold into prostitution, taken as wives and married by conversion'.<sup>[105]</sup> Women were marginalised, subjugated and compromised. Traditional social structures dictated that women were identified in accordance to a male relation within the dominant familial role. Traditionally, women had little autonomy therefore notions of identity were constructed and defined by a male presence to create an otherness. Sheila Sengupta, a relief worker in the wake of partition commented that women 'were in tremendous trauma, because their men folk were slaughtered, they were raped, and the men just left them and ran away'.<sup>[106]</sup> Fears over the safety of Hindu women in East Bengal became one of the most prominent reasons for migration to West Bengal. For those who committed such atrocities, religion was seen as the fundamental rite:

'Killing women was not violence, it was saving the honour of the community, losing sight of children, abandoning them to who knew what fate. It was not violence, it was maintaining the purity of the religion'.<sup>[107]</sup>

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Women who had been molested were considered impure and became social outcasts, disowned by families and caste groups. For some women however, this dissolution of traditional bonds created opportunities to become agencies of their own future and to eventually formulate their own identities. Increased numbers of women became involved in the workforce with a significant number of female refugees becoming teachers, nurses and clerks.[108] The refugee crisis represented a break with tradition and created a multitude of opportunities, which invested women, for the first time ever, with significant economical power.

The migration process created a psychological change within many refugees. The realities of refugee life failed to satisfy idealised expectations of life in West Bengal, resulting in feelings of frustration and fear, compounded by a crisis of identity. Following an escape from the atrocities of East Bengal, migrants often had high hopes of what life in West Bengal could offer, which many assumed would include a warm reception and freedom from persecution. However the reality was far from ideal, refugees were faced with a 'hell-hole' in the midst of a crisis, and 'the heartless city went about its way, careless and indifferent' to the flood of migrants.[109] The very foundations of identification were shaken as the promised land failed to materialise. Refugees were tolerated, not welcomed, stigmatised by their dependence on the state and set apart by their suffering. Almost overnight identities were overhauled as expectations were disappointed and refugees were met with indifference and rejection. Traditional kinship bonds perished as 'the same people were suddenly different'.[110] Refugees experienced a deep-seated psychological change which had an irreversible impact on social identity and the perception of self.

The psychological state of refugees was most significantly impacted by the deplorable living and healthcare provisions. In 1946 a statistical survey classed sixty percent of refugees in the city as in 'distress' or 'want', with the figure rising to seventy percent in rural localities.[111] Refugee camps had appalling living conditions which verged on the inhumane. Camps consisted of 'Nissen huts' which lacked adequate sanitisation and were often overrun with vermin. Huts were dangerously overcrowded, with a staggering 70,000 refugees sheltered in the largest refugee camp.[112] Crowded conditions lead to an increased spread of diseases such as cholera and dysentery, made worse by the scarcity of water. Food provisions were severely limited and refugees were forced to survive on a meagre dole as refugees were forbidden to find gainful employment outside the restrictive camp borders. Refugees were forced to regress into a 'Hobbesian state of nature' wherein life became 'nasty, brutish and short'.[113] Hundreds of refugees died as a result of the grossly uninhabitable conditions and for those who survived, the psychological impact was resonant. Refugees crossing the border on the border on foot were also hit by a desperate lack of necessary supplies due to the government failure to mobilise an effective response. The Royal Indian Air Force was used to drop food supplies and vaccines and doctors were mobilised to be stationed at border entry points.[114] For refugees arriving by train, conditions were no better, a reporter for the Amrita Bazar Patrika commented on the state of refugees at Sealdah station, Calcutta:

'Imagine, young women taking their bath in the open with thousands of people. Imagine, again, sleeping in a place a few feet away from a room which is used by thousands as a latrine... Imagine, again, cooking your food on three bricks with rubbish as fuel on the street along which pass hundreds of motor cars'.[115]

Refugees were placed in unimaginable conditions and as they discovered the realities of life in West Bengal, many were gripped by a desperate nostalgia for the homes they had left behind.

### **Chapter IV- Relief and Rehabilitation**

Government policies regarding the influx of refugees were implemented two-fold on the basis of relief and rehabilitation. The Indian Government initially denied responsibility for migrant persons who they considered to have migrated out of choice and the refugee 'problem group' became an increasing liability. At a density of over 9000 people per square mile Calcutta now suffered from severe overcrowding which grew worse with the daily influx of refugees. 54% of the total population of West Bengal lived on just 13% of the state land in and around the urban centre of Calcutta in what has been suggested to be 'the most densely populated part of the world'.[116] The Indian Government reacted to the growing crisis with ambivalence, and further, the State Government naively presumed that refugees would return to East Pakistan once the situation had calmed. [117] Nehru commented on the situation, stating that:

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'While we naturally wanted to help them here, the problem has become so big that help is very limited and the sufferings have become very great. The only real solution lies in their going back and settling, should I say, in their own homes'.[118]

The government first and foremost encouraged the repatriation of refugees and refused to consider relief and rehabilitation as fundamental refugee rights. The State established itself as a 'benevolent despot' and made decisions regarding refugee rights accordingly.[119] Central powers were concerned with putting an end to the influx which they understood to consist of migrants fleeing economic difficulties, attracted to West Bengal by the generous policies of relief. They did not account for the delicacies of migrants who were rushing to escape religious persecution and a culture of hatred. Nehru commented that 'relief and rehabilitation were more complex than the creation of Pakistan itself'.[120]

Uditi Sen outlines three distinct phases of rehabilitation; from 1947 – 1950 the government denied all responsibility for refugees, from 1950 – 1952 responsibility was shifted from the centre to the state, and from 1952 the government began to shut down all refugee camps.[121] The growing number of refugees forced the government into accepting its responsibility for the provision of relief, and up until 1955 administration of relief became the government's sole policy in dealing with the crisis. Migrants were identified as displaced persons, a category identified as a 'liability' by Nehru in the Parliament of India in early 1950, and were not entitled to rehabilitation.[122] However, on 7th September 1948, the Central Relief Committee passed a resolution in favour of the implementation of refugee relief policies in Bengal. The main authority on the provision of relief was the West Bengal Government who was limited to relying on central government for financial assistance. The approach to providing relief was at best ad hoc. In 1948 Nehru stated that relief in West Bengal was 'not being carried on very satisfactorily. Money doles given and little attempt made to make refugees work'.[123] Refugees were forced to take shelter in government run relief camps which were subdivided into relief and transit camps, permanent liability camps and colony camps to determine the different levels of relief necessary. The government maintained that permanent rehabilitation was unnecessary and only offered limited access to the dole, granting unconditional relief for just one week.[124] Further restrictions were enforced and relief was denied to all able-bodied men who were regarded as fit to work. Nehru complained, that 'This relief business is becoming too great a burden on India to bear and there is a great danger of our having to give it up simply because we just cannot afford it'.[125] As early as July 1949 the Indian government announced that it intended to close all relief camps in West Bengal by the 31st October 1949, later extended to the 31st December, claiming that it had satisfied their responsibilities.[126] Finally, in 1955, eight years after the partition of Bengal, the Indian Government recognised that the overwhelming percentage of refugees were not likely to return across the border and began to amend their approach through the implementation of long-term policies.

From 1955 the government shifted its focus from policies of relief to prioritise refugee rehabilitation. Severe disorganisation meant that the government lacked official statistics on the total number of refugees or the size and availability of surplus land complicating the formation of a cohesive programme of rehabilitation.[127] The government incorporated refugee rehabilitation into a wider state development programme, necessitated by low resources and a struggling state infrastructure which threatened total collapse. The government initiated a 'no-work-no-help' policy to ease the burden of state dependency and encourage refugees to find gainful employment. Various government loan schemes were set up for refugees to equip themselves with tools and training to become self-employed and ease rehabilitation. Ajit Prasad Jain, the Central Rehabilitation Minister for India stated that rehabilitation incorporated not only the provision of shelter and employment but was 'the process of economic recovery of displaced persons leading ultimately to the disappearance of all distinction between them and other nationals'.[128] The Central Government invested in and encouraged free state education for refugees, with a particular focus on child development and the importance of educating the future generation 'thus building up the youth of the nation'.[129]

Dangerous levels of overcrowding led the government to attempt to rehabilitate refugees through the displacement of persons to areas outside of West Bengal such as Bihar and Orissa.[130] Such initiatives failed due to the reluctance of neighbouring states to absorb the refugees and the unwillingness of refugees to move outside of the Bengali-speaking region for fear of becoming linguistically and culturally isolated. This unwillingness to move outside of the West Bengal state borders limited government agency and intensified pressures on land, resources and the state

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economy.

To ease effective administration of rehabilitation policies, the government utilised a classification system to identify different refugee categories. In 1949 the Government of India stated that refugees from East Bengal should henceforth be referred to as 'displaced persons'.<sup>[131]</sup> This change in terminology resulted from a need to differentiate and distance partition refugees from the the growing European refugee crisis produced by World War II. In mid-1949 the Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner identified three refugee categories: firstly the affluent class of refugees who did not need to depend on government rehabilitation; secondly, the section who lacked money but remained determined, sought employment and took risks to establish themselves in deserted houses or on vacant lands; and lastly, those who were too poor or traumatised to attempt any semblance of recovery without government aid.<sup>[132]</sup> The government focused its energies on this last category, constructing various rehabilitative schemes. The main distinction between schemes lay in the make-up of the refugees, outlining distinct programmes for rural and urban rehabilitation. For refugees of a rural agriculturalist background, the government aimed to acquire wastelands which could be cultivated for village reconstruction. Refugees from an urban background were to be provided with employment and a place of local residence. The government invested in state industries to generate employment opportunities and supported private industry endeavours.<sup>[133]</sup> The government hoped that the introduction of separate policies would increase the likelihood of successful rehabilitation.

The most difficult issue which prevented successful rehabilitation was the difference in occupational structures in East and West Bengal which rendered many refugees occupationally obsolete. State infrastructure was damaged by the migration of West Bengali Muslims to East Bengal, whose occupational structure differed entirely to the Hindu refugees entering West Bengal therefore destabilising the economy. Further difficulties included the ratio of rural to urban refugees. Nearly one-third of East Bengali refugees were from countryside areas and therefore needed rural resettlement to continue in agriculturalist occupations. <sup>[134]</sup> Such resettlement became difficult due to overcrowding and land scarcity, resulting in families seeking work in urban areas for occupations in which they held no prior experience. Urban refugees were also difficult to rehabilitate as many middle-class refugees who had previously had careers as teachers, lawyers and doctors were heavily over-represented in West Bengal and found themselves without demand and without work. The complete overhaul of the occupational structure left increasing numbers dependent on state hand-outs as previously affluent and successful sections of society were stripped of their livelihoods and were unable to maintain the standard of living which they had formerly been accustomed to.<sup>[135]</sup> Even more difficult to rehabilitate were the masses of uneducated poor who came to West Bengal with no means of creating a livelihood.

Many refugees did not rely on the state for rehabilitation and took the initiative to rebuild their lives without government assistance. Refugees established their own squatter colonies through the seizure of vacant and idle land introducing a semblance of refugee power and agency. 'Cooperative' activities included land reclamation, the construction of houses and schools and the introduction of small-scale cottage industries.<sup>[136]</sup> They aimed to build themselves a life by rooting themselves to the land and focusing on education as a means for future material improvement. The refugees became increasingly organised, forming the United Central Refugee Council in 1950 under Communist auspices.<sup>[137]</sup> This launched an articulation of refugee demands which were increasingly verbalised through umbrella organisations which appealed for equal political and economic rights and autonomy over their rehabilitation.<sup>[138]</sup> The refugees demanded an increased standard of living through the implementation of free education and healthcare, better sanitisation and increased employment opportunities. Refugees demanded to no longer be stigmatised but treated as equal citizens with equal entitlements. Government policies needed to be widened to incorporate social and political needs into the drive for economic improvement. This formation of group-consciousness became increasingly politicised and soon came under the influence of left-wing groups who were to have a profound effect on government policies.

The role of women was overhauled through the process of rehabilitation, opening up new opportunities for education and employment, made necessary by the failing economy and struggle to make ends meet.<sup>[139]</sup> This led to a significant rise in female literacy rates and increased social mobility granted women greater independence and economic power. A contemporary local newspaper commented that:

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'It is a startling fact that more women hold public positions of authority in India than anywhere else in the world, except in the Soviet Union. This is in spite of 85% mass illiteracy and that women form the larger percentage of adult illiterates.'[140]

However, for many women the process of rehabilitation was far from positive or progressive. The recovery of women who had suffered assaults or abduction was painful and prolonged. Social rehabilitation was a complicated process which courted tradition and many women who had been victims of sexual abuse were shunned from society and rejected by their kin for sins of sexual impurity. Congress leaders actively and publicly campaigned for the re-acceptance of affected sisters and daughters stating that 'to castigate these girls for having fallen victim to the lust of some monster was less than human'.[141] Some women could not be traced or recovered and Bengali contemporaries have suggested 'it was thought that after brutal torture, after being raped, they had been killed'.[142] The process of recovery often took several years and of those who were successfully traced many did not want to return to their former homes, having built a new life and formed new loyalties. Largely, women did not want to be returned because of fear of social rejection or because they no longer felt displaced and had become settled in their new territory. Many women had married and had children, complicating claims to citizenship and nationality and producing a generation 'born of mixed unions'.[143] A female Bengali relief worker described the difficulty of the situation facing a refugee woman she had encountered, stating:

'Once she lost everything, now she's settled down having children and a husband, she's settled she doesn't want to go. I felt it is really an injustice to a woman, she has just come out from one trauma settling down in life with a new family... but sometimes we force[d] them to go back'.[144]

Forced rehabilitation of women was not rare and many families pressed for the recovery of their sisters and daughters, even against their will. A father recounted his experience of tracing his daughter, and the argument that followed with his wife when the daughter was found to be happily married and living in West Bengal with three children. The mother pushed for her forced rehabilitation, leading the father to appeal that their daughter was 'one uprooted and again you are uprooting her, you never know what will happen to her... who will accept her'.[145] Separated from her husband and children, it took over twelve years for the daughter to escape her forced recovery and be reunited with the family she had created and the identity she had chosen.

Policies of relief and rehabilitation therefore had a massive impact on the construction of identities in everyday life. The millions affected suffered an 'identity-based rift...in the name of an utterly abstract principle: the principle of nationality which had only limited significance to them'.[146] Not only were refugees descending on West Bengal, but a stream of people also left for East Bengal, significantly altering the social composition of the state, making it increasingly difficult for the remaining Muslim minority. A new identity emerged as Muslim migrants crossed the border to the east and Hindu refugees were assimilated into the West Bengali state, the formation of which established new parameters in which identities were 'produced, consumed, regulated, sustained and invalidated'.[147] Many refugees failed to fully integrate into society, attempting to hold on to old traditions and customs that were unavoidably transformed by the new social landscape. The legacy of partition had deep-rooted psychological affects due to the often traumatic circumstances surrounding rehabilitation which led to families being separated and an inversion of the traditional social order as communities became increasingly bureaucratized due to the changing structures of power.[148] Rehabilitation was a continuous process that required constant re-evaluation of roles and identities within the newly emerging social order. As Dr Radhakrishnan, India's Vice President proffered in 1953; 'Our society becomes acceptable, our freedom becomes real, only if we are saved from hunger and cold, from filth and disease', [149] all of which remained prominent features of refugee existence.

### Conclusion

Indian Independence and the following creation of Pakistan marked a watershed in the history of India as it moved towards the creation of two separate nations. Such a vast political change had resounding economic and social effects which pervaded the country and its people. The portioning of lands led to a partitioning of minds, seemingly destroying any organic unity which existed within the locale of West Bengal. Individuals were suddenly encouraged to define themselves in relation to the great nation, and pledge allegiance to their place within it. Identities became



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increasingly fixed following the outbreak of the refugee crisis as millions flooded to claim entitlement to relief and rehabilitation. In an attempt to limit their accountability, the government introduced a system of classification to restrict eligibility for government aid. This formal categorisation of refugees failed to reflect the intricacies of refugee identities which were complicated by conflicts of interest and a complex layering of character. Identities were thus simplified and homogenised in order to be recorded and understood by the state, whereas in real terms they remained in a constant state of flux shaped by the inescapable impact of government policies regarding citizenship and entitlement.

Urvashi Butalia once stated that 'Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember',<sup>[150]</sup> and its effects were clear as communal tensions were heightened and over eight million Indians and Pakistanis were displaced as brutalities and violence became commonplace. Partition changed the landscape, the politics and the people of Bengal forever, creating in its wake both an economic and humanitarian crisis which shook India and the state of West Bengal to their very core. The events following the demarcation of the state were to change the parameters of self-perception forever, forging a new history, people and nation. The policies pursued by the government had a fundamental effect on the Bengali people, which impacted their composition and overhauled their relations to the state. West Bengal became both a place of widening opportunities and one of oppressive traditions as migrants and citizens alike attempted to adapt to the changing political landscape. Millions of individual Bengali lives were shaped by policies and decisions made in Jawaharlal Nehru's office in Delhi, illustrating the complete dislocation of central politics with grass root realities and complexities. The situation was made worse by the lack of productive communication between the federal and state governments which meant that the refugee crisis was not a recognised national problem until the early 1950s, years after the event of partition. This refusal to accept responsibility for the refugees stigmatised their place in society, becoming a 'problem group' for all involved.

In the wake of partition, Nehru proclaimed that 'The masses have now become the real rulers in the country and the strength or the weakness of the Government would depend on the people'.<sup>[151]</sup> To some extent this was true as the unrelenting proportions of the refugee influx paralysed the effective pervasiveness of government power, forcing readjustments and reviews on policy. At the same time however, the government controlled who was entitled to become a part of 'the people' and limited the autonomy and agency of state-dependents. Administration suffered from the distinct unawareness at the centre of the scale of the problems following partition and the necessary means to be taken to protect the daily lives of its citizens and its refugees. In 1947 Nehru claimed that:

'Something substantial has been achieved, though the burden on the common man continues to be terribly heavy, and millions lack food and clothes and other necessities of life'.<sup>[152]</sup>

This illustrates that Nehru viewed the situation pragmatically, putting first the formation of India as a nation before detailing the sacrifices which continued to be made by its long suffering people. Important social issues were overlooked and the government neglected appropriate forms of rehabilitation, maintaining throughout a strong focus on the recovery of the economy which they hoped in turn would lead to regeneration and increased social symbiosis.

Partition itself infected India with a sense of otherness, one Bengali citizen recounts with disbelief, 'Just on line drawn on the map, and my home becomes a foreign country!'<sup>[153]</sup> Decisions made at the highest level of politics had tangible effects for those on the ground who in turn had little autonomy as they became part of the programme of nation-building. People began to struggle with a sense of belonging as territorial divisions cut through previous layers of identity and rendered millions as aliens within their own state, even within their own homes. The effects were devastating as newly independent India lacked both the administration and the resources to deal with the crisis that destroyed the framework of everyday existence. Imagined nationalisms became territorial realities which forced large numbers to migrate to their perceived homeland only to be encouraged to return to the persecution which had become an everyday reality in East Bengal.<sup>[154]</sup>

It is important to consider the two-sides of partition together to understand the relationship between the high politics of government and the changes wrought to everyday lives. High political accounts of partition and grass root narratives are polarised and there remains a need for further and more inclusive research. For many who lived through partition, it is an event which they wish to bury in the past but are unable to do so due to the internalisation of

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effects which manifested to alter perceptions of self and the projection of individual identity. It is difficult to predict whether the partition of India would have taken place had the concept not been sanctioned by colonial powers, however it is clear that the Indian masses saw independence as a milestone, the birth of a nation and the opportunity to live freely and to coexist in peace. Unfortunately, the reality was one of partition and its subsequent humanitarian and economic crises which lead Nehru to suggest in 1947 that 'India's heart [was] broken'.<sup>[155]</sup> Partition resulted in a complete overhaul of relations to the state and inverted traditional social structures. Many local and familial loyalties remained but for most, and particularly for the East Bengali refugees, lives and loyalties were changed irrevocably. For millions, partition did not create a homeland, but for those who found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the border, it denied them of their very identity.

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