



## **Refugees and Nation-Building: A Historical Study of Rehabilitation Policies in Post-Partition India (1947–1965)**

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### **Abstract**

The partitioning of India in 1947 instigated one of the biggest forced migrations in the contemporary history and the newly independent Indian state had to face an unheard of humanitarian, administrative and economic issue. The paper looks at how the policy of rehabilitation of refugees contributed to the wider nation-building process of 1947 to 1965. It examines the manner in which the state planned institutional processes, law-making policies and development initiatives to re-settle and economically incorporate displaced people in various parts especially in the north-western and eastern parts of India. The analysis of the history and analysis approach relies on the government reports, census data, first-hand accounts, and secondary research, with the study indicating substantial regional differences in the application of the rehabilitation measures and their results. Although land redistribution, urban dwelling plans, compensation plans, and aiding small-scale industries, led to the rapid socio-economic movement, as well as agricultural and commercial change in north India, the eastern India experience was characterised by Holup postponements, scarcity of resources, and marginalisation over the long term. The paper maintains that refugee rehabilitation was not only a relief programme, but it was a very important tool of state building, economic restructuring, and political incorporation in the post-colonial India. Making refugee resettlement as part of nation-building, the research shows how the displaced peoples became effective participants in the creation of new urban locations, agricultural relations, and middle-class identities. The historiography of Partition is added to by the analysis as it connects the rehabilitation policies to the developmental goals of the early Indian state.

**Keywords:** Partition of India; Refugee Rehabilitation; Nation-Building; Displacement and Resettlement; Post-colonial State; Evacuee Property

### **Introduction**

This forced migration became one of the most severe and the largest forced migrations in modern history due to the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Almost 14-15 million individuals were displaced along the newly formed borders between India and



Pakistan leading to an unprecedented humanitarian and management crisis to both countries. In the case of India that was just coming out of the colonial rule, the sudden surge of refugees was a challenge of both relief and resettlement as well as an opportunity to establish the character and strength of the post-colonial state. The process of refugee's rehabilitation became closely connected with the more general one of nation-building, economic success, and political assimilation.

The Government of India immediately after Partition had to come up with institutional mechanisms, law and developmental strategies to absorb millions of displaced people. The creation of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, the creation of laws concerning evacuee property, the introduction of compensation plans and the initiation of rural and urban resettlement programmes were signs of changing attitude of the state towards planned reconstruction. These did not occur nationally, but instead, delivered regionally differentiated results, whereby, agrarian and urban integration was realised relatively successfully in north-western India and the rehabilitation processes were lengthier and more complicated in eastern India.

This paper will review the policy of refugee rehabilitation in India between 1947 and 1965 a time in which emergency relief was replaced by long-term economic and social integration. The paper aims at examining the role of these policies in the state building, economic modernization and the formation of new social and spatial systems. It also examines how much the displaced populations themselves were involved in and influential of these processes.

### **Conceptual and historical Framework.**

The process of nation-building in post-colonial India was not limited to the political sovereignty being established but also about consolidating the administrative institutions, economic rebuilding and about connecting the various people into one national system (Chatterjee, 1993). The 1947 partition, which left the new Indian state with the massive displacement of human beings across the borders of both India and Pakistan, obliged the newly independent India to increase its institutional power and reconstitute the connexion amid citizenship, territory and governance. Rehabilitation of refugees therefore emerged as an important space whereby the developmental agenda and political credibility of the state were explained (Zamindar, 2007).

The legalisation, registration, and classifications of displaced individuals in the form of permits and compensation claims and property rights were the manifestation of the new bureaucratic forms of inclusion and exclusion in the context of citizenship (Jayal, 2013). These processes gave way to a shift of colonial administrative modes to planned and interventionist state where it aimed at integrating refugees into the national economy by



redistributing land, resettling in the urban areas and creating employment, etc. The evacuee property transfer and agricultural land transfer in the north-western part of India especially in Punjab and Delhi brought about the rapid formation of a new group of peasant proprietors and urban entrepreneurs, which led to economic stabilisation and social mobility (Talbot and Singh, 2009; Yong and Kudaisya, 2000).

Contrary, the process of rehabilitation in eastern India had another course. The unending stream of East Pakistani refugees, dearth of arable land as well as slow industrialisation, led to years of reliance on state handouts and the development of refugee camps and unapproved colonies. This skewed regional distribution reflects the inequality in ability of the state and the diverse socio-economic performance of the rehabilitation policies (Chakrabarti, 1999; Sen, 2018).

In a more general approach to analysis, the rehabilitation of refugees may be seen as a spatial reorganisation and socio-economic integration. The introduction of planned towns like Faridabad and the creation of the refugee settlements in Delhi changed the city landscape and led to the emergence of new commercial networks and middle-class lives (Kudaisya, 2006). All these developments were strongly associated with the purposes planned economic development which was expressed in the early Five-Year Plans and regarded rehabilitation not only as a relief policy but as a productive investment and the national reconstruction (Government of India, 1950).

Moreover, the legalising of rights, the right of property and political representation made it easier to convert the refugees that were displaced subjects to citizens of Indian republic. To this end, rehabilitation could be seen as a humanitarian measure and a nation-building tool, which allowed the state to consolidate its administrative control, at the same time allowing it to re-order agrarian relations, urbanisation processes and social classes in post-independent India (Sherman, 2015; Zamindar, 2007).

### **Magnitude and Regional Patterns of Refugee Influx**

The 1947 Partition of India had created a demographic tsunami, with the movement of close to 14 to 15 million individuals between the new India and Pakistan borders. Among them, about 7 to 8 million refugees were introduced to India and this changed completely the demographic, economic, and spatial organisation of various regions (Talbot and Singh, 2009). The extent, time and character of this migration, however, was quite different in the north-western and eastern sectors, and resulted in different tendencies toward rehabilitation and integration.

The population movement was intense and rather short in duration and was rapid in the north western part of India. The refugees in West Punjab, North-West Frontier Province



and Sindh were mainly settled in Punjab, Delhi, Haryana and Rajasthan states of India. The presence of the evacuee agricultural land abandoned by Muslims who had immigrated to Pakistan made it possible to execute wide-scale rural resettlement programmes by the government of India. An elaborate percentage of the displaced cultivators received land in East Punjab by the early 1950s, which helped to restructure the agrarian relationships in addition to reviving agricultural production (Yong & Kudaisya, 2000). The refugee population became very high in urban centres and especially in Delhi; by 1951, almost a third of the urban population was composed of the displaced people (Kudaisya, 2006). This high demographic change saw the formation of new residential colonies, commercial centres and small-scale industries, which contributed significantly to the economic growth of the region.

Conversely, the movement of the refugees into eastern India was gradual and slow. Movement in East Pakistan to West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura went on deep into 1950s and 1960s due to frequent communal clashes, economic instability and political changes. As compared to Punjab, West Bengal was under acute land pressure because of the large population and scanty availability of cultivable land. This led to the settlement of many refugees in the camps, squatter colonies and forested or marginal lands and this was usually without sufficient state assistance (Chakrabarti, 1999). The slow rate of industrial growth also limited the chance of an economic recovery, and millions of people remained unemployed due to the displacement (Sen, 2018).

The demographic effect of the refugee migration was more apparent in urban centres. The north-west of the state, which experienced a tremendous rise in population as a result of migration of people (displaced persons), and the east recorded a major increase in population of Kolkata. Such a fast urbanisation had both the effect of exerting strain on housing, infrastructure and public services, and, at the same time, of creating new markets and labour networks. The refugees were at the centre of growth of the trade, transport, and small-scale production, thus, transforming the urban economy (Kudaisya, 2006; Talbot and Singh, 2009).

### **Policy and Institutional Structure of Rehabilitation.**

The large magnitude of displacement that ensued after the partitioning of India necessitated that the newly formed state needed to come up with a comprehensive administrative and legal apparatus to support the relief and rehabilitation exercise. A humanitarian aid that had been intended to become a systematic and long-term policy framework integrating humanitarian support with a planned economic rebuilding had started as an emergency response. The establishment of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation was also a great move in this sense as it became the main point of



coordination of registration of refugees, relief distribution, property allocation and resettlement programmes in various parts of the country.

The development of the laws concerning the evacuee property was one of the most important elements of the rehabilitation policy. The migrants to Pakistan left behind large quantities of houses, shops, and agricultural lands and the state took over their control, as it was necessary to redistribute them among displaced individuals. This process did not only give refugees instant shelter and livelihood but also allowed the government to control property transfer and legal ownership by means of a well-organised claims and compensation process. The checking of claims, evaluation of loss, and the rated compensation gave rise to a bureaucratic system that introduced the refugees to the relations with the post-colonial state institutions.

The rural rehabilitation was mainly founded on land resettlement. The displaced cultivators particularly those in the north-western India were given agricultural land in proportion to the land they lost. This involved massive land surveying, unification of small estates, setting up of irrigation plantations and restructuring of village communities. The state tried to achieve not only to restore economical life of refugee peasants but also to stabilise agricultural production and provide food security of the state during the first years of the independent state.

The case of urban rehabilitation took another turn. The fact that there was a sudden upsurge in the number of people living in cities caused a severe shortage of housing and jobs. The government responded by introducing scheduled housing projects, building refugee towns and building industrial and trade centres where the displaced people could get employment. The availability of credit, education in small-scale industry and the formation of cooperative organisations was promoted to promote self-employment and minimise the long-time reliance on state relief. These actions contributed greatly to the transformation of refugees into the active contributors of the urban economy.

### **Rural Rehabilitation and Agrarian Transformation**

The refugee resettlement programme in the years just after Partition was based mainly on rural rehabilitation especially in north-western India where majority of the displaced people were cultivators. The fact that agricultural land was left behind by the people that had migrated to Pakistan allowed the state to make one of the largest land redistribution exercises in the history of South Asia since independence. This was not done by the mere physical shift of refugee peasantry; the agrarian structures were systematically restructured, fragmented lands were combined with others, and units of cultivation based on economic viability were formed.



The distribution of land was done by a graded system which tried to give the value of land left behind an equivalent of the land given in India. This necessitated in-depth surveys, categorization of soil quality and new administrative measures of evaluation of claims. In parts, particularly East Punjab, small parcels were consolidated into small holdings to make cultivation and irrigation easy to use. The canal networks expansion and repair also aided in recovery of agriculture as well as stabilising food production during the era of acute shortages and uncertainty.

The changing of the displaced cultivators into peasant owners had far-reaching socio-economic effects. Land ownership brought economic security, social status and political power. The appearance of a new stratum of the small and medium landholders facilitated the process of democratisation of the rural society and enhanced the principles of the local self-governing institutions. Concurrently, the introduction of more productive farming techniques, better farming seeds, and availability of institutional credit boosted productivity and provided a platform on which agrarian growth could be achieved in future.

But not all rural rehabilitation was the same experience in the country. The possibilities of land-based resettlement were restricted by the lack of cultivable land and high density of the current population in the eastern part of India. A significant number of refugees resettled in forested areas, marshlands or places that had to be reclaimed. Such settlements were frequently insufficiently irrigated, infrastructurally developed and had no access to markets, thus agricultural rehabilitation was slow and uncertain. This left a large part of the rural refugee population relying on state aid, or forced to find other means of livelihood.

### **City Rehabilitation and Economic Revitalization.**

City rehabilitation was an important part of the refugee resettlement programme especially in urban centres that had seen a sudden and enormous rise in population following Partition. The influx of displaced people into the cities like Delhi, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Kolkata brought a severe lack of housing, jobs and the most basic civic facilities. The state responded by embarking on a sequence of planned interventions that were not only to give urgent shelter but also incorporate the refugees into the growing urban economy.

Temporary camps were one of the first steps to be adopted that were gradually substituted by permanent settlements and structured refugee camps. Vacated houses and business enterprises were given to the displaced families and the new residential areas were built around the periphery of cities. These colonies rapidly developed into full-fledged socio-economic communities that had respective markets, schools, places of worship, and



community organisations. The intended township of Faridabad is a bright exception of such a strategy, housing and industrial establishments and collaborative institutions were created concurrently to guarantee residence and work.

Integration of refugees into the economy was done using various avenues. A good number of the displaced people had skills in trade, crafts and small-scale manufacture, which they re-established in their new urban setup. The state was aiding these activities by granting them access to credit, training areas as well as industrial plots. Innovative small-scale industries in textiles, metalwork, printing, and food processing grew at a fast rate and provided jobs and economic growth in the urban areas. The other important role that was played by refugee business people was in the establishment of new commercial networks, retail markets and transport business enterprises.

One of the most important results of this process was the transformation of urban space. Previously sparsely populated areas were turned into densely populated neighbourhoods and new business hubs were created to serve the population that was increasing. This growth was followed by expansion of roads, schools, hospitals and public institutions that enhanced the power of the administrative and infrastructural system of the post-colonial state. Their role in these processes was not restricted to the economic life of the refugees; they also became active in the municipal politics, in the cooperative movements, in the local associations and this way they helped the democratic nature of urban government.

### **Challenges, Limitations and Regional Disparities in Rehabilitation Policies**

Although the rehabilitation programme was designed on an impressive scale and ambition, it was characterised by some structural, administrative and regional constraints that showed the limitations of the post-colonial state. The process of emergency relief to resettlement demands a lot of financial resources, the preservation of all losses properly documented, and the effective coordination of work between central and state agencies. Practically, the time lag experienced in the confirmation of claims, complication of the procedure and lack of good records tended to delay the delivery of the compensation and property, which was frustrating to the displaced populations.

Inequality in the distribution of resources was also one of the greatest obstacles. The existence of large evacuee agricultural land and urban property in north-western India enabled the introduction of quite successful programmes of rural and urban resettlement. European eastern India, on the contrary, was experiencing the acute pressure on the land, the overpopulation and the constant labouring inflow of refugees during a long period. Some consequences were that rehabilitation in this area was often in form of relief and not resettlement. The refugees were left in large numbers in the camps, squatter colonies



and environmentally sensitive places where they had limited access to basic amenities, working and social services.

There were also serious limitations of administrative capacity. The new independent nation was continuing to consolidate its structures and it also had no trained people, proper infrastructure and proper communication channels in most places. The very number of claims and the necessity to estimate the worth of property lost on the international borders complicated the process of compensation highly. Land valuation issues, claims of corruption, and the presence of fraud claims further complicated the process, and destroyed the level of confidence in the population with regards to some cases.

Another huge challenge was economic constraints. Although the rehabilitation programme became a component of an overall plan of the planned development, the competing demands of state resources on state resources, including industrialisation, defence, and development of the infrastructural network, limited the funds to spend on the resettlement. Where industrial expansion was low and agricultural land was limited, there were no sustainable sources of livelihood and this resulted in long-term reliance on state support. The same scenario was very notable especially in places where the refugees were resettled in marginal lands that had to be reclaimed extensively thereby slowing down their economic integration.

The presence of social inequalities among the refugee population also affected the results of the rehabilitation. The fortunate ones who had skills or education or access to commercial networks could afford to reconstruct their lives faster particularly in the urban centres. Landless labourers, capital-less artisans, and socially marginalised people, in contrast, had a hard time enjoying the compensation and resettlement schemes. This brought about the internal differentiation to refugee communities and recreated some aspects of economic inequality.

### **Rehabilitation of refugees and nation-building.**

Refugee rehabilitation in post-Partition India was not simply an outcome of response to a humanitarian crisis; it was a key part of Indian nation-state formation. The policies and programmes that were created to resettle displaced populations made the state extend its administrative remit, restructure the economic frameworks, and develop new modes of political and social incorporation. In this regard, the process of refugee rehabilitation was dynamic in the sense that it transformed the abstract concept of the nation into living institutional and material lives.



Among the greatest rehabilitation contributions to the nation-building was the consolidation of the state authority. Refugee registration, comprehensive evaluation of claims, land and housing distribution, and compensation distribution introduced millions of displaced people to direct contact with the institutions of the new state. In these processes, the state was able to offer relief as well as legitimise itself as the main protector of rights, property and livelihood. Turning refugees into lawful citizens with legally enforceable rights strengthened the connexion between the person and the political system of the country.

The rehabilitation factor as far as the economic aspect was concerned also contributed significantly to the developmental fate of the country. Reorganisation of agricultural land in the north-west helped restore food production when the situation was at a critical shortage stage and the future of agrarian development was laid. Urban development The development of refugee colonies, markets and small-scale industries in urban centres boosted commerce and created new jobs. The displaced businesspeople, merchants and skilled labourers were now active participants in expansion in manufacturing, transport, and service industries. The state could transform a population uprooted by violence into a productive economic unit to fit the larger planning development agenda.

The spatial restructuring that came along with the resettlement of refugees also had far reaching consequences to nation-building. The establishment of new villages, townships and urban neighbourhoods changed the physical landscape of the nation and made it easier to integrate some of the former peripheral areas into the national economic systems. The rehabilitation-related infrastructure-built roads, schools, markets, and administrative offices and enhanced the institutional presence of the state and regional connectivity. These reforms covered not only short-term demands of the displaced people, but also helped in the long-term national consolidation.

### **Conclusion**

The process of refugee's rehabilitation in post-Partition India is one of the greatest and most complicated experiments in state-directed social and economic reconstruction during the twentieth century. The policies of resettlement that grew out of the acute demands of displacement and humanitarian crisis developed slowly to form a structured programme that played a direct role in the process of solidifying the Indian nation-state. The process was much more than provision of relief, it consisted of institutional mechanisms, reorganisation of the agrarian economy and the urban economy, and the radicalisation of displaced populations to become active citizens.

This paper has established that rehabilitation of refugees was a decisive factor in enhancing state power and administrative cover of the new political system. The state



proved to be the key actor in ensuring the rights, the regulation of property, and promotion of livelihood by means of registration of claims, allocation of land and housing, and distribution of compensation. These actions did not only manage to rebuild the economy of millions of displaced individuals but also enhanced their acceptance by the democratic system of the republic.

The economic effect of rehabilitation was as well of importance. The redistribution of land and the reorganisation of agricultural production in rural areas led to food security and changed the existing tendencies in agrarian power. The development of colonies of refugees, markets and small-scale industries in urban centres boosted commercial growth and generated new jobs. The innovative initiatives and focus on education by the communities of refugees helped the creation of an active middle-class that shaped the social and economic life of post-independence India.

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