

# Adaptation of A New Land After Partition in Bengal and Adaptability of the Migrants: Influence on Social, Cultural and Spatial Transformation of Kolkata

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**Abstract** - After a long and sacrificial freedom struggle, India got independence from the British colonists in 1947 and more painfully at the cost of partition of Bengal and Punjab on religious ground creating two new nations, India and Pakistan. Eastern areas of Bengal formed the east wing of Pakistan, after partition, due to impending violence, over 72% East Bengali Hindu refugees fled from their motherland, (State Statistical Bureau, 1951) chose West Bengal as safe haven to adapt for relocating themselves with no choice of returning back, because of its physical proximity and commonalities of language and religion. Long and slow processes of resettlement, and rehabilitation at state and national levels, made these forced migrants to build their new homes in Kolkata hinterland and other parts of West Bengal. Many refugee colonies of these new communities which sprang up hurriedly, but, with a futurist vision of neighborhood type of planning, not only to reside, but a self-contained environment to practice religious festivals, to educate their children, for pursuing sports, cultural activities, to make awakened citizens in a dignified way. This paper aims to study gradual transformation of the built environment in Kolkata refugee colonies responding to the need of growing population, improved economy, changing socio-cultural behavior, political ideologies, etc. from an emic standpoint in anecdotal manner. The author argues that adaptation, a two-way evolution process, where adaptability of the migrants suited themselves in new living environment for survival with the ability and willingness to adjust, to take opportunities, and to tackle new challenges, resulting an overall transformed culture and built environment.

**Keywords**— *Forced migrant, refugee colonies, neighborhood planning, adaptation*

## I INTRODUCTION

In 1947, India was declared as an independent nation, at the cost of partition of Bengal and Punjab creating another nation Pakistan. The divide and rule policy of the British colonists was based solely on religious grounds for tearing the land into two nations India and Pakistan; a majority Hindu India and a majority Muslim Pakistan with west and east wings.

Bengal was divided, the Radcliffe's line separated into two parts east and west, a hurriedly drawn international boundary on religion ground raising many controversies. The East Bengal with largely Muslim population formed the eastern wing of newly formed nation Pakistan and the western part of largely Hindu population formed West Bengal, a state in newly formed nation India. Kolkata (former

Calcutta), the first capital of the British Empire remained as the capital of newly constituted state of West Bengal. In undivided Bengal, Colonial Calcutta remained as a primate city, attracting like magnet people from the rural areas including middle-class East Bengalis as their temporary abode for education and employment. The city evolved as the most important city of country, and more importantly, as the fountainhead of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's Bengal Renaissance and the freedom movement.

The partition of land caused massive population movement as one of the largest in record of human history, affecting local as well as people migrated across the border. The major impact of the partition in West Bengal was firstly, the area reduced to 36.4% of its previous size, and secondly, the exodus of Hindu refugees from east to west Bengal to relocate themselves, arrived like waves. The first phase, during 1946 to 1949, refugees were belonging to the higher class and middle-class strata or '*bhadralok*' (gentle people), implying people from respectable background, socially distinguished and with refined lifestyle, usually but not exclusively from upper castes. They were landlords and landowners, professionals, educated, non-manual labour (Chatterjee, N., 2017), with varied degree of exposure to urban life and livelihoods (M. Roy, 2002). They chose to settle particularly adjacent to Calcutta and suburbs due to an already existing social network of friends and relatives in the city. It is estimated that, 2.55 million people arrived in first phase, and 81.2% of them chose to settle in West Bengal (GOI 1954; SSB, 1951). The displaced population caused an exponential increase of average density of the state. Kolkata grew suddenly, 27% of Kolkata's population was refugees from East Bengal (1951 Census), density raised to 88,953 psm (persons per square mile) appx. from 751.2 psm in a decade (CAI, 1738). The refugee colonies extended the city's limits of old boundaries on vacant lands, rice fields, marshy lands, ponds, lakes, jungles and gardens in the surrounding suburban areas of Kolkata.

The people who crossed the border after 1949 following the massacre of several districts of East Pakistan, were very poor and were mostly peasants, and subaltern castes (A. Basu Roy Chaudhury & I. Dey, 2009). The second wave of displaced refugees arrived during the Bangladesh war in 1971. Government of India (GOI) defined the term refugee as 'displaced' initially, later in 1970s the terms 'refugees' and

'displaced' were replaced by 'migrants' and clear line was drawn between 'old' and 'new' 'migrants'. Those who migrated between October 1946 and March 1958, were known as 'old' migrants.

This paper discusses the relocation in new land by the old migrants. The physical setting of the squatters' colonies always remained in the blur backdrop of the saga of refugees in the scholarly studies. This study attempts to project the physical planning in the foreground on which the uprooted lives replanted their dreams, and transformed over time till date. The exploration was confined geographically in existing refugee or squatters' colonies of 1950 sprung up in south Kolkata. The facts were collected from interactions with residents, scholarly literature, and experiences of the author.

The most painful feeling of partition-refugee was the realization of becoming Hindu vulnerable and unwanted minority in their own homeland which was divided and turned to a new Muslim country overnight, at the same time, the identity of refugee in their own land making them as stranger. For relocation in adapted land in West Bengal, the partition-refugee faced various challenges, confronted locals, and needed adjustments and adaptability for everything. The refugee movement in the 50s was not solely of losses, instead could be considered as a history of success of winning over all odds to emerge as powerful citizens of a new state and nation. Hence, it is an attempt to narrate - How did they find a new home?

## II ADAPTATION & ADAPTABILITY

Migration and refugees are not interchangeable words; rather refugees are the migrants in outside their own country with specific status. At international level, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), a UN agency is mandated to aid and protect refugees since 1950. The first Refugee Convention in 1951, addressed the refugee crisis and defined refugee as a person who has fled his/her country owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself/ herself the protection of that country. This international legal framework for protection of refugees published in 1951, after the crisis of partition, and also was inadequate to resolve the issue in India.

Adaptation implies the dynamic and reciprocal evolutionary process of species including humans that transform their fitness to suit themselves and modify their surroundings to maximize chances of survival. Migration as an adaptation strategy to cope hostile situation, witnessed throughout in history. Relocation process in adapted land was a two-way adjustment for partition-refugees as well as for the local people, resulting in environmental modification and transformation through assimilation.

Adaptability is the ability or willingness to change or suit oneself, to adjust or to cope with different conditions. This implies to skills, qualities and attitudes of individuals or communities to take opportunities, to deal with challenges and to make adjustments to suit in particular environment and make a foreseeable future.

## III THE GENESIS OF REFUGEE COLONIES

Starting the life afresh in an alien land after partition was full of hurdles. The Partition after long anti-colonial struggle led to a complicated and sustained sense of displacement for the uprooted forced migrants of no choice to return. What remained with them was the nostalgia and memories which they left behind, a land of abundance, as well as loss and agony of displacement, while resettling themselves.

Major struggle remained at the government level, with exclusion and inclusion criteria of recognizing refugees for resettlement and rehabilitation. At the same time, the migrants, dissatisfied with the government's inadequate efforts of rehabilitation, decided to take initiatives for self-rehabilitation to fulfill urgent need of a roof for survival. The favourable facts as unity of mass migrants and camaraderie were the strength, witnessed in the struggle in unfavourable situations.

These circumstances led to an organized and illegal squatting on forcibly acquired vacant land, owned by government or private landowners within a night. These settlements were known as '*jabardakhal*' (forceful occupation of land) squatters' colonies, mostly emerged between 1949 and 1950 in the southern outskirts of Kolkata. It is claimed in some references that, the formation of squatters' colonies was made possible due to the verbal permission received from both federal and provincial governments, hence, cannot be called as '*jabardakhal*' or illegal. In 1951, there were 150 squatters' colonies in Kolkata Metropolitan District (S. Chattaraj, 2003), out of which 40 colonies established Kolkata in the south (*Tollygunj, Jadavpur*), in west (*Behala*) and in east (*Kasba*) (P. Chaudhury, 1983). These colonies were named after the names of freedom fighters and martyrs as *Gandhi, Baghajatin, Netajinagar, Shahidnagar, Surjanagar* and might be an attempt to pay homage to departed leaders and also to legitimize their 'illegal' actions through popular nationalism and self-help.

The squatters' colonies resulted in beginning of a prolonged conflict between the local people who did not suffer the loss of homeland and the forced migrants for whom the loss was perhaps too heavy. Local citizens were less receptive to the growing influx of refugees, regarding them as 'intruders' in spite of their deep-rooted Bengali commonalities in culture, history, language, religion, traditions, and collective involvement in nationalist struggle. The cultural differences witnessed in the first generation after partition in behaviour of the so-called 'urbane' society of Kolkata and west Bengalis or '*Ghatis*' ridiculing the east Bengalis or '*Bangals*' for their dialect, custom and everything as rustic and unsophisticated.

The local landlords, tried to evict the squatters but failed, finally losing their lands to the permanent partition-migrants. With uncertain legal right of land and almost certain of not able to return to the East Pakistan and without any government aid, the refugees settled themselves without the basic amenities as water, sanitation and electricity. After partition, many East Bengali patriotic freedom fighters and supporters of Congress party became refugee and stranger in their own country. They needed to build up a strong opposition against the Congress government to claim the rights and relief and to resolve problems faced by them. Left-

wing political organizations were fervent supporter of self-settlement squatters' colonies and mobilized their protests uniting people. Many independent refugee colonies formed by leadership of these political organizations and repeated clashes and conflicts between them continued for long.

There was a strong reason for the upper and middle class educated people not to choose for settling in the refugee camps mainly of their dignity and to avoid social stigma to be classified as refugee. Majority of them preferred to relocate themselves in refugee colonies. The progress of these colonies is described in narratives and in newspaper reports as "in one generation, through sheer hard work these colonies have become more prosperous areas with one to three storey brick and concrete structures neatly maintained, despite the high density due to the small plots", south Kolkata Bijaygarh, (first self-settlement colony) as "modern version of a self-supporting village republic", quote of Nehru as saying "it is better if the refugees begin to do something on a cooperative basis.." (S. Chattaraj, 2003). The refugees contributed profoundly to the progress and prosperity of their adapted country.

#### IV OVERNIGHT URBANIZATION

This section is the anecdotal description of the author, experienced while brought up in *Netajinagar*, one of the colonies. Information culled from a wide array of resources namely memoirs, oral interviews, documents, reports, novels and memories.

Kolkata was polarized as north for *Ghatias* and south for *Bangals*, but the refugee resettlement in Bengal helped in breaking class and caste differences to a great extent. With uncertain legal right of land and without any infrastructure and money, middle-class refugees had no option to subdivide forcibly occupied land to build their new homes for a decent life. With no exposure of settlement planning, most of the refugee colonies adapted basic sectoral urban planning concept, similar to the neighbourhood unit planning, composed of several wards with plots and with basic facilities as schools, markets, religious places and play grounds. Majority of these people were belonging to a rural agrarian community, unexpectedly, needed to adapt a new urban lifestyle in the squatters' settlements very near to the largest urban center in the country. The new home is not only a shelter, but a self-contained environment to practice religious festivals, to educate their children, for pursuing sports, cultural activities, to make awakened citizens in a dignified way.

The roads were laid with basic two hierarchies as wider thoroughfares and narrow inner access roads. The thoroughfares sometimes were aligned with meandering existing track from nearest main roads with bus routes, and connected surrounding areas. The narrow internal access lanes along which individual plots were located, found both orthogonal as well as meandering alignment from the thoroughfares, mostly, both ends connected with other roads and few with dead-ended ones. The width of access road varied, the narrower ones had just sufficient width for cycle-rickshaws to cross in both directions, as most of the people walked to go to schools, markets, bus-stands and other regular places, and used cycles for travelling longer distances

like nearest railway stations, tram-depot and working places etc. The roads were usually flanked by open drains on both sides to dispose waste water from the adjacent plots.

Each ward was sub-divided into plots of standard sizes, measuring approximately of 3 to 4 *kathas* (1 *katha* is appx. 720 sft) or sometimes as per family sizes, and were allotted amongst refugee families on a first come-first served basis in exchange of a token rent (sometimes as Rs. 10 for few colony).

Once, fairly settled, administrative skill of the refugees was shown in formation of local colony committees of elected and self-appointed members. The committee collected subscriptions from residents and formed voluntary labour groups for infrastructural development as clearing and leveling of land, laying out of roads, drains and latrines, plot configurations, allotments of plots, settling disputes and fighting for the right of ownership of the land. Gradually, the city authority recognized these squatters' colonies acknowledging their success as 'self-help' housing solution in the context of inadequate resettlement and rehabilitation programmes of government.

#### V CASE STUDY: NETAJINAGAR

The flood prone area near Adi Ganga, originally was fallow land with tall grasses with foxes and wild cats. The area was owned by Hindu landlord, also inhabited by Christian Missionaries and Muslim communities. Few pucca houses and hutments (some of Muslim communities who were displaced due to squatting) and tube wells existed. Already a bus route existed with two or three buses plying daily to city center and Howrah station.

The date of establishment is claimed as 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950, the acquisition used to happen by the mass in the night time. Roads and plots (average size of 3 *kathas*) were laid, and shacks were erected overnight before the landlord and police reached to evict. People from varied places and diverse set of background arrived to get a plot through a network as from same district or village in East Bengal, groups of families from same district and village were flocked in a single ward, and there were many tussles about several issues. Majority of them, came from middle-class with some urban exposure.

The colony committee formed under the leadership of handful men of recognition mostly, teachers and lawyers to resolve land disputes, infrastructure development, to help during emergency, etc. Plots were allotted with payment of Rs. 15, and the family was required to erect a room and a kitchen at their own risk. Roads were raised from the excavated soil from the drains along the sides of the roads, residents constructed even at night in kerosene lamp. Many Ponds were excavated to raise the plinth of the houses, labourers from Canning and Sundarbans areas were hired for these works. Shallow tube wells (16 to 20 feet deep) in individual plots were dug by owners for daily use and common deep tube-wells (80 feet deep) were excavated by colony committee for drinking water at road junctions within the wards. Plots for schools (primary, separate boys' and girls' secondary schools), market, religious place as *Harisabha* and play grounds were allotted, and most uniquely, plots for clubs for nurturing cultural development were provided. There were many ponds, which were used for



bathing, washing and even for fishing. Few ponds had ghat of brick and cement steps, were used for various rituals and for emersion of idols. The open drainage network along both side of the roads was for disposal of household waste water, whereas, each plot had individual septic tank built by the owner. Initially, no electricity was available, but in few years, it was provided. Gradually, since 1960s, brick and concrete permanent houses were replacing the initial bamboo-trellis / *hogla*-leave walls with clay tiled / tin roofed houses. Boundary walls and division of plots divided again, with the growing need of families.

Traditional practices and left-wing attitudes simultaneously blended, overlapped or existed separately. The women-folks visited each other's house for talking various issues, old folks captured in the reminiscences of their east Bengal homes, children playing around with neighbours, men and women interacting on roadsides, veranda steps or *rak*, near common tube-wells and ghats of pond, regular fights in family and with neighbours were the daily scenes made neighbourhoods or paras alive. Political rallies chanting slogans, morning processions of school children on special days singing patriotic songs were the days. Neighbourhood clubs emerged with regular staging of plays, cultural competitions and performances, having public library and indoor games, hosting football (Bengal's favourite sport) tournaments in colony play grounds and celebrating Durga puja and other religious festivals. It is also believed by few old residents that, Rabindranath Tagore's writings helped to consolidate the unity and argued that the people of East Bengal embraced and nurtured more than people of west Bengal.

1970s witnessed several events, developments, and challenges through which the area became at par with other parts of Kolkata, losing the identity as refugee colony. Firstly, the political violence of Naxal extremists, and Bangladesh war coupled with arrival of new refugees, adversely affected the lives and development. Secondly, government's decision for infrastructure development of colonies, which was undertaken by CMDA (Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority, now KMDA) by construction of metalled roads, underground drainage system, lamp posts in all lanes, piped water supply, and new building for primary schools. In 1989, residents were given legal ownership of their land with 99 years lease, and in 1999, given the right to sell their land (M. Roy, 2002). Real-estate developers entered and tall ownership apartment buildings started taking place of houses of single extended families, new people moved in from different parts of India and becoming a 'multicultural' Indian society. With the extension of the Eastern Metropolitan bypass (E.M. Bypass) and the metro rail, the areas have become prime locations in the city. The property prices have increased exponentially, and high-rise apartments, English-medium schools, fancy restaurants and supermarkets are the witnesses of increasing affordability of the residents.

## VI CONCLUSION

The city of Kolkata grew in size with massive burden of livelihoods and physical infrastructure, but melted down in the cultural and intellectual milieu uniting the east and the west. The author argues that adaptation, a two-way evolution

process, where adaptability of the refugees suited themselves in new living environment for survival with the ability and willingness to adjust, to take opportunities, and to tackle new challenges, resulting an overall transformed culture and built environment.

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