



Partition of Bengal in 1947 and the Lives of Bengali Women

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The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the largest mass migrations in human history, and it also led to one of the bloodiest religious conflicts in recent history. The partition divided the British Indian Empire into two independent dominions: the Dominion of India, a Hindu-majority state, and the Dominion of Pakistan, a Muslim-majority state.



Figure 1 Partition of India 1947 source- Wikipedia

The partition of Bengal was a part of the Partition of India. The Bengal Province was divided along religious lines, with the western, Hindu-majority portion becoming part of India and the eastern, Muslim-majority portion becoming part of Pakistan. This division left millions of people on the wrong side of the border, and it led to widespread violence and displacement.



Figure 2 Partition of Bengal 1947 Source- JSTOR

The consequences of the Partition of India were devastating. An estimated 12-15 million people were displaced during the partition, and between 1 and 2 million people were killed. The partition also had a profound impact on the political and social landscape of the Indian subcontinent. It led to the creation of two new countries, India and Pakistan, and it also exacerbated tensions between Hindus and Muslims in both countries.

The partition of Bengal was a particularly tragic event. It led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and it also divided families and communities that had lived together for centuries. The partition of Bengal also had a profound impact on the Bengali language and culture.

The partition of Bengal in 1947 drastically altered the lives of Bengali women. People's lives were ruined on both sides of India's western and eastern borders because of the split. Bengalis from East Bengal who moved to West Bengal following Bengal's division in 1947 were later referred to as "refugees" in West Bengal. These refugees had to deal with a variety of issues. The partition of Bengal in 1947 drastically altered the lives of Bengali women. People's lives were ruined on both sides of India's western and eastern borders because of the split. Bengalis from East Bengal who moved to West Bengal following Bengal's division in 1947 were later referred to as "refugees" in West Bengal. These refugees had to deal with a variety of issues.

The gradual pace of migrations faced hindrances due to the government's rehabilitation policies. Despite the persistent influx of migrants from East Bengal for many years post-Partition, the West Bengal government found itself under mounting pressure from the Indian central government. The directive was to establish the Rehabilitation Ministry to discourage further migrations.

1. Regrettably, the execution of this process lacked consideration for the conditions and requirements of the refugees, resulting in a lackluster attempt at their rehabilitation. Following discussions, it was determined that migrants would be categorized into three groups.
2. The first group encompassed migrations occurring between October 1946 and March 1958, labelled as 'old migration.' Migrants falling within this timeframe were theoretically eligible for government aid and rehabilitation, although more than half of them did not receive any assistance.
3. The second category comprised migrations between April 1958 and December 1963, termed 'in-between migrants.' These migrants were denied both rehabilitation and financial assistance, as the government perceived their motivation to be the meager incentives offered to them to relocate to West Bengal.
4. The final category consisted of 'new migrants,' encompassing individuals who migrated from 1963 to the 1970s. They were deemed eligible for rehabilitation only if they sought employment outside the state of West Bengal; those who chose to stay were considered ineligible. These policies underscore the government's stance towards refugees, viewing them primarily as motivated by financial incentives while neglecting their genuine plight.

They resided on railway lines' pathways. Their bodies were not dressed appropriately. They had a horrific existence when they migrated to West Bengal, afraid for their lives in East Bengal. They were so impoverished that they lacked shelter, food, and even clothing. These were the people's everyday needs, for which they had nothing.

Partition was motivated by politics, while the division of Bengal was motivated by numerous violent crimes. There were greater caste difficulties and clashes between Hindus and Muslims in East Bengal during the time. Bengal has numerous oppressed people, rape-mongering, and land tenure issues after partition in 1947.

Lower-class individuals, particularly women, were particularly hard hit at the period. However, the women of the families that arrived to West Bengal as refugees subsequently adapted well, interacted with society, participated in numerous activities, and even became active in various political organisations.

We subsequently discover that these Bengali immigrant ladies leave the house in search of job and begin working in various locations. West Bengal's refugee women contributed to the country's economy both directly and indirectly.

But, in the end, it goes without saying that division affected the life of Bengali women for the worst. When East Bengal women arrived to West Bengal, they had a lot of effect on the upper and middle-class women in West Bengal.

After the partition, the refugee women of West Bengal had a significant influence on women in society; it is a source of pride that they were able to adjust to their new surroundings. They were involved in a variety of movements, groups, and associations.

Mrithik Ghatak's films, such as "Megh Dhaka Tara" and "Mahanagar", have clearly depicted the lives of many women. These two flicks had a lasting impression on me. It is critical to understand how the women seized control of their families' lives. Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel, "The River Churning" (Epar Ganga Opar Ganga in Bengali), vividly captures the trials and tribulations faced by women during the partition. This poignant work provides a nuanced perspective on the experiences of women amidst the division, offering a deeply human exploration of their challenges and resilience. "Mahanagar" featuring the talented Madhabi Mukherjee unfolds in the 1950s, a critical juncture when women in Bengal were gradually stepping into the public sphere as primary breadwinners for their families. Mukherjee's portrayal of a refugee woman in "Mahanagar" not only captures the character's personal journey but also serves as a reflection of the broader societal shifts occurring during that era. The audience witnesses the evolving roles of women, their resilience, and the challenges they faced in navigating a changing socio-economic landscape.

Various historians can teach us about the arrival of refugees in West Bengal. However, the challenges and hardships of migrants from East Bengal or West Bengal were not immediately addressed. It is true that the unfortunate scenario in Bengal was caused by the state government of Bengal. At the time, the state administration made little effort to address the issue of Bengali refugees.

Because of this condition, these new refugee women in West Bengal experienced a variety of challenges; yet refugee women in Bengal eventually transformed into Bengali domestic women who make a living for their family. As they begin to earn, they adjust to the new society for the family and pursue various occupations. They even took part in numerous campaigns to affect Bengali society's culture.

Historians frequently illustrated how women were oppressed, exploited, raped, and ignored in society while discussing women, but more significantly, how the women of this Bengali community responded to these problems.

It was these refugee women who demonstrated that they were enjoying their lives in the new women's movement when they arrived in a new area and adapted to various conditions, which eventually profoundly transformed and restored Bengali women's social lives.

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