

# Forgotten Promise: Nehru and the Bengali Refugee

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**Abstract:** This is an attempt to understand the partition of Bengal, 1947, in the context of migration and rehabilitation of the partition refugee from East Bengal. It analyzed the political overview of the Central government of Jawaharlal Nehru and other political leaders about Bengali Hindu refugee from East-Bengal. This paper focuses on the reaction of the Government of India especially the prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru to the Bengali Hindu refugee in the eastern border. There is no doubt that in those days Nehru was the main moving force behind every decision and policy adopted by the Government of India. We can see that Nehru's view on the Bengali Hindu refugee problem had changed in time. He was gradually making distance from East-Pakistan's Refugee problem. There are several personal and official letters and documents which can prove this type of inhuman behavior from our popular leaders.

**Keywords:** Refugee, Minority, Exodus.

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Partition of Indian Sub-continent between India and Pakistan in 1947 created one of the world's largest migration problems. Punjab in the north-west and Bengal in the eastern border was the main epicentre of this migration problem. Though the scale of violence was very high in the western border but situation was under control within one or two years. But in the eastern border it remains a ceaseless process.<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses only the migration problem of eastern border, more specifically the problem of West Bengal. Bengali Hindu refugee who migrated to West Bengal from East Pakistan on and from 1946-47 to 1970 is main concern of this paper. Though the migration of the Bengali Hindu still going on, but government of India declined to admit them as refugee who comes to India after 1971.<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses on the reaction of the Government of India especially the prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru to the Bengali Hindu refugee in the eastern border. There is no doubt that in those days Nehru was the main moving force behind every decision and policy adopted by the Government of India. We can see that Nehru's view on the Bengali Hindu refugee problem had changed in time. He was gradually making distance from East-Pakistan's Refugee problem.

Being influenced by primary emotion and excitement of freedom Indian leaders invited cordially the refugees from Pakistan. Gandhiji promised in a prayer meeting in Delhi on 16th July 1947 that- "*There is the problem of those who fear, imaginary or real, will have to leave their own homes in Pakistan. If hindrances are created in their daily work or movement or if they are treated as foreigner in their own land, then they will not be able to stay there. In that case the duty of the adjoining province on this side of the border will be to accept them with both arms and extended to them all legitimate opportunities. They should be made to feel that they have not come to an alien land*".<sup>3</sup> Nehru in his famous dialogue in the eve of the partition promised- "*.....we think also of our brother and sister who has been cut-off from us by political boundaries and who unhappy can-not share at present in the freedom that has come. They are of us and remain of us whatever may happen, and we shall be sharers in their good of ill fortune alike.....*"<sup>4</sup>

But when the refugee started pouring in thousands our leadership obviously forgets the generous promise to the minorities on the other side of the border. There is no doubt that both governments in the state and in the centre were failed to anticipate the hard reality of this problem. The Bengali Hindu refugee started to take shelter in the bordering districts of the West Bengal from time of Noakhali Riots (June-July 1946). This migration reached to 26 lakh before 1948. This huge

number of refugees made the Indian leader scared. Nehru and his government forgot their promise and started to discourage those refugees who were coming from East Pakistan to save their life and honor. In his letter to Bidhan Chandra Roy, C.M of West Bengal Nehru told- "I realize your difficulties and naturally we should do what we can to help you.....there is no reasonable solution of this problem if there is a large influx from East Bengal. That is why I have been terrible anxious throughout to prevent this, whatever might happen.....every effort should be made to prevent it."<sup>5</sup>

This U-turn of Nehru's approach towards the partition refugee specifically Bengali refugee was representing the approach of the most of the congress leaders. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy was very sympathetic to the Bengali refugee problem. In his letter to Nehru Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy repeatedly informed the catastrophic situation of Bengal and seeking financial help. In response to Roy's letter Nehru wrote- "*I have been quite certain right from the beginning that everything should be done to prevent Hindus in East Bengal from migration to west Bengal. If that happened on a mass scale it would be a disaster of the first magnitude. Running away is never a solution to a problem. I think the Hindu leaders of East Bengal who have come away have done no service to their people. If, as you suggest, things are gone too far already, then naturally we shall all do what we can, but I shudder at the prospect and at the magnitude of the human misery that will come in its train. To the last I shall try to check migration even if there is a war*"<sup>6</sup>

Nehru himself convinced that the condition in East Bengal did not constitute a grave and permanent danger to Hindu minorities. He regarded their westward flight as the product of largely imaginary fears and baseless rumours, not the consequence of palpable threats to Hindu life, limb and property. Long after the exodus from the east had begun, Nehru continued to delude himself that it could be halted, even reversed, provided government in Dacca could somehow be persuaded to deploy 'psychological measures' and restore confidence among the Hindu minorities who were leaving in droves<sup>7</sup>

N.V.K.B.P (Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parisad) was founded on 1948. According to the decision taken in the Parisad's conference a three member delegation of Amritalal Chatterjee, Mahadeb Bhattacharjee and Nagen Das attended The Jaipur session (1948) of A.I.C.C. and submitted a memorandum to Nehru. Nehru refuses to receive the memorandum and advised that the Parisad's representative had better talk to the foreign bureau of the A.I.C.C. as the refugees were all foreigners. Neheru's proposal stunned everybody and karma Parisad convinced that there is no other way but to take the way of protest and agitation. Now it is clear that between 1946 and 1949 the sense of brotherhood was vanished and the refugee from his own country remains as foreigner. Historian Jadunath Sakar warned the government in a conference of East Bengal Refugee at the University Institute Hall. In his Presidential address Sir Jadunath sarkar said -".....It is for your own good. Oh ye, men now in possession in our ministry, University and professions, do not be alarmed about losing your personal gains, about sharing what you have captured by manipulating the electorate or political jobbery. Admit this infusion of new blood or else you will die and your children will have no future. Those who are leaving East Bengal are the very best portion of the local population, in brain, wealth, organizing capacity and indomitable spirit....."<sup>7</sup> Another Historian D. R.C. Majumder also in his speech in the same conference alleged that no authority has done anything to solve the problem of the East Bengali refugee in true manner. He also regretted that the leaders have no sympathy to the Bengali refugee. He suggests a non-official commission should appoint to guide the rehabilitation work for the Bengali refugee from East Pakistan.

In the beginning of 1950 communal disturbance spread over some districts of East-Bengal ably supported by the East Pakistani authorities. Khulna, Rajsahi, Dacca, Brisal, Faridpur was worse affected. Thousands of Hindu started to cross the border for India and the biggest exodus of Hindu from East Pakistan began. The exodus of 1950 brought the administrative machinery of West Bengal almost cracked. It was impossible to state government to face such a mass of refugee in a short time. Mohanlal Saxena was central Rehabilitation minister in that time. West Punjab's refugee was the main concern of Indian government. Entire responsibility of the Eastern Border refugee was given to only a joint commissioner. In such a situation it became imperative for the government of India to act. The central rehabilitation commissioner Mohanlal Saxena came to Calcutta and held a meeting on 2nd march 1950 in Writers building. Representative of West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, Bihar and Orissa governments were invited. Reputed scientist Dr. Meghnath Saha also was present in this meeting. Mr. Saxena made it clear that this meeting is to convey the decision of the central government regarding the refugee from East Pakistan. He said that Central Government's effort will spent only in the relief not on the rehabilitation of the new refugee. Government will arrange temporary relief camps for the refugee.

No permanent accommodation will provide because those who had left East Bengal for fear of their lives would soon return to their homes as soon as peace was restored. The question of rehabilitation therefore did not arrive. The influx had come with the suddenness of a summer storm and no one had any idea as yet of its ravages. So there could be no plan for rehabilitation at the moment Dr. Meghnad Saha was very sympathetic to the problem of the refugee, he protested in this meeting and reminded Mr. Saxsena that our leaders promised to the minority Hindus of the Pakistan that they will be treated like our brothers. It will be very inhumane if we forget our promised to this refugee. After a long discussion with leaders of the several states it was decided that Tripura and Orissa will received 25000 refugees each and Bihar government will accommodate 50000 refugees temporarily and more than one lakh refugee will remain in West Bengal. All the temporary camp for the relief of the Bengali refugee will be opened in the border surrounding area. Central government though that the refugee will go back to their home after the communal tension solve. Indian government still failed to anticipate the real situation or they were intentionally doing so.

Nehru started discuss with Liakat Ali, then prime minister of Pakistan, to stop the refugee influx. After a long discussion an agreement was sign with Pakistan. This pact was better known as Nehru Liakat Pact or Delhi Pact. It was decided that those people who live their country before 31st December of 1950 will regain their property and the respective government will be responsible to ensure that. Both nations agreed to take some stapes to ensure the safety of their minority population and to reduce the communal tension. But The Pakistan's government was never showed any sympathy to the refugee problem. It may also be said that minority Hindu also had no faith on the Pakistani authority. As a result an admirable number of Muslim return to West Bengal but the pact failed to re-establish faith of minority Hindu on Pakistan's administration.

Another measure was taken by introducing the passport system on 15th October 1950. Announcement of introducing the new passport system scared the Hindu minorities of East Bengal. They take this as a control on their cross border movement and speculate that they will be forced to stay in East Bengal. Thus there was a sudden increased in migration from East Bengal. Central Rehabilitation Department divided the refugees in to two categories. Those who migrated between October 1946 and 31st March 1958 are known as Old Migrant. They received some facilities for their rehabilitation by the West Bengal Act XIV of 1951. Those who migrated between 1st January 1946 and 25th March 1971 are known as 'New Migrant'.<sup>11</sup> But in between April 1958 and December 1964 who crossed the border received nothing as the government never admitted them as refugee. As per government record almost 52000 people crossed the international border from East Bengal to West Bengal. This figure is only of those people who crossed the fancy through the cheek-post and there is no record of those people who crossed to India through the 1200 mile long border. This will be near about 250000 or more. As there was a wide scale violence on the minority Hindu in the several districts in Rajsahi, Pabna etc.

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