

## Syama Prasad Mookerjee and the refugee problem of Bengal (1947-1953)

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### Abstract

The Partition of Bengal refers not only to the political division of the Bengal province under British India into East Pakistan and West Bengal and the similar partition of the Punjab province into Punjab (West Pakistan) and Punjab (India), but also social, economic and cultural aspects. Four groups of refugees settled in India after the 1947 partition and they were the Bengalis, Punjabis, Tibetans and Ceylonese Tamils. Hindu nationalists made migration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and there were various allegations against Bangladeshi migration. It never became a mainstream political issue in the state. Now the question arises why Bangladeshi migration did not become a divisive political issue in the state? The chief objective of this paper is to highlight the predicament of the minority communities in East Pakistan who were uprooted and forced to seek shelter in the Indian province of West Bengal. The present article is also an attempt to highlight the role played by Syama Prasad Mookerjee in the refugee problem in Bengal. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to explicate how Dr. Mookerjee raised his voice in favour of the refugees and their rehabilitation in Bengal.

**Keywords:** syama prasad, partition, refugee, rehabilitation, hindu mahasabha, migration, east Bengal, problem

### Introduction

The Partition of India was the partition of the British India Empire which led to the creation, on August 14, 1947 and August 15, 1947 respectively of the Sovereign states of the Dominion of Pakistan and the union of India. The partition is commonly understood as a violent territorial and political separation of peoples, their forced evictions and migration as well as communal upheavals. The partition was a great tragedy. The British, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim league must share the responsibility in some measure for the horrendous happenings during partition. Partition here not only caused the division of the Bengal province of British India into East Pakistan and West Bengal and the similar partition of the Punjab province into Punjab (West Pakistan) and East Punjab (India), India's Partition can be seen as something more than separation of communities and the creation of distinct national identities<sup>[1]</sup>. It is stated that the partition had not separated Muslims and Hindus, in the east of the sub-continent and resulted in incredible violence in the west. East Pakistan, with a total population of 42 million in 1951, contained 9 million Hindus, while West Bengal numbered 5 million Muslims amongst its population of 26 million<sup>[2]</sup>. But partition had not been accompanied by widespread disturbances in Bengal; it had left the minority with a feeling of insecurity which was aggravated by the inefficiency of the administrations on each side of the border. Refugees<sup>[3]</sup>. Belong to the mainstream of history rather than the margins. Refugees might flee in order to save their life but was deliberately targeted, expelled or transferred by the state. The *Hindu Mahasabha* approached the refugee problem in a realistic and radically different way; for, its solution will be in keeping with its ideal of *Hindu-Rashtra* it regards Bharat preeminently as the 'National Home' of the Hindus. According to Nehru, 1600000 East Bengalis had migrated from East to West Bengal in the period after partition; it had not completely stopped before the fresh wave in 1950<sup>[4]</sup>.

In the early months of 1950, when serious riots engulfed certain areas of Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna and parts of Rajshahi and Barisal, the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, made a comment in Parliament about the grim East Bengal tragedy<sup>[5]</sup>. In March, Dr P. C. Ghosh, a member of the Congress Working Committee, visited Dacca and made an opinion that there is no sense of security in the minds of the Hindus. The greatest scare has been caused by attacks resulting in deaths in the railway trains<sup>[6]</sup>. By end of March 1950, over 250000 refugees had entered West Bengal by air, river and land routes since the disturbances started in December, while special steamers were requisitioned by Dr B. C. Ray, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, to bring stranded East Bengal refugees from Barisal, Khulna and Chandpur.<sup>[7]</sup> In this respect *Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported that 'people from villages in districts like Dacca, Rangpur, Mymensingh etc saw that large scale movement of Hindus have started. -----Village *kavirajs*, day-labourers, *namasudras*, *santhals*, carpenters-in fact every Hindus in Eastern Pakistan is trying to move out<sup>[8]</sup>.

The number of Hindus including Sikhs left behind in West Pakistan was near about 1 crore-about 8 lakhs in Punjab, about 15 lakhs in Sind and about 5 lakhs in N. W. F. P, Baluchistan and Kalat and Swat. They owned much of the business and urban property in all these areas. The city of Lahore proper had a majority of Hindus who owned more than 80 per cent of its business and property According to the criteria laid down for the guidance of Radcliffe Commission<sup>[9(a)]</sup>. Lahore should have been surely awarded to India. But the Commission gave it to Pakistan on the plea that Calcutta was being awarded to India. Calcutta had to remain with India because it was surrounded on all sides by Hindu majority areas of Bengal.

It may also be noted that the Hindus who dominated the economic and cultural life numbered over 13 million and constituted 30 per cent of the total population of East Bengal

at the time of partition. They owned nearly 80 per cent of the national wealth of East Bengal. They owned most of the urban property and organized and financed 95 per cent of the 1290 high schools and 47 colleges of East Bengal and 90 per cent of teachers from University to high schools came out of them. There were so many centres of Sanskrit learning spread all over East Bengal. This population of 13 million included a very numerous and progressive middle class and a very active and virile rural population of *Namsudras*. It can be mentioned that the Hindus there were half a million Buddhists who lived in the Chittagong hill tract. They too were, to a man, opposed to partition <sup>[10]</sup>. The *Hindu Mahasabha* cannot too strongly condemn the callous, but willful, indifference shown to the refugees by the present Government of Bharat who wants to stop the influx of Hindus from Pakistan-now particular from East Bengal.

In regard to the partition Dr. B. R. Ambedkar <sup>[11]</sup>. Had clearly pointed out that exchanges of population will be the logical corollary of Partition and had given a detailed procedure to bring it about in five years. The Congress leadership accepted the partition but refused to accept its logical corollary of exchange of population. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee(1901-1953) <sup>[12]</sup>. Also did not think of it at that time. But Master Tara Singh and other Hindu leaders of Punjab, who had a better insight into the Muslim mind and who had got a foretaste of what was in store for them in Pakistan in the Rawalpindi massacre of March, 1947, were wise enough not to depend upon the assurances of Congress leaders about their safety in Pakistan after they had accepted partition over their head. As a beginning, within a few months of the partition virtual exchange of population took place between East Punjab and West Punjab. It is a legacy that still haunts India and Pakistan in different and painful ways. In this situation the Hindus lost property worth hundreds of cores of rupees and about one million people lost their lives on both sides. But it saved the suffering Hindus of West Pakistan from the process of slow annihilation like cats and dogs at the hands of the Muslim rulers of Pakistan.

Nehru and Liaquat Ali began their talks and on 8 April 1950 they signed the agreement which became known as the Delhi Pact. Meanwhile both Nehru and Patel were trying to persuade Dr. Mookherjee to reconsider his resignation in the larger interests of the country, but without success, and on 19 April, 1950 he attempted to justify his stand before Parliament. Dr. S. P. Mookherjee in his historic statement before the Parliament on 19 April, 1950, on his resignation, further argues why he was unable to support the recent Nehru-Liaquat Agreement or Delhi Pact because:

1. We had two such Agreements since partition for solving the Bengal problem and they were violated by Pakistan without any remedy open to us. Any Agreement which has no sanction will not offer any solution.
2. This events have proved that Hindus cannot live in East Bengal on the assurances of security given by Pakistan.
3. Hindus will continue to come away in large numbers and those who have come will not be prepared to go back. On the other hand, Muslims who had gone away will now return and in our determination to implement the Agreement Muslims will not leave India.
4. India and Pakistan are made to appear equally guilty, while Pakistan was clearly the aggressor. The Agreement provides that no propaganda will be permitted against the

territorial integrity of the two centres and there will be no incitement to war between them.

5. In the grab of protecting minorities in India, the Agreement has reopened the problem of Muslim minority in India, thus seeking to review those disruptive forces that created Pakistan itself etc <sup>[13]</sup>. At the public meeting in Calcutta, Dr. Mookerjee renewed his attack on the Delhi Pact and proposed that, if Pakistan continued to deny her Hindu minority its rights, India should demand an exchange of population and property at governmental level on a regional basis, comprising East Bengal on the one hand, and West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and parts of Bihar on the other <sup>[14]</sup>.

On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1950, Dr. Mookerjee presided over an All-Bengal Refugee Conference at the Calcutta University Institute. In this meeting he placed before the house an account of instances of persecution of Hindus in East Bengal just for the month of May 1950. The following table refers to the instances of persecution of Hindus as below

**Table 1**

Murder	32
Kidnapping/ Abduction	23
Rape	5
Disappearance of young women	4
Public dishonor	6
Dacoity	202
Robbery	35
Theft	15
Extortion	76
Torching	16
Stabbing	56
Trespass	123
Harassment	19
Wrongful confinement	2
Desecration of Hindu Temple	16
Total	630

*Source:* Tathagata Roy, *The Life and Times of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: A Complete Biography*, Prabhat Prakashan, New Delhi, 2012, p. 276.

Till this date the official figure for Hindus who had come over to West Bengal and sought state rehabilitation was 35 Lakhs (3.5 million) but Dr. Mookerjee estimated the total number to be around 50 lakhs. He also pointed out that during this period the Law and order situation in West Bengal was totally peaceful <sup>[15]</sup>. The Bengali Muslims who had left for East Pakistan in February-March 1950 were feeling emboldened enough to return to West Bengal and reclaim their properties. As a result the economy of West Bengal was subjected to a terrible strain.

At that time Dr. Syama Prasad primarily concerned his energies in trying to rehabilitate the thousands of Hindu refugees coming from Eastern Bengal. The refugees were important not only in terms of numbers in August 1950 there were in the Indian Union some 2,521,681 displaced persons who had come since 1 January from East Pakistan <sup>[16]</sup>. But their relief camps were 28 in West Bengal, 25 in Assam and 41 in Tripura affected the surrounding regions. Dr. Mookerjee formed a national forum for his ideas at the large conference of refugee organizations which was held in Delhi at the end of July. He told reporters that it was not possible for Hindus to live in East Pakistan – only after we have

realized this fact; we can expect to find a proper solution of the problem. Figures which he gave showed that many refugees were now returning to their homes; between 9 April and 25 July, 541,251 Hindus had left India for Pakistan as compared with the 1,284,623 who had come into the country, and the outflow of Muslims-449,968 had not been much larger than the inflow – 304,255 <sup>[17]</sup>.

On 7<sup>th</sup> August 1950 Dr. Mookerjee placed three alternative proposals before the Government of India for its consideration. These proposals are as follows:

1. He could declare that Pakistan's failure to protect her Hindu citizens had destroyed the basis of partition and that India would now assume the responsibility for protecting them;
2. He could demand 1/3 of the territory of East Pakistan for the resettlement of her refugees; or
3. He could oblige Pakistan to argue to an exchange of populations in the eastern part of the sub-continent. Nehru completely ignored these alternatives that Dr. Mookerjee had posed, and did nothing <sup>[18]</sup>. As a result the Hindus of East Bengal were subjected to the worst possible plight, with no help from India forthcoming. But the pogroms continued into the Bangladesh era: 1988, 1992 and 2001 saw three distinct pogroms that brought down the Hindu percentage in Bangladesh from 29% in 1947 to about 9% in 2010 <sup>[19]</sup>.

Dr. R. C. Majumdar pointed out such bold and realistic speeches of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, his scathing criticisms of the Indian Parliament, about Nehru's indifference to the refugees of East Bengal and his appeasement policy towards Pakistan, which the Bengalis can hardly forget. However, Dr. Mookerjee's Parliamentary acumen earned him the title Lion of Parliament. On the other hand B. D. Graham remarked that Dr. Mookerjee's love of Bengal, his pride in Bengal achievements, his revulsion at the barbarity of the riots – all help to explain his attitude, but another factor, the fear of disorder, was present as well <sup>[20]</sup>. Nehru's essential failure had been his refusal to face the fact that the Indian state must stand for strong action against the national enemy, Islamic Pakistan, if it were to survive and be healthy. Graham remarked that Dr. Mookerjee was an honest and honourable politician <sup>[21]</sup>. It may be said that after Independence Mookerjee had no other issue except the refugee problem.

There can be no doubt that Dr. Mookerjee got respect from different quarters for the service he rendered to the famine and refugee affected people. The *Hindu Mahasabha* held that a complete and effective solution of the refugee problem demanded the adopting of both preventive and curative measures. It stated that the Congress worked for the destitute, 'did little' and *Hindu Mahasabha* 'did much' <sup>[22]</sup>. In this perspective, Rakhahari Chatterjee remarks that lakhs of Muslim victims of famine and Hindu refugees were saved by the efforts of Dr Mookerjee. In this connection, one Muslim League Minister of the Bengal Government said that if there were no Dr. Mookerjee then millions of Muslims would have been dead <sup>[23]</sup>. Undoubtedly, he was one of the most remarkable public figures who appeared on the Indian stage in the crucial pre-Independence and post-Independence decades of Indian history. He was a social prophet of the refugees. He was one of the greatest personalities of India who is popularly known as the *Messiah* for the refugees. We

may quote Bal Raj Madhok here: 'The people of Bengal can never forget Shyama Babu, the humanitarian, the friend of the poor, the hungry and the sickly- even through some of them may not have liked his politics' <sup>[24]</sup>.

## References

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3. A refugee is a person who is outside his or her country or habitual residence because they have suffered persecution on account of race, religion, nationality and political groups. It may be said that four groups of refugees setting in India after the partition, these groups are Bengalis, Punjabis, Tibetans and Ceylonese Tamils. For details see Website-<https://prezi.com/refugee-problem-after-1947>.
4. Dr. Rita Basu, op. cit, 95.
5. Debjani Sengupta, 101.
6. *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 1950; 4.
7. *Hindustan Standard*, 1950; 14.
8. *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 1950; 23.
9. Bal Raj Madhok, *Portrait a Martyr: Biography of Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee*, Bombay, 1969; 74.  
(a) For a detail account of the Radcliffe Commission see, Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, Routledge Curzon, London, pp. 154-170; H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divine Britain-India-Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1932-1947-1985-2004; 345-55.
10. *Ibid*, 75.
11. See BR. Ambedkar, *Thoughts on Pakistan*, Bombay: Thacker And Company Limited, 1941.
12. For details see Tathagata Roy, *The Life and Times of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: A Complete Biography*, New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, Prashanto Kumar Chatterji, *Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Indian Politics: An Account of an Outstanding Political Leader*, New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1938-1953-2010-2012.
13. Dr. Rita Basu, op. cit, 100-101.
14. *Ibid*, 102.
15. Tathagata Roy, op. cit, 276.
16. Dr. Rita Basu. Op cit, 102.
17. *Ibid*. 103.
18. *Ibid*. The following concrete suggestions shall come up for active consideration of the *Mahasabha* for affording relief to displaced Hindus—i. Imposition of a special Rehabilitation Tax on non-refugees; ii. Permanent allotment of Muslim evacuees' land and tenements to Hindu Refugees; iii. Least possible dislocation of refugees settled in urban areas; IV. Although negotiations shall be carried on with Pakistan for the recovery of Hindu asserts left there etc. For details see *Mahasabha and Its Ideals*, prepared by the Central Parliamentary Board, Akhil Bharat Hindu MAhasabha, Bharat Publications Ltd. Calcutta, December, 1950; 9(13).
19. Tathagata Roy, 277.

20. Dr. Rita Basu, op. cit, 103-104.
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22. See Dr. Rita Basu, op. cit, 66.
23. Ibid. see also Rakhahari Chatterjee, *Bekti Shyama Prasad*, published in *Swastika* (a Bengali periodical).
24. Bal Raj Madhok, op. cit, 49.