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Researching Post-Partition Resettlement and Rehabilitation in South Asia: A Historiographical Survey

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ABSTRACT

The historiography of the Partition of British India has evolved significantly from state-centered narratives of rehabilitation to more nuanced examinations of migration, displacement, and refugee resettlement. Early official accounts primarily portrayed rehabilitation policies as administrative successes, emphasizing governmental achievements in refugee relief and property redistribution. Subsequent scholarship, however, has challenged these celebratory narratives by highlighting the complexities of displacement, the uneven implementation of rehabilitation policies, and the prolonged struggles faced by refugee communities. Rather than treating cross-migration as a singular historical event, recent studies conceptualize Partition as the beginning of multiple and interconnected histories involving migration, settlement, urban transformation, institutional reconstruction, and identity formation. This review examines the existing literature on post-Partition resettlement by organizing it into three thematic areas: patterns of cross-border migration across different regions of the subcontinent; the socio-economic, cultural, and political challenges encountered by refugees during rehabilitation; and the transformative impact of refugee communities on the cities, institutions, and societies in which they resettled. Through this thematic approach, the review identifies major historiographical trends and highlights areas that continue to require scholarly attention.

Keywords: *Partition of India; Refugee Rehabilitation; Refugee Studies; Historiography; Migration Studies.*

Introduction

The Partition of British India in 1947 generated one of the largest episodes of forced migration in modern history, resulting in unprecedented demographic, political, and socio-economic transformations across South Asia. While the immediate violence and mass migrations have received considerable scholarly attention, the long-term processes of refugee rehabilitation and resettlement have emerged as an equally important field of historical inquiry. Initial accounts of post-Partition rehabilitation were largely shaped by official state narratives that celebrated administrative efficiency and portrayed rehabilitation policies as successful instruments of nation-building. These accounts generally emphasized governmental initiatives such as refugee camps, land redistribution, compensation schemes, and urban housing programmes while paying limited attention to the everyday realities experienced by displaced populations. Over the past several decades, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars of migration have challenged these official narratives by examining rehabilitation as a prolonged and contested process rather than a completed administrative exercise. Their studies reveal that cross-migration did not conclude with the physical movement of populations across newly established borders; instead, it initiated enduring struggles over livelihood, identity, citizenship, property rights, memory, and social integration. Refugees negotiated new political, economic, and cultural landscapes while simultaneously reshaping the urban and rural environments in which they settled.

The growing body of scholarship on post-Partition rehabilitation reflects diverse methodological approaches, ranging from analyses of state policies and institutional responses to oral histories and micro-historical studies that reconstruct lived experiences. This literature review synthesizes these contributions by examining three interrelated themes. The first section reviews studies on regional patterns of cross-migration throughout the former British Indian territories. The second investigates scholarship on refugee rehabilitation, resettlement, and everyday struggles during the post-Partition period. The third explores the long-term contributions of refugee communities to economic development, urban transformation, institutional reconstruction, and broader societal change. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of post-Partition rehabilitation as a dynamic and ongoing historical process.

Various studies had been produced so far with the specified subject of rehabilitation and relevant procedures. This subject has its start in the state-initiated official version that presents only the positive side of the picture.¹ This part would however study the serious works produced by academic scholars. Cross-migration was not a single-completed event, but it was an incident that triggered a series of histories revolving around two key subjects; details of dislocations and the long-term struggle of settlements, places, people, and institutions.

Post-partition dispensations have been the subject of various inquiries. Ranging from studying impacts on a particular region or locality to the subsequent dispensation meted out to those affected areas. Many works have tried to study the state policies while resettling the refugees and many have made their focus on the varying responses of the locals to the displaced persons. Lived experiences of partition are also a current trend in the historiography of partition that tried to study the everyday life of post-partition situations. By keeping all these trends, the literature review in this part would be comprised of three sections. In the first section, we look at patterns of cross-migration in the different parts of erstwhile British India. The second section explores some patterns of post-Partition struggles of the refugees, and the third section would include those studies focusing on the contribution or changes brought out.

Anwesha Sengupta in her article, 'Calcutta's Muslims after Partition' delves into detail about the plight of Muslims in the city.² Post-Partition Calcutta remained a city of intermittent violence against Muslims for years. Hindu refugees from East Bengal and Assam had brought with them the stories of horrid details of the Muslim violence against Hindus in East Bengal. Which resulted in producing the retributive sense among the right-wing organizations Rashtriya Sevak Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha in Calcutta. Subsequently, they started targeting the notable Muslims in the city. They demanded that there is no space for Muslims in Calcutta thus an exchange of population between India and East Bengal should be executed. The massive influx of non-Muslim refugees in Bengal from western Bengal also amplified that demand. As they were looking for residential accommodation. In intending so, they had to create communal antagonism further enough to create space for them. In the

¹ First monograph was penned by Khushwant Singh to draft an official version of the rehabilitation of the *sharnathies* in the east Punjab. This monograph contained the stories of how came Indian Punjab government had dispensed with refugees in the different parts of the province in an organized way. it also eulogized state role while providing livelihood to the skilled refugees according to their level of expertise. *Muhajerreem ka mamsala* refugees' books banks in east Punjab.etc

² Anwesha Sengupta, 'Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta's Muslims after Partition, in *Calcutta The Stormy Decades*, ed. Tanika Sarkar Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2014)

subsequent series of events, those Hindu migrants squatted on properties left by Muslims with the help of Mahasabha and RSS.

In the book, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*, Joya Chatterji explains that refugees from East Bengal caused dispossession within West Bengal by pushing Muslims out of their properties by using the existence of the “evacuee property” provisions of the Inter-dominion Agreements and the extra-legal but administrative impediments to reclaiming occupied properties once declared “evacuee”.³ These practices led to Muslim migration from urban to rural areas and the creation of “Muslim ghettos” and “Muslim clusters.” In another supplementary article Joya Chatterji also showed that Muslim residents in Selimpur (Calcutta) gradually lost their rights over a local graveyard in the wake of Hindu migrants’ forceful occupation over it. In her seminal article ‘Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in Partitioned West Bengal 1947-67’, she detailed the plight of leftover Muslims in Calcutta city.⁴

Siddiqui and Lala, in their co-authored research ‘*The Darzis of Metiaburj*,’ substantiated how came Muslims had lost financial space to the incoming Hindus in the city of Calcutta.⁵ With the statistical surveyed evidence, this research stated that before partition readymade garments market was phenomenally dominated by Muslim tailors and a huge majority of them had not migrated. Immediately after partition, they gradually lost that monopoly over the market to the hands of Hindus from East Bengal. Thus, it could be safely asserted that the rehabilitation of the Hindus from East Bengal was at the expense of those Bengali Muslims who had not migrated to East Bengal but were made to forcefully flee.

Working through Partition: Making a Living in the Bengal Borderlands is an explanatory work by Willem van Schendel, which considers how Partition affected working people's livelihood and labor relations.⁶ The essay focuses on the northeastern part of the subcontinent, where Partition created an international border separating East Bengal from West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. Based largely on evidence contained in “low-level” state records, the author explores how labor relations for several categories of workers in the new borderland changed during the period of the late 1940s and 1950s. Udayon Misra also sheds light on the Muslim migration from East Bengal, very after the partition due to livelihood problems.⁷

On the contrary, there is another research about the Hindu space in West Bengal in the wake of incoming Bengalis refugees from the east part. According to this study, this was also not a case of warmed welcome. In that research, Ramola Sanyal has explored the evolving hegemonic character, the Bengali refugees had adopted in the immediate course in the urban locale of the post-partition Calcutta.⁸ The writer tried to detect the struggling character adopted by those refugees from East Bengal in the urban environment of Calcutta-locating a ‘fault line’ in a post-colonial urban center. *The Plight of Dwelling: East-Bengal Refugees and*

³ Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010),

⁴ Joya Chatterji, Of graveyards and ghettos, Muslims in West Bengal, 1947-67. In Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy, (eds.) *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 222-249.

⁵ ‘The Darzis of Metiaburj’ in *Aspects of Society and Culture in Calcutta*, ed. M.K.A. Siddiqui (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1982)

⁶ *Working Through Partition: Making A Living in the Bengal Borderlands*, van Schendel, W. Published in: *Partition and post-colonial South Asia: a reader*. - Vol. 3: identities, geopolitics, reconciliations

⁷ Udayon Misra, *Burden of History: Assam and the Partition Unresolved Issues*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018)

⁸ Romola Sanyal (2009) *Contesting refugee hood: squatting as survival in post-partition Calcutta*, *Social Identities*, 15:1, 67-84, DOI: 10.1080/13504630802692937

the Struggle for Land in Kolkata, is another research, which brings the case of everyday labor of the refugees to be settled. Annemeik Prins traced the shadowed aspect of the rehabilitation of the refugees by studying their everyday coping with the situation to get their rights which State legalities had not granted them.⁹ It was the everyday effort of the refugees to get shelter by challenging the notion of state-led judicial and legislative roles, which yielded the refugee's resettlement. In this situation, refugees had to go for political action to get legalize their appropriated space. They acquire a place themselves, with the help of political actions. The people's transition from refugees to citizens gained shape through that process. Many studies on the partition of Bengal would tell us about the existence of a subterranean presence of religion as a cultural-demographic element in the making of hegemonic national ideologies.¹⁰

Rahman and Van Shendal in their co-authored research studied the Muslim migration from the northern and northeastern provinces of Bihar, Bengal, and Assam to East Bengal.¹¹ This article tells us about the long process of citizenship for the migrants in those areas. It is stated that by the imposition of the passport system in 1952, the movement of refugees from U.P. Bihar Assam, west Bengal, Tripura, and U.P was not officially regulated by the governments of both sides (Indian and Pakistan). After classifying various types of Muslim migrants, it is stated that those Muslim migrants who once moved to East Bengal came back to and settled in West Bengal borderland and other eastern parts of India and had to face local volatile challenges. The writer established the link between the communal riots in 1962 in northeast India and the Muslims fleeing to East Pakistan.

Another important study about the immigration influx in Tripura explores the wide hospitality extended by the authorities of Tripura to the refugees.¹² That study focused more on the state and central government policies to rehabilitate those refugees. The inflow of those refugees from East Bengal and Sylhet continued from 1947 to 1958. Despite the implementation of the Passport system in 1952, that flow remained continued until the late sixties. According to that study, those refugees were hailed as coreligionist and their integration was instantaneous and completed.

Sarah Ansari also explored the rehabilitation process in the wake of ethnic strife in Sindh among the Urdu-speaking migrants in Karachi and other parts of Sindh. According to the writer, that settlement was quite chaotic, because of the lack of resources and appropriate system.¹³ On the same subject of Urdu-Speaking migrants, Amtul Hasan presented a rejoinder work, *Impact of Partition: refugees in Pakistan: the struggle for Empowerment and State's Response*. In this work, the writer presented a differentiated case of Urdu-speaking migrants while settling in Sindh. The writer stated that refugees from east Punjab were assimilated in Punjab facing no major problems owing to the absence of cultural and ethnic differences. Those Punjabi migrants had not identified themselves as Muhajirs. However, in the case of Migrants for U.P, C.P Bihar and other areas in India had to face a lot of hardship while making their efforts of settling in Sindh. Those communities felt comfortable about identifying them

⁹ Annemeik Prins, 'The Plight of Dwelling East-Bengali Refugees and the Struggle for Land in Kolkata', *Refugee Watch* 43 & 44 (2014), 32-52.

¹⁰ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge South Asian Studies, Series Number 57) 1997

¹¹ Mahbubur Rahman and Willem van Schendel, 'I Am Not a Refugee': *Rethinking Partition Migration*, *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Jul., 2003), pp. 551-584

¹² Tripura book

¹³ Sarah Ansari, *Life after Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh: 1947 – 1962*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005)

as Muhajirs. They faced many problems in their settlement in the new socio-cultural settings. This identity clash is prolonged to this day. According to the writer, the political disempowerment led to creating a political vacuum, which saw the meteoric rise of MQM in the eighties. Impact of Partition: refugees in Pakistan: struggle for Empowerment and State's Response.¹⁴

The story does not end with local hostility or socio-political challenges, but it is also about the exclusive character adopted by the refugees to get settled. Ravinder Kaur explores this aspect in her study, which tells the story of Hindus, and Sikhs from the North West Frontier Province and West Punjab trying to get settle in Post-Partition Delhi.¹⁵ Kaur stated that the actual credit for their successful settlement was owed to the long-run effort they had made. According to researchers their success to the community insecurities from the locals of Delhi, different hostile elements, and negligence by state authorities. Based on the everyday life of the migrants in three resettlement colonies, her research shows Partition stands as a living theme and a point of reference for those Punjabi refugees in Delhi. The refugees' journey towards becoming 'locals' is mapped through an exploration of their coping strategies, and gradual identification with the Indian state. Ravinder Kaur also challenges narratives that represent migration as chaotic, disorderly, and hurried. Using personal and governmental narratives, she shows that the population movement-layered by multiple levels of class, caste, and gender experience was far more complicated than we popularly imagine.

Yasmeen Khan has come up with her research on the actual treatment given to refugees in the United Provinces. She stated that some western districts of the United Provinces were afflicted with the refugee problem. Her major finding is that the response of the government, and right-wing political parties in U.P was not cordial and welcoming. In the earlier phase when refugees from west Punjab were pouring into U.P., the government resisted the further arrival of those refugees by trying to seal the border of the U.P. and by taking illegal steps to stop the inward movement of those Punjabi refugees.¹⁶ In April 1948, it stopped registering refugees in this province. In the early phase of the episode, the UP government was not interested in preventing the migration of Muslims to Pakistan. But with the Nehru-Liaquat pact in 1950, that policy changed and state authorities showed concerns to prevent Muslims from migrating. It also put strict policies for the non-Muslim refugees for their settlement in U.P. Given that scenario, RSS, and Hindu Mahasabha had tried to exploit the suffering of the non-Muslim refugees to get them settled in the province. As a subsequent situation, the relationship between refugees and locals became hostile. The provincial chapter of Congress had shown communal posturing while contesting the congress policies at the center on the issue.

'The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories' by Wazira Fazila-Yaqoob Ali Zamindar, is about the displaced communities in the cities of Karachi and Delhi.¹⁷ With the help of ethnographical material, scattered stories of the people migrating to and from Karachi and Delhi with their experience of Partition. By taking these communities as her ethnographic subject, Zamindar places a potentially marginalized history at the center of her text at the heart of the narrative of nation-state creation, complicating

¹⁴ Manohar New Delhi 2006

¹⁵ Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947. Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*. (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007), 277.

¹⁶ Yasmeen Khan, The arrival impact of Partition refugees in Uttar Pradesh, 1947–52, Volume:12 *Contemporary South Asia*, December, 2003 / 12 Vol. 12; Iss. 4

¹⁷ Wazira Fazila-Yaqoob Ali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (Karachi: OUP, 2009)

any automatic or easy assumptions about Indian or Pakistani citizenship. Zamindar seems to be of the suggestive arguments that the nature of the partition is not confined to the violence and genocidal incidents rather it has some other crucial and defining features. Her book shows that bureaucratic violence has also put its role in making the helm of affairs more and more complicated for the incoming migrants from across the border and thus ultimately drawing political boundaries. On the same question of citizenship, Papaya Ghose delineated the rather prolonged course of partition-started migrations.¹⁸ Studying the migrants from Bihar in the wake of partition, she narrated their long-struggled story of further migration to West Bengal and then to East Bengal (East Pakistan) then finally to West Pakistan. She depicted the crucial politics of states, as neither state was ready to establish the actual status of their citizenship. Many Bihari refugees are still living in Bangladesh waiting for their citizenship settlement between the state of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Ian Talbot in his book has presented a comparative case study the of adjoining cities of Lahore and Amritsar.¹⁹ It is the study of the processes of resettlement in the aftermath of partition. It also sheds light on the future development of Lahore in the post-partition scenario. On the same research design, Pippa Virdee presented her comparative study of the Ludhiana and Lyallpur with far more exploration in the theoretical domain of that scholarship. Ilyas Chatha also developed his work on the Sialkot and Gujranwala keeping the locality concept in the pivot of his dissertation. The Study by Chatha has explored various aspects of the role of the migrants in the industrial development of Gujranwala and Sialkot. There were some retrospective legacies in that altered change connected with the pre-partition fabric of that locality.

Menon and Bhasin highlight the ambiguity in their path-breaking study of women's experiences during Partition: 'The choice of Punjab was obvious for personal and historical reasons both, and because it had been the site of maximum relocation and rehabilitation.'²⁰ The authors vividly describe the refugee camps and the tremendous task of rehabilitation. They find out what happened to widowed women, those whose husbands were missing or whose families could not be traced.²¹ The stories show the varying impact Partition had on women: some were shattered, while others "spread their wings". The feminist reading of Partition illustrates how women's history can be written interestingly. Menon and Bhasin have been able to capture women's voices and the quality of their lives that traditional historians have ignored or dismissed.

Another emerging insight related to the above-mentioned subject is by Tajul Islam Hashmi. In the paper 'Peasant Nationalism and the Politics of Partition: The Class-Communal Symbiosis in East Bengal,' he asserted the tension in the immediate before circumstances produced due to the large-scale upheavals unleashed by the Calcutta bloodshed.²² The impact of the Calcutta riots resulted in the production of an immense sense of confidence among the Muslim peasant classes in the east Bengal rural side-Noakhli towards Hindu Landlord,

¹⁸ Ghosh, Papiya, *Muhajirs and the Nation: Bihar in the 1940s*. (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010)

¹⁹ Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar* (Karachi: OUP, 2007)

²⁰ In a footnote, they add that they had originally wished to include West and East Bengal but after initial interviewing and discussion, they realized that 'the Bengal experience was so different that it merited a separate study.' For this reason, their book covers only Punjab. See Ritu Bhasin and Kamala Menon, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000).

²¹ Bhasin and Kamala.

²² Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, *Peasant nationalism and the politics of partition: the class-communal symbiosis in East Bengal 1940-1947; in region and partition: Bengal, Punjab and the partition of the subcontinent* edited by Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Moneylenders, bhadralok, and the lower classes. In this sub-regional variation, Muslim masses started to realize that after the exodus of non-Muslims, they would soon acquire control in their utopia of being independent. According to the writer, those post-famine areas were to be affected by the riots with the ultimate sense of liberation in the wake of the non-Muslims exodus. However, in concluding the research, Hashmi asserted the main patron of ground transformation was the elite-propelled tussles. Which led the peasant movement to the forced ousting of non-Muslims.

In a comparative study of the post-partition settlements of refugees in the west and east Punjab, Muhammad Waseem substantiated that partition led to two different processes of assimilation in both wings of Punjab.²³ He studied that, west Punjab had acquired center-stage in the politics of Pakistan. Waseem also established that various communities in both wings had reversed their ethnic profile. West Punjab continues to be ethnically conscious while eastern Punjab exhibits a strong sense of alienation with the ultimate emergence of Sikh nationalism turned militancy. In another study, the aggregate impact of partition-related migration on gender, education, and occupation structure of districts in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh is assessed. According to this study partition-related, flows resulted in an increase in literacy rates in India and a decrease in the percentage of people engaged in agriculture. In Pakistan, while incoming migrants tended to raise literacy rates, migrating Hindus and Sikhs tended to reduce total literacy. In India, the increase in people engaged in non-agricultural professions could have been instrumental in the industrialization process.²⁴

Conclusion

The historiography of post-Partition rehabilitation demonstrates a clear shift from state-centric interpretations toward more socially grounded and interdisciplinary perspectives. While official narratives largely celebrated the administrative achievements of refugee rehabilitation, subsequent scholarship has revealed the complexities, inequalities, and prolonged nature of resettlement across South Asia. Contemporary studies increasingly recognize that Partition was not merely an event of mass migration but the beginning of enduring historical processes involving displacement, adaptation, and reconstruction. The existing literature may be broadly categorized into three major strands: studies examining regional patterns of migration; analyses of refugee rehabilitation and everyday experiences; and research exploring the transformative impact of refugee communities on urban development, institutions, and local societies. Collectively, these works underscore that rehabilitation extended well beyond the provision of relief, encompassing long-term negotiations over identity, citizenship, property, employment, and belonging. Despite substantial advances in the field, important gaps remain. Comparative regional studies, city-level analyses, and investigations into the long-term institutional, economic, and cultural consequences of refugee resettlement continue to be relatively underdeveloped. Addressing these gaps would further enrich our understanding of Partition as an ongoing historical process whose effects continued to shape postcolonial societies long after the cessation of violence and migration.

²³ Mohammad Waseem, *Migration and Assimilation: A Comparative Study of Pakistani Punjab*, in, (eds) Ian Talbot & Gurharpal Singh *“Region and Partition”* (OUP 1998), 204.

²⁴ *The Partition Of India: Demographic Consequences* Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Khwaja & Atif Mian