

Refugee Influx and Its Impact in India: A Comparative Study Between West Bengal and Punjab

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ABSTRACT

India has traditionally served as a significant shelter for displaced individuals owing to its geographical closeness to numerous conflict-ridden areas. West Bengal and Punjab have had considerable refugee inflows, originating from diverse sources and within varying socio-political frameworks. The migration of refugees in India is closely linked to the subcontinent's volatile political history, especially after the Partition of India. The partition of British India into two independent nations triggered one of the most extensive mass migrations in human history, shifting millions across newly established borders. From 1947 to 2020, India had numerous significant refugee influxes, affecting the nation's demographics, economics, and social structure. Although certain parts are present in the literature, less effort has been made to thoroughly analyse the influx's various dimensions or predict its consequences. Refugee trends differ significantly by state and location. West Bengal and Punjab are notably impacted regions due to the magnitude and intensity of refugee migrations. West Bengal mostly accommodated refugees and asylum seekers from pre- and post-Partition Bangladesh, whereas Punjab sheltered individuals from post-Partition Kashmir and contemporary regions of Pakistan. The present influx mirrors historical patterns; asylum seekers from Tibet, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, as well as internally displaced individuals from Jammu and Kashmir, persist in arriving.

Keywords: Refugee, Migration, West Bengal, Punjab, Displaced, Bangladesh, Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

India holds a distinctive role within the global refugee framework. The nation accommodates a diverse array of refugees from remote regions and adjacent countries, establishing it as one of the foremost refugee-hosting countries globally. India has any legal legislation that specifies or delineates the status of refugees. The migration of refugees in India has been a significant result of the 1947 Partition and following geopolitical crises, including the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 (Bose, 2005). West Bengal and Punjab witnessed the most substantial refugee flows among Indian states, although the characteristics, magnitude, and enduring effects varied significantly. This comparative analysis underscores the disparities in historical development, socio-economic effects, and governmental responses. Technically, "Refugee" refers to someone who is forced to flee their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (Shacknove, 2017; Oberoi, 2001). The geographical coverage encompasses both West Bengal and Punjab, which have had substantial refugee influxes since independence. The two states exemplify divergent scenarios. West Bengal has accommodated a higher influx of refugees; nonetheless, its yearly budgets and per capita spending indicate a significantly lower allocation of resources for refugee administration compared to Punjab.

Historical Context of Refugee Influx into India

India persists in accommodating substantial numbers of refugees, yet the state is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, nor the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. This ambivalence also pertains to its border with Bangladesh and particularly the West Bengal province, where over fifty percent of the population may trace their ancestry to the region's historical Partition and the disintegration of East Pakistan (Chatterji, 2007; Nandy, 2017). The scale of

unlawful population influx into North India is surpassed only by that of Bangladesh. Urban locations along the Punjab axis have experienced analogous yet limited patterns of individual and cross-sectional mobility, notwithstanding the prior consistent out-migration of Punjab is to other areas (Khindo, 2017). Between 1947 and 1971, West Bengal received approximately 3.5 million refugees, while Punjab received roughly 1.6 million refugees (Nath, 2003). Between 1971 and 2001, West Bengal experienced a second influx of 0.2 million individuals. The state-level proportions of refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants were 50%, 33%, and 69% respectively for West Bengal, and 18%, 40%, and 63% for Punjab. As a result, significant disparities in governance and service provision arose. West Bengal addressed immigrants from former East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh by using a combination of legislative and executive actions, integrating certain urgent legal stipulations within the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955. State policies on refugees and other migrants were framed on the premise of high volumes of inflow and pressure on services delivered from state budgets. Punjab, as a border state, has seen a large influx of refugees but selected a policy approach from a relatively opposite vantage point. While state-level immigrant inflow in Punjab was quite significant, the corresponding share of refugees was low. Refugees arriving during Partition and thereafter classified as displaced persons acquired specific status, and were thus dealt separately from other types of immigration. A dual refugee profile remained in Punjab, pre-Partition Sikh refugees and post-Partition displaced persons yet separable. Refugee population in Punjab peaked in 1951 at 18% of total. Nevertheless, focus shifted to welfare of remaining displaced persons after repatriation of Sikh influx was completed by mid-1950s (Rai, 1968). Further, an estimated 718,000 Sikhs fled for safety during the violence in the aftermath of the Operation Bluestar in June 1984. Another influx of up to 500,000 Sikhs and non-Sikhs arrived during the period of armed militancy between 1981 and 1992. For almost a decade after this period, Punjab encountered a relative state of equilibrium, with minor movement across the international border (Talbot, 2011). Since then, Punjab has received a steady, low-level inflow of refugees, undocumented migrants, and other socio-economically weaker sections from the neighbouring states of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

Historical Trajectories and Policy Responses in West Bengal:

West Bengal has endured the consequences of refugee inflow into India during the past seventy years. Examining the historical trajectory elucidates the factors driving immigration patterns, subsequently leading to the state's policy reaction. The chronology of refugee influx delineates three notable waves. The initial phase saw Hindu immigrants fleeing from East Bengal during the tumultuous period of Partition, with the majority arriving subsequently (Samaddar, 1999; Roy, 2003). The majority of them were wealthy, aristocratic Hindu immigrants who put no pressure on the government to rehabilitate them. In order to settle in Calcutta (now Kolkata), the majority of these migrants had previously owned houses or relatives, jobs, or financial arrangements. In addition, many refugees had sought safety outside of Kolkata in areas such as Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and others (Sarkar and Kasemi, 2019; Ahmed, 2021).

The second wave comprised Hindu refugees escaping from India's eastern border owing to natural disasters, political upheaval, drought, and famine. The third wave involved the migration of Bengali Muslims following the Bangladesh Liberation War (Ranjan, 2016). A timeline of notable events and advancements offers enhanced comprehension of the circumstances. The nature of the refugee influx has evolved from a homogeneous community flow to one marked by community diversity. Political power concurrently shifted among the governing parties. In response to this shift in political power, the state's role and the resources designated for refugees experienced periodic modifications. A fundamental inquiry arising from this historical progression is whether the frequency and timing of political power transitions have influenced the character and sufficiency of the state's reaction to the refugee influx and its assimilation into West Bengal.

Historical Trajectories and Policy Responses in Punjab

Following the partition of India in 1947, the socio-political situation in the Indian state of Punjab declined. Communal rioting resulted in a substantial migration of refugees into the state from West Punjab (now in Pakistan). The refugees established themselves in camps, provisional shelters that rapidly evolved into permanent settlements, as well as in the towns and villages of Punjab (Oberoi, 2001). Approximately 2 million individuals migrated to India seeking refuge, with approximately 50% establishing residence in Punjab. The Indian government provided legal and constitutional protection, food, shelter, and other essential necessities to the refugees, as they were predominantly unskilled and uneducated. The separatist movement that afflicted Punjab during the 1980s and 1990s, partially a consequence of refugee relocation from 1947, has since diminished. The influx of refugees from West Punjab, which possessed abundant artisanal and technical expertise as well as infrastructure, contributed to the state's

development (Vakil, 1950; Fenske and Bharadwaj, 2011).

Demographic and Socioeconomic Profiles of West Bengal and Punjab

The migration of refugees in West Bengal was gradual and repeated, associated with persistent regional conflicts, while Punjab experienced a sudden and concentrated influx after Partition. West Bengal experienced an influx of refugees from East Pakistan in 1947, 1964, 1971, and the 1980s. The principal motive for the campaign was political persecution. The population growth rate in West Bengal has significantly above the national average since 1947. No state in India likely exhibits greater intrastate demographic diversity influenced by historical and geopolitical circumstances than West Bengal (Sarkar, 2017). The predominant ethnic group is Bengali, and the state has a distinctive diversity of indigenous Bengali-speaking linguistic communities, encompassing Muslim, Hindu, and Christian populations. Furthermore, the sex ratio and various socio-economic statistics of West Bengal above the national average. The agrarian economy, encompassing tea, jute, cotton textiles, leather goods, and small-scale industries, along with a harmonious integration of urban and rural economies, fisheries, health infrastructure, literacy, social well-being, absenteeism, landholding distribution, land tenure, and labour productivity, reflects the socio-economic status of a region. West Bengal possesses the largest rural population among all Indian states. The economy of West Bengal is predominantly agrarian, cantered on crops such as rice, potatoes, and jute. Agricultural techniques are mostly led by marginal farmers, with significant participation from women in the workforce. The bulk of rural households rely on agriculture, fishing, and livestock husbandry. Seventy percent of the villages in West Bengal rely on micro and small companies for their revenue. Solid waste management constitutes a significant issue. West Bengal possesses a profound cultural legacy, notable advancements in health infrastructure, increased average life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, and enhanced mother health. Elevated dropout and repetition rates in schooling necessitate urgent policy intervention (Amjad et al. 2008). Subpar air quality and a reduction in forest cover are significant environmental concerns in West Bengal. The caste system was significantly prevalent until the 1960s, but it diminished greatly subsequently. Traditional bondage, serfdom, and indenture were implemented in numerous colonies; however, insufficient rainfall, unpredictable natural events, and volatile pricing rendered this system ephemeral. The land ownership system in Bengal has undergone significant transformation due to land reforms, redistribution, and enhanced tenure security; however, further improvement is also needed. The economy is gradually transitioning towards services, yet the distribution of economic resources across rural and urban areas, as well as across castes, remains significantly unequal. Critical concerns include the generation of employment opportunities in the infrastructure and services sectors for university and technical graduates, stagnant growth in manufacturing and the organized sector, and the enhancement of sufficient skills and education at all levels.

Punjab experienced an inflow of refugees from Pakistan in 1947, 1971, and 1984. The primary impetus for the migration was religious persecution and political turmoil. Following the partition of India in 1947, the socio-political situation in the Indian state of Punjab declined. Communal rioting resulted in a substantial migration of refugees into the state from West Punjab (now part of Pakistan). The refugees established themselves in camps, provisional shelters that rapidly evolved into permanent settlements, as well as in the towns and villages of Punjab (Oberoi, 2001). An estimated 2 million individuals migrated to India seeking refuge, with approximately fifty percent establishing residence in Punjab (Talbot, 2007). The Indian government provided legal and constitutional protection, food, shelter, and other essential necessities to the refugees, as they were predominantly unskilled and uneducated. The separatist movement that afflicted Punjab during the 1980s and 1990s, partially stemming from refugee migration in 1947, has now subsided. The flood of refugees from West Punjab, which possessed abundant artisanal and technical expertise as well as infrastructure, facilitated the state's development (Fenske and Bharadwaj, 2010).

Policy Frameworks and Governance Mechanisms

Efficient administration, robust policy measures, and an emphasis on social integration are essential for addressing the refugee crisis and fostering harmonious coexistence between refugees and host communities. India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol, and lacks a national legal framework for refugee protection. The international refugee framework developed along with India's efforts to define its national identity, government structure, and legal systems. Refugee protection and management are essential topics in migration and asylum discussions. Migrants, especially refugees and asylum seekers, are subjected to regulatory measures by governments in both their countries of origin and host nations. The acknowledgment of refugee protection by states is politically delicate and pivotal in determining the designs of control regimes. India's government exhibits two

unique regulatory frameworks for refugees and asylum seekers along its northern border, while the western frontier is fortified with heightened control measures amidst vigorous support. West Bengal's welfare system is regarded as excellent among Indian states; yet, refugee migrants encounter significant policy deficiencies, and the necessity for coordination is evident in both inter-departmental transfers and discussions with other jurisdictions (Roy, 2012). West Bengal is constrained by inadequate resources and a public infrastructure burdened by a significant and prolonged influx of migrants and refugees. Historical antecedents, particularly the proactive accumulation of welfare programs from the mid-1970s, and their current adaptation to continued cross-border migration, have elicited responsive government and service delivery. State reactions to refugee influxes in Punjab and West Bengal, while dissimilar, exhibit analogous themes. After initial political participation, governments have steadily de-prioritized refugee concerns. The Punjab government redirects its focus towards youth unemployment, substance abuse, and agricultural suffering as a result of this external emphasis. Initiatives by successive administrations to allocate budgetary resources for refugee rehabilitation often stagnate after the initial year of administration (Mumtaz and Ali, 2019). A case study on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees suggests that Punjab's displacement-post-displacement framework aligns with West Bengal's temporary-relief framework (Jones, 2012).

Economic Impacts and Labor Market Dynamics

Refugees present obstacles for host nations; nevertheless, they can also provide substantial constructive contributions (Fenske and Bharadwaj, 2011). The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant population displacements in human history, affecting nearly 18 million individuals and leading to widespread atrocities. The huge eastward migration of Punjab refugees pursued safety and prompted substantial labour movements across the subcontinent, resulting in the formulation of integration programs. Refugees frequently arrive with major disparities in skills compared to the local population. In Punjab, the influx of refugees primarily consisted of uneducated Sikhs and Muslims who arrived with minimal tangible assets and considerable debts, complicating their economic integration. In contrast, the displaced population relocating to West Bengal possessed elevated educational qualifications, hence augmenting their economic contribution to the burgeoning jute industry.

In West Bengal, refugees from East Pakistan who arrived after Partition primarily engaged in economic activities utilizing skills acquired during migration, settling in pre-Partition jute-producing regions. In Punjab, forced migrants from Pakistan adopted varied economic practices; regardless of their initial occupations, some transitioned to trade and services, facilitating intra-settlement mobility and enhancing urbanization. These trends align with migration, trade, and demographic perspectives on labour-market adjustments following demand shocks (Fenske and Bharadwaj, 2010). India's strategy regarding the refugee influx demands a nuanced perspective: whereas West Bengal has accommodated both Hindus and Muslims for decades, the security dynamics in Punjab necessitate distinct responses to the influx, primarily impacting the Sikh community, despite these factors frequently being disregarded. The terrorist operations in Punjab have necessitated the establishment of specialized protocols by security services, and a cautious approach towards refugees is required (Mayilvaganan, 2019). The Border Security Force has adopted a "zero-tolerance approach" to the Sikh refugee issue, considering the persistent separatist in Punjab and the crime rate statistics that exacerbates local fears.

The refugee issue is analysed through the lens of public service delivery, focusing on education, health, housing, utilities, and public expenditure. The effects of the refugee inflow on public service infrastructure have been examined. The analysis is based on Census of India data, secondary data from other national surveys and databases, a report titled *Refugees in the Country of Their Birth*, and pertinent research papers produced by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The accessibility of this data has for a comprehensive investigation of the various factors connecting the refugee issue with public services, such as electricity connections, housing, healthcare, and educational institutions.

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Social Integration, Cultural Impacts, and Security Considerations

West Bengal and Punjab exhibit disparities in social integration, cultural influence, and security measures. While transnational migration of refugees and asylum seekers has historically presented issues to nations, such migratory patterns frequently encompass significant contextual subtleties for inter-state comparability. India serves as a notable example, having intermittently accommodated refugees since the colonial era, although it stands as the sole major democracy lacking a national refugee policy. States regulate and administer refugees variably based on their pre-existing socioeconomic situations, cultural demographics, migratory population, and levels of governmental capacity. Despite many influxes during the twentieth century, divergent state-led policies toward refugees have influenced their socioeconomic status and prospects across various Indian states. The internationally recognized principle of non-refoulement—an obligation for states to refrain from returning refugees to nations where they may encounter peril—further complicates the established evidence of informal settlements throughout several Indian states. The Austrian school of public finance highlights the relocation expenses of refugees, which hold substantial importance for international financial institutions and domestic entities seeking to fund assistance to host areas (Jones, 2012). The varied trajectory and characteristics of refugee migration into India need a comparative investigation of two unique state-level situations within the nation.

The imperative for the efficient integration of refugees in India is a prominent topic in contemporary discussions, given the rising number of refugees escaping violence and humanitarian emergencies from adjacent nations (Calvert, 2018). Since the mid-20th century, West Bengal and Punjab have each had steady influx of refugees due to the Partition of India and Pakistan, as well as the 1984 migration from Afghanistan. Despite a shared history of accommodating refugees, the two states demonstrate contrasting patterns in social cohesion—West Bengal sustains social balance, but Punjab faces increased tensions (Rehman et al., 2021). The processes of refugee generation, transmission, displacement, and resettlement, including inter-state displacement, influence demographic characteristics, economic activities, and service provision in host countries, which are crucial factors in social cohesion. The influence of refugees is contingent upon historical, socio-economic, and governance frameworks—factors that define state-specific paths and affect past, current, and future results.

In West Bengal, health-related quality of life has been consistent for over a decade, with refugees indicating just slightly lower levels than non-refugees. In Punjab, secondary school enrolment rates are inferior to those of the general population; the influx of refugees has not affected overall participation rate; however, engagement remains restricted for older, recently arrived refugees. Urban Afghan refugees encounter significant disadvantages in housing, education, healthcare, public transportation, utility access, and judicial systems. West Bengal is marked by significant integration challenges, as the government is reluctant to recognize refugee status.

Refugees represent a substantial segment of the worldwide populace, with numerous countries perceiving their presence as a potential security threat (Shacknove, 2017). Conflicts stemming from political and religious extremism, terrorism, transnational crime, and separatism intensify the situation, creating opportunities for criminal networks to thrive in remote areas. Consequently, refugees marching through the streets of the once designated territory of refugees have caused dread and panic among the local population.

A comparative analysis of refugee influx and its multifaceted effects provide significant insights. Direct experience with the influx of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan during partition, subsequent adjustments, and the 1971 civil war offers the eastern state of West Bengal reference points, albeit flawed, for assessing the later refugee influx resulting from Kashmir's ongoing separatist conflict and its effects on governance (Pandey, 2001). Conversely, the northwestern state of Punjab, plagued by militancy from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, remained indifferent to the Kashmir situation. The critical issue in both cases is the degree of alteration in demographic and socio-economic structures, as well as in the public policy landscape and governance methods in regions impacted by refugees, prior to and following the influx of extra migrants. A three-gap convergence paradigm for West Bengal is more reliant on census numbers as its primary empirical foundation than it is for Punjab. Economic and socio-cultural factors have been computationally minimized, when applicable, to provide space and distribution coefficients that not only enhance empirical validation but also prompt considerations of escape routes (Tahiliani and Cohen, 2015).

Crime and policing are essential elements of the security framework, particularly for individuals who sense a threat to their personal safety or property. A robust law enforcement presence and the efficacy of criminal justice systems bolster community safety and discourage unlawful conduct. The thought that the police may fail to safeguard one's rights or well-being is feared more than crime itself. To evade arrest,

individuals may reduce interactions with law enforcement, therefore undermining the institutions responsible for enforcing legal protections, promoting increased lawlessness, and rendering persons vulnerable to predatory conduct. The existence of national-level refugee populations imposes further pressures on law enforcement. Non-nationals may present a lesser or distinct threat compared to other elements of the polity or territory; therefore, an apparent decline in lawlessness among nationals may obscure an increase in a divergent crime portfolio among non-nationals. Urban areas with more stringent policing practices have varying levels of enforcement aimed at non-nationals, involving information collection, immigration control, and security inspections to prevent violent crime and invasion, as conducted by local authorities.

Policy Gaps, Challenges, and Opportunities

Postcolonial India exhibits a substantial migration of refugees from many neighboring and distant nations. West Bengal and Punjab have been identified as two significant states facing an influx of refugees, which has persisted as a political issue. In the post-independence period, refugee populations fleeing persecution have entered the country from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Tibet, with migration from Bangladesh becoming increasingly prominent following the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) when the nation gained independence from Pakistan. Approximately 4 million cross-border refugees are claimed to have entered India during the war in search of asylum from persecution (Oberoi, 2001). Punjab is a state where Afghan Sikhs escaping the Islamic State of Afghanistan seek asylum. During and after the Partition in 1947, refugees from the eastern regions of Pakistan, specifically the Muslim and Hindu populations, migrated to Punjab and established residence there (Singh, 2018). West Bengal has consistently served as a refuge for migrants from neighbouring countries; however, contrasting trends are evident in Punjab. Additionally, refugee migration varies concerning ethnic identity, background, and religious affiliation, revealing distinct welfare challenges associated with service deficiencies and policy concerns.

The increasing apprehensions about influx and migration jeopardize peace and stability in host nations, frequently undermining government and resulting in social and economic threats to the economy. West Bengal and Punjab provide a suitable basis for such a comparative analysis. The governance strategy is crucial in managing refugee resettlement. The West Bengal government implements a policy to facilitate the settlement of refugees from neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh, to garner the support of the Bengali community. In contrast, Punjab established itself as a welfare state by advocating for social security measures to address the rights of Afghan refugees, acknowledging the social and economic upheaval that their migration could generate under the federal government's jurisdiction.

CONCLUSION

The flood of refugees in West Bengal and Punjab has profoundly impacted the social, economic, and political landscapes of these regions. Although both underwent demographic changes and economic difficulties, the varying settings of migration influenced unique integration paths. Punjab and West Bengal experienced significant refugee influxes shortly after independence. Refugees in Punjab exhibited greater cultural and linguistic similarities with the host community, facilitating integration. In West Bengal, despite ethnic similarities, socio-economic rivalry occasionally obstructed assimilation. Refugees in Punjab also profited from structured relocation initiatives that promoted economic recovery and development. The refugees in West Bengal encountered disjointed assistance, resulting in diverse economic consequences. In addition, refugee matters in West Bengal are still politically contentious due to ongoing migration and citizenship discussions, but in Punjab, the establishment of refugee settlements was integral to nation-building initiatives following Partition, with minimal ongoing political dispute. Understanding these comparative dynamics offers valuable insights into refugee management and policy formulation in India.

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