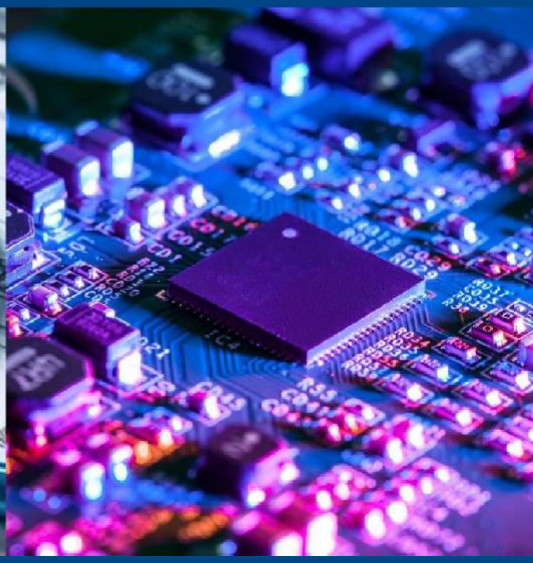
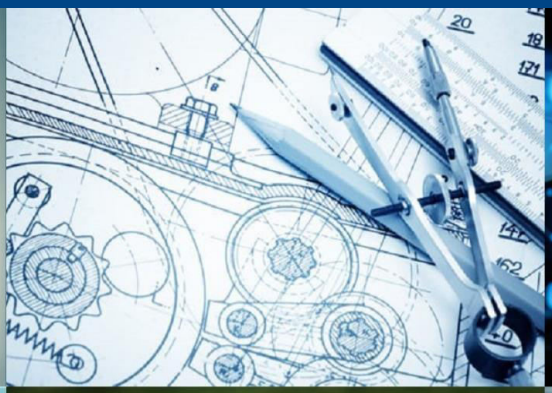
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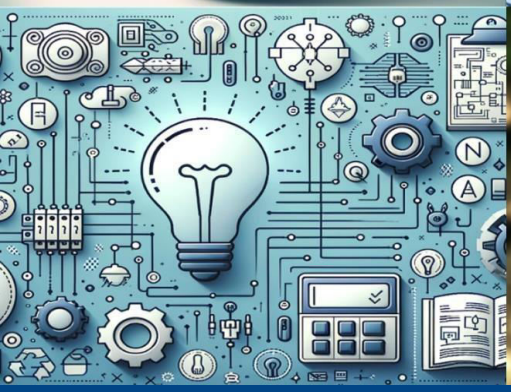




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The Role of Refugee Movements in the Political Transformation of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT: The Partition of India in 1947 brought significant political, social, economic, and demographic changes to West Bengal. The division of Bengal resulted in the large-scale displacement of people from East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) to West Bengal, creating serious challenges related to housing, employment, education, food, security, and rehabilitation. However, refugees were not merely passive victims of Partition; they gradually emerged as an important political force that influenced the political transformation of West Bengal. This study examines the role of refugee movements in shaping the political landscape of West Bengal, particularly between 1947 and 1971. It focuses on how displaced people organised themselves into collective movements to demand rehabilitation, land rights, employment opportunities, citizenship, and social justice. The study also explores the relationship between refugee organisations, political parties, and the government in the post-Partition period. Following Partition, thousands of refugees experienced inadequate government assistance and difficulties in establishing permanent settlements. Many were forced to live in temporary camps, railway stations, and overcrowded settlements. In response to these conditions, refugees began organising protests, demonstrations, public meetings, and political campaigns to demand their basic rights. Organisations such as the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), established in 1950, played an important role in mobilising displaced communities and raising their demands before the government. Refugees also established settlements on vacant land and organised collective struggles against eviction and displacement. These activities gradually transformed refugee rehabilitation from a humanitarian issue into an important political question.

KEYWORDS: Partition of Bengal, Refugee Movements, Political Transformation, West Bengal.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It resulted in the division of British India into two independent countries, India and Pakistan, and created major political, social, economic and cultural changes. Bengal was also divided into two parts: West Bengal became a part of India, while East Bengal became part of Pakistan, later known as East Pakistan. This division created widespread displacement, migration and uncertainty among millions of people. A large number of people, particularly Hindus from East Bengal, migrated to West Bengal in search of safety, shelter, employment and a better future. Many families were forced to leave their ancestral homes, land, property and traditional occupations. The arrival of these refugees created serious challenges for the newly established West Bengal government and gradually became an important issue in the state's political development. Refugee movements were not simply struggles for food, shelter and rehabilitation; they also became powerful forms of political participation that influenced public opinion, government policies and the growth of political organisations in West Bengal.

The migration of refugees from East Bengal to West Bengal did not take place at one particular moment. It continued in several phases between 1947 and 1971. The first phase began immediately after Partition, when many people crossed the newly created international border because of communal tensions, insecurity and uncertainty about their future. Further waves of migration occurred following communal violence and political disturbances in East Pakistan, particularly during 1950 and 1964. The political crisis and military repression in East Pakistan in 1971 resulted in another enormous refugee influx into West Bengal. Consequently, refugee migration became a long-term challenge rather than a temporary problem. The continuous arrival of displaced people placed considerable pressure on housing, employment, education, healthcare, transportation and other public facilities. Cities such as Calcutta and several districts near the border experienced significant demographic and social changes. The government struggled to provide adequate facilities, and many refugees were forced to live in temporary camps or establish settlements on vacant and privately owned land.

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The conditions faced by refugees gradually encouraged collective organisation and political awareness. Initially, many refugees expected the government to provide proper rehabilitation, financial assistance, employment opportunities and permanent housing. However, the limited availability of resources and the difficulties associated with government rehabilitation policies created dissatisfaction among displaced communities. Many refugees believed that they had sacrificed their homes and property because of Partition and therefore deserved support and protection from the Indian government. When their demands were not adequately addressed, they began organising meetings, demonstrations, protests and public campaigns. These activities transformed refugees from individuals seeking assistance into organised groups demanding their rights. Their struggles included demands for permanent settlement, recognition of refugee colonies, access to education, employment, healthcare and protection from eviction. Thus, refugee movements became an important part of the emerging political culture of post-Partition West Bengal. One of the important organisations associated with refugee mobilisation was the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), established in 1950 with the involvement of Communist activists and other political groups. The organisation played a significant role in bringing together refugee representatives and coordinating their demands for relief, rehabilitation and permanent settlement. It helped refugees express their grievances through organised political activities and public movements. The UCRC also supported the establishment and recognition of refugee colonies and protested against government policies that refugees considered unfair. During the 1950s, refugee organisations became increasingly active in demanding housing rights, employment opportunities and improved living conditions.

The relationship between refugee movements and left-wing politics was particularly important in the political transformation of West Bengal. Communist leaders and activists supported several refugee demands and helped organise protests against government policies. They connected refugee problems with broader issues such as economic inequality, land rights, unemployment and social justice. Many refugees found common ground with left-wing political organisations because these organisations raised questions concerning housing, workers' rights and the redistribution of resources. The Communist Party of India and other left-oriented groups gradually developed strong connections with refugee communities, particularly in urban settlements and refugee colonies. This relationship helped expand the political influence of the Left among sections of the displaced population.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to examine the role of refugee movements in shaping the political transformation of West Bengal after the Partition of India in 1947. The Partition resulted in the large-scale displacement of people from East Bengal (later East Pakistan) to West Bengal, creating serious social, economic, and political challenges. The continuous arrival of refugees influenced the demographic structure, social relationships, economic conditions, and political environment of the state. Refugees were not merely victims of displacement; they gradually became active participants in political activities, protests, demonstrations, and organised movements to demand their rights and improve their living conditions. Therefore, this study aims to understand how refugee movements developed into important political forces and contributed to changes in the political structure of West Bengal. It also seeks to examine how the experiences of displacement, insecurity, unemployment, landlessness, and difficulties in rehabilitation encouraged refugees to organise themselves and raise their voices against government policies.

Another important objective is to study the major causes behind the emergence and development of refugee movements in West Bengal between 1947 and 1971. The research aims to identify the social, economic, and political difficulties that encouraged displaced people to participate in collective movements. These difficulties included inadequate housing facilities, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, poor living conditions in refugee camps, insufficient financial assistance, and uncertainty regarding permanent settlement. The study will examine how these problems created a feeling of dissatisfaction among refugees and encouraged them to establish different organisations and associations to protect their interests. It will also investigate how refugee colonies became important centres of collective action, political discussion, and community organisation. Through this objective, the research intends to understand the relationship between displacement and political mobilisation in post-Partition West Bengal.

The study also aims to examine the role of refugee organisations and political associations in organising and strengthening refugee movements. Various organisations, including the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), played an important role in representing refugee demands and coordinating protests against government policies. The research will investigate their organisational structure, leadership, objectives, methods of protest, and political activities. It will also study how these organisations connected local refugee problems with wider political issues such as land rights, rehabilitation,

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employment, citizenship, and democratic participation. Particular attention will be given to the ways in which refugee organisations negotiated with government authorities and developed relationships with different political parties. This objective will help explain how scattered groups of displaced people gradually developed into organised political communities capable of influencing public opinion and government decisions. Another major objective is to analyse the relationship between refugee movements and the growth of left-wing politics in West Bengal. During the 1950s and 1960s, communist and other left-oriented political organisations became increasingly involved in refugee-related issues. They supported several demands concerning rehabilitation, land settlement, employment, and social justice. The study aims to understand how political parties used refugee grievances to mobilise public support and how refugee organisations influenced the political strategies of these parties. It will particularly examine the relationship between refugee movements and the Communist Party of India, as well as the changing political influence of left-wing organisations in the state. The research will also investigate whether refugee participation in political struggles contributed to weakening the popularity of the Congress government and creating favourable conditions for the growth of alternative political forces. This objective will provide a deeper understanding of the connection between refugee mobilisation and the development of left politics in West Bengal.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study, entitled "The Role of Refugee Movements in the Political Transformation of West Bengal," adopts a historical and qualitative research methodology to examine the influence of refugee movements on the political, social and administrative development of West Bengal after the Partition of India in 1947. The study mainly focuses on the period from 1947 to 1971, when large numbers of people migrated from East Bengal (later East Pakistan) to West Bengal due to Partition, communal violence, political uncertainty and economic difficulties. The research attempts to understand how refugees gradually moved from being displaced and vulnerable communities to becoming politically active groups that influenced government policies, political parties, public protests and popular movements. A historical research approach is suitable for this study because it helps examine the relationship between past events, political developments and social changes over a particular period. The study investigates not only the problems faced by refugees but also their participation in political activities, collective organisations, demonstrations, land movements and struggles for rehabilitation and citizenship.

The research is primarily based on secondary sources, supported by the examination of available primary historical materials. Secondary sources include books, research articles, academic journals, published historical documents, doctoral theses, government publications and reports written by historians and social scientists. These sources provide important information about the Partition of Bengal, refugee migration, rehabilitation policies, political organisations and the changing political situation in West Bengal. The works of historians such as Joya Chatterji, Uditi Sen and other scholars of Bengal's Partition history are particularly useful for understanding the relationship between refugee communities and the postcolonial state. Their studies provide insights into migration, citizenship, rehabilitation, political identity and the experiences of displaced people. The research also examines existing studies on refugee movements to identify important historical developments and understand how refugee activism became connected with broader political movements in West Bengal. Primary sources form another important part of the research methodology because they help establish a direct connection with the historical experiences and political activities of refugees. These sources may include government records, legislative assembly debates, official correspondence, rehabilitation department reports, census publications, administrative documents, contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, political leaflets and organisational records. Relevant archival materials from the West Bengal State Archives and other accessible historical collections can be examined to understand government responses to refugee demands and the political reactions of different organisations. Newspapers published during the period are also valuable sources because they provide information about refugee demonstrations, public meetings, political speeches, protests, land occupations and debates concerning rehabilitation. Newspapers and contemporary publications will be studied critically because their reporting may reflect the political views and interests of particular organisations or groups. Wherever possible, information from newspapers will be compared with official documents and independent historical studies to improve the reliability of the research.

The study gives special attention to the historical background of refugee migration following the Partition of Bengal in 1947. It examines the circumstances that forced people to leave their homes in East Bengal and settle in different parts of West Bengal. The research considers the major causes of migration, including communal tensions, insecurity, loss of property, economic difficulties and uncertainty about citizenship and political identity. It also examines the different experiences of refugees belonging to various social and economic backgrounds. Particular attention will be given to the

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differences between middle-class refugees, agricultural communities, working-class groups and Dalit refugees, as their experiences of displacement and rehabilitation were not identical. This approach helps explain why different refugee communities developed different political demands and forms of protest. The study will also examine the settlement patterns of refugees in urban and rural areas, particularly in Kolkata, Nadia, North 24 Parganas and other important refugee settlement regions.

IV. BACKGROUND

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It resulted in the division of British India into two independent countries, India and Pakistan. Bengal was also divided into two parts: West Bengal became part of India, while East Bengal became part of Pakistan. This division created serious political, economic, social, and cultural problems for the people living in the region. Millions of people were affected by communal violence, insecurity, displacement, and uncertainty about their future. A large number of Hindu families migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal in search of safety, shelter, employment, and better living conditions. The migration did not take place only during 1947 but continued throughout the following decades, particularly during periods of communal tension and political instability in East Pakistan. The continuous arrival of refugees placed considerable pressure on the government and the existing social and economic structure of West Bengal. Refugees who arrived in West Bengal faced many difficulties, including a shortage of housing, unemployment, poverty, lack of educational facilities, inadequate healthcare, and problems related to social adjustment. Many families had lost their agricultural land, houses, businesses, and traditional sources of income in East Bengal. They had to begin their lives again in unfamiliar surroundings with limited resources.

The government established refugee camps and rehabilitation schemes to provide temporary shelter and assistance. However, the available facilities were insufficient to meet the needs of the growing refugee population. As a result, many refugees became dissatisfied with government policies and started organizing themselves to demand their rights and basic facilities. These circumstances encouraged the development of refugee movements, which gradually became an important part of the political history of West Bengal. Refugee movements were not limited to demands for food, shelter, employment, and financial assistance; they also became movements for social justice, land rights, citizenship, dignity, and political representation. During the late 1940s and 1950s, several refugee organizations emerged to represent the interests of displaced people. Organizations such as the Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad and the United Central Refugee Council played important roles in organizing protests, public meetings, demonstrations, and political campaigns. These organizations provided a common platform for refugees to express their problems and demand government action. Refugees also established committees in different settlements and colonies to coordinate their activities and improve local conditions. One important feature of these movements was the occupation of vacant or privately owned land for residential purposes. Many displaced families occupied unused land and established settlements because they could not afford houses or obtain adequate assistance from the government. These settlements gradually developed into organized refugee colonies, particularly in and around Calcutta and its neighbouring districts.

The refugee movements also influenced the political relationship between the ruling Congress government and the emerging opposition parties in West Bengal. In the initial years after independence, the Indian National Congress controlled the state government and was responsible for managing refugee rehabilitation. However, many refugees believed that the government's policies were inadequate and failed to address their long-term needs. The slow process of rehabilitation, limited employment opportunities, and attempts to relocate refugees to distant areas created dissatisfaction among displaced communities. Political parties, particularly the Communist Party of India and other Left-wing organizations, gradually became involved in refugee struggles. They supported demands for land, housing, employment, ration facilities, education, and equal rights. Through these activities, refugee issues became connected with wider movements for economic equality, workers' rights, and social justice. The relationship between refugee organizations and Left-wing political groups contributed to the growth of opposition politics in West Bengal. Refugees became an important section of the politically active population and participated in demonstrations, strikes, public meetings, and electoral campaigns. Their experiences of displacement and government neglect influenced their political attitudes and increased their interest in collective action. Another important aspect of refugee movements was the struggle for citizenship and political recognition. Many refugees believed that they had the right to receive protection and rehabilitation from the Indian government because they had migrated due to circumstances beyond their control.

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V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Partition of India in 1947 was a major turning point in the political, social, economic and cultural history of West Bengal. The division of Bengal resulted in large-scale migration from East Bengal (later East Pakistan) to West Bengal, creating serious challenges relating to displacement, rehabilitation, employment, housing, citizenship and social security. The refugee crisis gradually developed into an important political issue and influenced the growth of political movements, public protests and new forms of political participation in the state. Several historians and researchers have examined the impact of Partition and refugee movements on the transformation of West Bengal. Their studies provide valuable information about the relationship between migration, state policies, political organisations and refugee resistance. Joya Chatterji, in her important work *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (2007), examines the consequences of Partition and the continuing migration of people from East Bengal to West Bengal. She explains that the migration process did not end immediately after 1947 but continued for several years because of communal tensions, political uncertainty and economic difficulties.

Her study highlights how the increasing refugee population created pressure on the West Bengal government and influenced its administrative and political decisions. Chatterji also discusses the problems associated with refugee rehabilitation, including the establishment of camps, settlement policies and the difficulties faced by displaced families. Her research is particularly important for understanding how the refugee crisis became a long-term political and administrative challenge for West Bengal. Haimanti Roy, in *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65* (2013), provides an important examination of migration, citizenship and the relationship between refugees and the Indian state. She discusses how refugees from East Pakistan were viewed by government authorities and how relief and rehabilitation policies shaped their experiences. Roy explains that refugees were often considered both victims of Partition and a challenge to the administrative and economic resources of the state. Her research highlights the difficulties faced by displaced people in establishing their identity and claiming their rights as citizens. It also demonstrates that refugee demands were not limited to housing and financial assistance but included dignity, security, employment and permanent settlement. Uditi Sen, in *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (2018), examines the development of refugee rehabilitation policies in post-Partition India, with particular attention to West Bengal.

She explains that the government's approach towards refugees changed over time according to administrative requirements, political pressures and economic conditions. Her study highlights the relationship between refugee identity, citizenship and state responsibility. Sen argues that rehabilitation was not simply a humanitarian activity but also a process through which the Indian state attempted to manage displaced populations and establish its authority. Her work is valuable for understanding how refugee demands influenced government policies and political discussions during the post-Partition period. Joya Chatterji's article, "'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal" (2007), focuses on the difficulties associated with government rehabilitation programmes. The study examines the experiences of refugee families who were moved to camps and other settlements. It highlights the gap between official rehabilitation policies and the actual needs of displaced people. Many refugees opposed relocation because they wanted to remain in West Bengal, where they had linguistic, cultural and social connections. Their resistance and protests demonstrated that refugees were not merely dependent on government assistance but were active participants in shaping their future. This work provides an important understanding of how dissatisfaction with rehabilitation policies encouraged collective mobilisation and political awareness among refugee communities. Research on refugee settlement in Calcutta also highlights the importance of squatter colonies in the development of refugee politics.

VI. DISCUSSION

The refugee movements played a significant role in shaping the political, social, and economic transformation of West Bengal after the Partition of India in 1947. The division of Bengal forced millions of people to leave their homes in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) and migrate to West Bengal in search of safety, shelter, and better living conditions. This large-scale migration created serious challenges for the newly independent Indian government and the state administration. Refugees faced problems such as unemployment, poverty, lack of housing, food shortages, and difficulties in rebuilding their lives. However, refugees were not merely passive victims of Partition; they gradually became an active political force. Through protests, demonstrations, public meetings, organizations, and political movements, they demanded land, housing, employment, education, and equal rights. Their collective struggles influenced the policies of political parties and contributed to the changing political environment of West Bengal.

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One of the most important developments in refugee politics was the formation of refugee organizations to represent the interests of displaced people. Among these organizations, the **United Central Refugee Council (UCRC)**, established in 1950, played a major role in organizing refugees across West Bengal. It brought together different refugee groups, colony committees, political activists, and social organizations under a common platform. The main demands of the organization included proper rehabilitation, financial assistance, employment opportunities, housing facilities, and recognition of refugee settlements. The UCRC helped transform individual problems into collective political demands. It organized meetings, public demonstrations, conferences, and protest movements to put pressure on the government. Through these activities, refugees developed political awareness and learned to raise their voices against administrative decisions that affected their lives. The formation of the UCRC marked an important stage in the development of organized refugee politics in West Bengal.

The issue of land and housing became one of the major reasons behind refugee movements. A large number of refugees settled on vacant, unused, or privately owned land because the government could not provide sufficient accommodation. These settlements gradually developed into refugee colonies, particularly in areas around Kolkata, Jadavpur, Naihati, Howrah, Hooghly, and the 24 Parganas districts. The residents organized colony committees to manage their settlements and demand basic facilities such as roads, drinking water, schools, electricity, and healthcare. However, the government considered many of these settlements illegal and attempted to remove the occupants. This situation resulted in strong opposition from refugee communities. The proposed Eviction Act of 1951 became an important issue in refugee politics. The UCRC and other organizations mobilized people against eviction and demanded legal recognition of their settlements. These protests demonstrated that refugees were prepared to organize collectively to protect their homes and secure their rights. The anti-eviction movement also strengthened the relationship between refugee organizations and left-wing political groups. The refugee movements also contributed significantly to the growth of left-wing politics in West Bengal. Several leftist organizations and leaders supported refugee demands and participated in demonstrations against government policies. The Communist Party of India and other left-wing groups gradually developed strong connections with refugee communities, particularly in urban settlements and squatter colonies. They raised issues related to unemployment, housing, land rights, and social justice. Refugees, in turn, participated in wider political movements and became an important part of the growing opposition to the Congress government. This relationship helped left-wing parties expand their social and political support among displaced communities. However, refugee politics was not completely controlled by one political party. Different organizations, including socialist and other political groups, also participated in refugee movements. These groups sometimes disagreed over leadership, rehabilitation strategies, and political methods. Nevertheless, their activities contributed to the expansion of mass politics in the state.

Another important aspect of refugee movements was the struggle against the government's policy of relocating refugees outside West Bengal. Due to the continuous arrival of displaced people and pressure on available resources, the central government introduced rehabilitation schemes in other parts of India. Some refugees were encouraged or compelled to settle in places such as Dandakaranya, while others were directed towards different rehabilitation locations. Many refugees opposed these schemes because they wanted to remain in West Bengal, where they had cultural, linguistic, and social connections. They believed that rehabilitation should provide them with opportunities to rebuild their lives without forcing them to leave the region again. The UCRC and other refugee organizations organized protests and campaigns against compulsory relocation. These movements highlighted the importance of regional identity and the emotional attachment of refugees to Bengal. They also created political pressure on the central and state governments to reconsider their rehabilitation policies. Refugee movements also became connected with broader economic and social struggles in West Bengal during the 1950s and 1960s. Refugees faced unemployment, low wages, rising prices, shortages of essential commodities, and difficulties in accessing public services. These problems were not limited to refugee communities; many ordinary residents of Kolkata and other parts of the state experienced similar hardships.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant events in the history of modern South Asia. It brought major political, social, economic, and cultural changes to the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Bengal. The division of Bengal into West Bengal and East Pakistan resulted in large-scale migration, displacement, and social instability. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes, properties, occupations, and communities because of communal violence, political uncertainty, and insecurity. West Bengal became one of the major destinations for refugees arriving from East Pakistan. The arrival of these refugees created serious challenges for the state government, including problems related to housing, employment, education, healthcare, food, and rehabilitation. However, refugees were not merely helpless

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victims of Partition. Over time, they became an important political force and actively participated in movements that influenced the political development of West Bengal. Their struggles for survival, dignity, citizenship, and rehabilitation gradually transformed them into organized political communities.

The refugee movements played an important role in changing the relationship between ordinary people and the government. In the initial years after Partition, many refugees lived in temporary camps, railway stations, schools, and overcrowded settlements. Government assistance was often insufficient to meet their basic needs. Many families were forced to establish settlements on vacant or unused land without official permission. These settlements later became known as refugee colonies or squatter colonies. Through collective action, refugees organized themselves into committees and associations to demand housing rights, employment opportunities, financial assistance, and proper rehabilitation. Their struggle demonstrated that displaced people could organize themselves and raise their voices against government policies. Instead of depending entirely on government support, they began demanding their rights as citizens of independent India.

This transformation was an important development in the political history of West Bengal. One of the most significant organizations in this movement was the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), established in 1950. It brought together different refugee organizations, colony representatives, and political activists to create a united platform for addressing refugee problems. The organization played an important role in mobilizing refugees and organizing demonstrations, public meetings, protests, and political campaigns. It raised demands for proper rehabilitation, recognition of refugee colonies, protection from eviction, and access to basic facilities. The movement against the West Bengal government's Eviction Act of 1951 was particularly important. Refugees feared that the government would remove them from the settlements they had established through their own efforts. Through organized protests and resistance, refugee organizations challenged the government's eviction policies and strengthened the collective political identity of refugee communities. The UCRC therefore became an important symbol of organized refugee resistance and political participation.

The refugee movements also contributed significantly to the growth of Left-wing politics in West Bengal. During the 1950s and 1960s, several Left-wing political parties, particularly the Communist Party of India (CPI) and later the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), developed connections with refugee organizations and settlement communities. Left-wing leaders supported many refugee demands and participated in movements related to rehabilitation, employment, housing, and social justice. Refugees gradually became active participants in wider political struggles beyond their immediate rehabilitation issues. Their participation in movements such as the tram fare resistance movement, teachers' movement, and food movements strengthened the relationship between refugee communities and Left-wing political organizations. These movements helped transform refugee colonies into important centres of political mobilization. The involvement of refugees in broader public protests also connected their struggles with those of students, workers, teachers, and other disadvantaged groups.

Another important contribution of refugee movements was the development of political awareness and democratic participation among displaced communities. Before Partition, many refugees had limited opportunities to participate in organized political activities. However, the experience of displacement and the difficulties of rehabilitation encouraged them to become politically conscious. They began attending public meetings, joining organizations, participating in demonstrations, and expressing their opinions about government policies. Refugee colonies gradually developed their own leadership structures through colony committees and local organizations. These committees helped residents raise common demands and solve problems related to housing, sanitation, education, and public services. Such activities encouraged cooperation, leadership, responsibility, and democratic participation among ordinary people. Refugees began to understand that collective political action could influence government decisions and improve their living conditions.

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