

Refugees in the Face of Emerging Ethnicity in North-East India: An Overview

MONIRUL HUSSAIN

Gauhati University
Guwahati

Just as British colonialism opened the floodgates of massive migration to hitherto very thinly populated North-East India, the Partition caused an exodus of refugees at the time of Independence and its aftermath from Pakistan to India and vice versa. At the time of Partition, the refugees were received as an unavoidable part of the political commitment made by both the state and the people. However, at times, the receiving society was totally disturbed, it accepted the refugees disdainfully; and at times, it was in deep slumber or apathetic to the arrival of the refugees. Consequently, one can locate distinctly different and uneven responses of receiving societies i.e. Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Paradoxically, with the emergence of various indigenous national/ethnic movements in North-East India in recent times, one can situate the similarity among all these movements at least in one aspect, i.e. mixing/overlapping and obfuscating the salience of the refugee question with that of outsiders, migrants and immigrants etc.

At this stage, it would be appropriate to define refugee and to distinguish it from migrants/immigrants. The United Nations documents define:

A refugee as every person, who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.¹

Obviously those people who migrated from newly created Pakistan to India and vice versa were the refugees. However, it is very difficult to distinguish precisely between the refugees and the migrants/immigrants. However, by drawing a typographical contrast, it is possible to state that:

Refugees are not simply pushed from their homeland but flee the impending danger whereas the pull of new opportunity is likely to be stronger among migrants/immigrants.²

The refugees from both sides – India and Pakistan – had to experience the ‘impending danger’ to their lives as a result of pogrom generated by the communal ideology and its praxis in its worst form in the Indian subcontinent. This not only led to the vivisection of a great civilisation and a country of continental dimensions, it also divided a big national group, i.e. the Bengalis in its eastern region.

This exercise is concerned with the refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh to North-East India. We are aware of the limitations imposed by space and paucity of data on each individual state besides the preliminary nature of the paper. Here, we shall try to comprehend the nature of response of each individual state towards the arrival and presence of the refugees amidst them. The forceful emergence of various social and political movements based on the plank of ethnicity has, to a large extent, influenced the changing status of refugees and ex-refugees in North-East India. Very recent happenings in Arunachal Pradesh indicate the inseparability of emerging ethnicity and the refugee question today.

Immediately after Partition, the exodus of refugees started to Assam from East Pakistan. The East Pakistan refugees continued to pour in with periodic lull depending on the inter-communal situation and the role played by the Government of Pakistan. Needless to say that most of the refugees from East Pakistan were Bengali Hindus – the persecuted religious minority in Islamic Pakistan ruled by modern and politicised armed forces. The Partition made their position extremely vulnerable. The threat to their existence with dignity, both actual and perceptual, propelled their movement across the border.

It is very difficult to ascertain the actual number of refugees in Assam. According to a report the percentage of people of foreign origin including Sylhet in Assam was 5.6%.³ Luthra (1972) points out that 52.83 lakhs of refugees from East Pakistan entered India out of which West Bengal alone accommodated 39.56 lakhs.⁴ The remaining 13% were accepted by other states. Misra has estimated that Assam had received 6.87 lakhs of East Pakistani refugees.⁵ Estimates show that more than 80 lakhs people came from Pakistan to India and not less than 70 lakhs people went to Pakistan from India.

The refugees who came to Assam were rehabilitated by the state government with the patronage of the Central Government. In the early fifties North-Eastern India consisted of only 4 political units – Assam, Manipur, Tripura and North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). As Assam and Tripura shared a common border with East Pakistan and pre-partitioned Sylhet district was a part of British Assam, therefore, obviously Assam had to accept a substantial number of refugees. Assam already has a significant Bengali Hindu population, and Cachar was also a Bengali majority district. Therefore, the uprooted Bengali Hindus, particularly from Sylhet, crossed over to Assam permanently. They settled down mostly in Cachar district and the Brahmaputra Valley under official patronage. Also, many refugees

successfully settled down independently or with the help of their kith and kin in Assam without any assistance from the government. Significantly, some East Pakistan refugees exchanged their properties with the Indian refugees from Assam who had opted for Pakistan. What we see in reality is that a significant section of the East Pakistan refugees rehabilitated themselves in Assam without becoming a burden on the state. Most of them gradually became citizens of democratic and secular India. Only a few were left at the refugee camps to survive on government doles. The educated sections of the refugees were mostly employed in the Central Government offices in Assam. A section of them excelled very conspicuously in profession and business. This was enough to cause a backlash from their competitors in Assam. A section of the semi-educated refugees became petty traders in certain urban, semi-urban and rural areas of Assam. Sociologically speaking virtually all the East Pakistan refugees integrated well economically by early sixties in Assam. However, as both the refugees and the sons of the soil had to compete within the same mobility structure with a very limited space, it obviously generated a perpetual clash of interest.

Most of the refugees were settled down in the Brahmaputra Valley and Cachar district in Barak Valley. The districts inhabited predominantly by the hill tribals, however, did not face the exodus of refugees. For instance, immediately after Independence, the insurgency problem in the Naga Hill district (now Nagaland) started. Since then, it has remained a trouble spot with periodic lull. The Lushai Hill district (now Mizoram) bordering Pakistan and Burma, was virtually an isolated area from the mainland. Besides, the Inner Line Permit System was in operation in both these districts. Therefore, these two districts remained virtually out of bounds for the East Pakistan refugees. Similar was the case with a few exceptions, of erstwhile United Mikir and North Cachar Hill district and the Garo Hill district (now a part of Meghalaya). However, the erstwhile United Khasi and Jaintia Hill district had to receive a substantial number of East Pakistan refugees. This was the capital of pre-partitioned and post-partitioned Assam till early seventies. This district shared a common border with East Pakistan and was easily accessible from Sylhet. Even a good number of Hindu Bengalis from East Bengal settled down permanently in the capital town of Shillong much before Independence. The traditional Bengali *baboos* who were occupying junior level positions in the colonial administration, many of them preferred to settle down in Shillong because of its salubrious climate.

However after Partition, Shillong attracted many refugees from East Pakistan. They gradually settled down permanently in Shillong and became a very conspicuous social group in a largely tribal milieu. At the beginning, there was no resistance against the arrival of refugees. But the crystallisation of tribal identity based on the plank of ethnicity led to the formation of a tribal state – Meghalaya comprising both United Khasi and Jaintia Hill District and Garo Hill District. This situation forced the Government of Assam to shift its capital from Shillong to Guwahati in the Brahmaputra

Valley. With this shift, a very substantial number of the Asamiya population migrated to Guwahati from Shillong. This in turn made the Bengalis with a strong middle class component, the second largest social group in Shillong next to the local Khasis.

With the rise of ethnicity, the consolidation of an indigenous Khasi middle class and its control over the government of newly emerged Meghalaya State, the burgeoning of its expectation and the increased discontent of the tribal masses even after the formation of Meghalaya created a condition conducive for ethnicity based violence against the refugees/Bengalis/outsideers etc. in Meghalaya. Significantly, because of political exigencies pertaining to electoral politics – the political leaders often used ethnic passion which placed the refugees who had become bona fide Indian citizens in a very disadvantageous position. This situation continues.

In Assam, the state government made very sincere efforts to rehabilitate the refugees in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. Because of already established Bengali dominance in the Barak Valley, the Hindu Bengali refugees faced no resistance in undivided Cachar district. They were absorbed and integrated well into the new situation which was very similar to their place of birth. In the Brahmaputra Valley which has been the historical homeland of the Asamiyas which they have been sharing with other tribals; with the growth and consolidation of a nationalism based mainly on linguistic, regional and cultural identities, their response to the arrival of the refugees was different from that in the Barak Valley from time to time. Elsewhere, we have shown how the colonial situation envenomed the relations between two subject nationalities – one big and one small, i.e. the Bengalis and the Asamiyas.⁶ The post-colonial ruling elites in Assam inherited not only the colonial legacy, but at times attempted to carry it very sincerely with themselves. The perpetual economic backwardness and absence of a powerful progressive democratic movement, the Asamiya ruling classes have several times in 1960, 1972 and 1980-83 used violence against those whom they did not consider to be a part of their nationality. Such a situation again exposed the refugees to severe disadvantages and threats. Notwithstanding such periodic aberrations, the refugees from East Pakistan have made good progress and are today indistinguishable from the Hindu Bengalis of Assam and in many cases from the Asamiyas themselves. Significantly, many refugees have merged with the Asamiya nationality and enriched it substantially.

In recent times, the Assam movement brought the question of refugees into a sharp focus.⁷ The Assam movement demanded the detection and deportation of foreigners including the refugees/ex-refugees who entered Assam after 1951. The movement not only exposed its leadership but also exposed the limitations of the Indian state in solving the refugee/foreigners' question in no uncertain terms in the face of social movement. In the process the question of refugee/foreigner became negotiable. Since the beginning of Assam movement, the refugees and those who attained bona

fide Indian citizenship experienced both an actual and perceptual threat. However, the Assam accord (1985) signed between the leadership of the movement and the government, when the support base of the movement eroded tangibly, persuaded the leadership to accept all those who migrated to Assam upto 25th March 1971 including those who were East Pakistan refugees. It seems, however, that the refugees question in Assam is inseparably linked with the larger Asamiya-Bengali question, very specifically to the nationality question in Assam. Any perceptive observer can also see the anti-refugee manifestations of the Bodo movement for autonomy/state. At the present stage of development the issue is far from resolved.

In contrast to Assam and present Meghalaya, Manipur like Mizoram and Nagaland did not experience the East Pakistan refugee problem. Mizoram fortunately had the experience of receiving only a small group of Myanmarese refugees temporarily who did not seek Indian citizenship. However, the situation in Tripura is very different from other North-Eastern states. The heavy influx of refugees very drastically transformed the demographic pattern of Tripura wherein the Bengalis became a majority and the Tripuri tribals a minority in their traditional homeland. This propelled a serious problem of adjustment between the indigenous tribals and the Bengali refugees. And this problem significantly contributed to the emergence of insurgency in Tripura and the notorious pogrom at Mandai.

The case of Tripura is very often cited by the leadership of various movements based on the question of identity in order to accentuate a fear psychosis and win over supporters so as to intensify their respective movements. The leadership of the Assam movement, too, argued that the position of the Asamiyas was quite similar to that of Tripura tribals who had lost their identity and majority status in their historical homeland, and that the same fate was awaiting the Asamiyas in the wake of the influx of refugees/foreigners in Assam. However, an objective look makes the scene qualitatively different and non-comparable. The argument that the Bengalis can destroy the Asamiya identity is not based on history and sound demographic understanding. We have argued elsewhere the fallacy of comparing the case of Tripura with Assam.⁸ Besides, it must be added that a substantial number of the East Bengal population migrated to Tripura under the patronage of the Tripura *Maharajas* much before India attained her independence.

Besides, the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, Tripura had to receive the Chakma refugees from the Chittagong Hill tracts in Bangladesh. Unlike the Bengali refugees, however, the Chakmas have remained unwanted guests in Tripura. The government has been trying to send them back to the Chittagong hill tracts, Bangladesh. The Chakmas became the perpetual victims of the Partition and of successive regimes in East Pakistan and Bangladesh. It seems now that they are unwanted on both sides of the international border. Besides other factors, the largely Buddhist Chakmas are finding it difficult to survive with dignity in the largely Hindu and Muslim

milieu of the subcontinent. In 1994, a good number of refugees were sent back from Tripura to the Chittagong hill tracts in cooperation with the Bangladesh Government. There are uncertainties about the remaining lot in Tripura. Undoubtedly the Tripura Government, which has very limited resources at its disposal, has been facing a very serious problem because of the additional economic burden imposed upon it by the refugees. The Tripura Government would require more Central and international aid till the Chakma refugee problem is amicably resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the Chakma refugees have been facing a very tough testing time. Before discussing the status of the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh, it would be necessary to point out that unlike Tripura, the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh are, in fact, stateless people. Similar is the case with the Hajongs of Arunachal Pradesh. In 1964 the Government of India settled approximately 66,000 Chakma and Hajong refugees from East Pakistan in the erstwhile NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh. They have been there for the last 30 years. The new generation of these stateless people have not seen the motherland of their parents. At the time of their settlement under direct orders from the Government of India, NEFA was in deep slumber. With NEFA's transformation into Arunachal Pradesh gradually the Chakmas and Hajongs became persona-non-grata together with other refugees from Tibet. Here, one has to distinguish between the Chakma-Hajongs and the Tibetan refugees. The latter hope to go back to Tibet one day and the former do not want to leave Arunachal Pradesh come what may. They are determined not to leave their present habitat notwithstanding a very hostile situation. Their determination is matched equally by the determination of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) to drive them out of Arunachal Pradesh. They even served a 'Quit Arunachal' notice to all those whom they considered to be foreigners. They have labelled all the refugees and the stateless people as foreigners and absolutely unwanted in Arunachal Pradesh. These refugees and the stateless people are facing discrimination and a threat to their survival in the wake of belligerent ethnicity with the direct support of the state government. The Government of India was committed to grant citizenship to these stateless people. Besides, in keeping with the Assam Accord of 1985, the Government of India accepted all the pre-1971 refugees as Indian citizens. All this qualifies the Chakmas and Hajongs for Indian citizenship. Will the Government of India be able to grant them citizenship in a sensitive border area where the indigenous tribals do not want them to settle permanently? This is a very big challenge before the Indian state thrown by an ethnic movement. The state has to prove its prudence here without offending the sentiments of the indigenous tribals and that too without endangering the commitment made by the state to those unfortunate refugees.

Emergence of innumerable social movements based on ethnicity/identity/autonomy plank has once again brought into focus the question of

outsiders whether refugees/stateless people or Indians in North-East India. The Congress at the Centre and at the state level have been paradoxically adopting inconsistent positions on such an important issue involving the 'unfortunates of the subcontinent'. The refugee problem is very complex and has remained unresolved in the North-East in a manner very similar to the ethnic, communal and national questions of post-colonial/post-partition India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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