

The Puzzling Numbers: *The Politics of Counting 'Refugees' in West Bengal*

The counting of population by the state is often seen as collection of demographic data merely for production of knowledge. This is why when the British administrators took up census operations way back in 1872 it was thought that they needed data at the grass-root level on a mass scale to know more about the Indian society.¹ That counting can be a political act too is often overlooked. Under certain circumstances the state decides the method of counting keeping in view its political motives. It decides the information that need to be circulated and those that need to be hidden. The exercise carried out by the Indian state to count displaced Bengalis in West Bengal since 1947 can be seen as a political act. This paper deals with some aspects of the politics of counting and explains why the state had to enter into it.

The Indian state took over the stupendous task of counting the millions of displaced people from East Bengal at the time of Partition in 1947. The counting continued for nearly four decades since the information was required for rehabilitation and resettlement of millions of Bengalis who crossed the border.² However, to this date it is not clear exactly how many displaced had arrived in West Bengal. Different reports quote different figures. Broadly, three main sources of information on the number of displaced Bengalis are: (a) official reports published from time to time to ascertain the magnitude of the problem at the instance of the central and the state governments, (b) reports of the independent commissions,³ (c) the census reports. Figures were also quoted by politicians or presented at the time of legislative debates. Media reports and scholarly works too contain information on the number of displaced.

It is not known how counting was carried out by the state government agencies. This is intriguing in view of the fact that Indian state inherited a sophisticated method of counting of its population from the British in 1872 when the colonial state embarked upon counting its population and

collecting socio-economic data. The collection of data in decennial census operation went on without interruptions for nearly 130 years. However, when it came to the question of counting the displaced no attempt was made to count their numbers in a systematic manner. Then were these numbers fudged, concocted to suit the needs of the state especially to make a case to rehabilitate the uprooted Bengalis on different terms and conditions as compared to their counterparts from West Pakistan? According to the Report of the Rehabilitation Department of the Government of India (1972), the main organization which carried out the counting on behalf of the central government, in all 72.95 lakhs displaced persons reached India from West and East Pakistan. By 1950 the flow from West Pakistan almost came to an end but it continued in the eastern region. Between 1946 and 1971, West Bengal had 38.41 lakhs of displaced and its neighbouring states like Assam, Bihar, Orissa received a total of 13.33 lakhs (see Table 1.1). However, Census Reports show that by 1971 some 73.82 lakhs displaced persons crossed over to West Bengal. One can get district-wise break up in the census figures. The three districts that received maximum number of displaced persons were 24 Parganas, Nadia and Bankura (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.1 Refugee Influx in West Bengal and Other States, 1946-71

Year	Number of Refugees (in lakhs)		
	In West Bengal	Other States	Total
1946-52	25.18	5.73	30.91
1953	0.16	0.15	0.31
1954	1.04	0.17	1.21
1955	2.12	0.29	2.41
1956	2.47	3.34	5.81
1957	0.04	0.02	0.06
1958 (upto 31.3)	0.01	0.00	0.01
1958 (1.4 to 31.12)	0.04	0.00	0.04
1959	0.05	0.01	0.06
1960	0.09	0.01	0.10
1961	0.10	0.01	0.11
1962	0.13	0.01	0.14
1963	0.14	0.02	0.16
1964	4.19	2.74	6.93
1965	0.18	0.26	0.44

1966	0.04	0.04	0.08
1967	0.05	0.19	0.24
1968	0.04	0.08	0.12
1969	0.04	0.06	0.10
1970	2.23	0.18	2.41
1971 (up to 25.3.1971)	0.07	0.02	0.09
Total	38.41	13.33	51.74

Source: Department of Rehabilitation Report (1981:39).

Let us take a look at Table 1.2 to get an idea of the nature of discrepancy and percentage concentration of refugees in different districts.

Table 1.2 Number of Refugees in West Bengal, 1971 Census

District	No. of Refugees	Percentage of the Total
24 Parganas (North and South)	16,50,000	22.3
Nadia	15,00,750	20.3
Calcutta	9,00,000	12.9
Cooch Behar	4,42,000	5.9
Dinajpur (North and South)	2,92,500	3.3
Jalpaiguri	2,49,000	3.3
Burdwan	2,40,000	3.2
Bankura	14,15,750	19.1
Hoogli	1,59,000	2.1
Howrah	1,44,000	1.8
Murshidabad	1,35,000	1.8
Malda	1,27,500	1.7
Medinipur	63,000	0.8
Darjeeling	48,000	0.6
Birbhum	15,000	0.2
Purulia	975	0.2
Total	73,82,475	100.00

Source: Census Reports, 1971.

For a comprehensive report the state government appointed a Refugee Rehabilitation Committee (RRC) in December 1978 with members from different walks of life. According to the RRC, by 1971 census the number of the displaced in the state of West Bengal reached 73.82 lakhs.

However, survey carried out by the RRC recorded 74.4 lakh refugees residing in the state of West Bengal. Some 2.1 lakhs lived in the squatter's colonies since 1950. If they are added in the estimation then some 76.5 lakhs or roughly 80 lakh refugees lived in West Bengal at the time of completion of RRC Report in 1981. The committee found the central government's estimates faulty on many counts. First, the influx of roughly 6 lakhs between 1964 and 1971, often quoted in their reports, is not in conformity with reality, more had looked for shelter in West Bengal. Second, the earlier head counts missed out huge member of squatter's colonies located in different parts of the state. Many displaced persons who did not have access to camps or who took shelter in houses left vacant by evacuee Muslims or government barracks and building, who squatted in open lands were not included in the final counting. However, till the late eighties, the central government noted in its reports, West Bengal received approximately 40 lakh refugees. This is almost half of the number quoted by the RRC.

Like independent commissions, the figures quoted by the politicians either at the floor of the Legislative Assembly or to the print media were higher than the official figures. On July 30, 1964 the prominent Congress leader Atulya Ghosh stated that upto the end of 1963 a total of 48.64 lakhs refugees from East Pakistan had entered into West Bengal, out of which only a small fraction 1.54 lakhs went outside the state. Ghosh added "...they were over crowding the cities and rural areas and disrupting normal life".⁴ However, in tune with the central government, Ghosh said, "West Bengal fully agreed with the Union government that only those who were prepared to go out of the state could receive rehabilitation benefits. This decision was taken because West Bengal had virtually reached a saturation point in regard to the availability of land and other sources of rehabilitation."⁵ Ghosh was the lone member in the state Congress to voice concern and to contradict facts and figures supplied by the central government. Even the Chief Minister B.C. Ray was cautious in his approach. Instead of going into the question of number he was interested in highlighting humanitarian problems. However, media reports were more candid in describing the situation. A media report highlighted the problem of mass exodus in the following way: "Refugees

varying from 2 to 3 thousand daily coming to West Bengal from East Pakistan.... No steps were taken to register the names of the uprooted systematically."⁶ Time and again leaders of the opposition parties criticized the centre for underestimating influx problems. Here we have an interesting situation, different groups speaking in different voices, each claiming authenticity.

Defining a 'Refugee'

The politics of counting was initially linked with the way a 'refugee' was defined. The Indian state remained inconsistent and ambiguous in defining the term. In the official literature the word 'displaced' was used more frequently than 'refugee'. In 1948 when mass exodus was going on in full swing the government defined the displaced in the following way:

A displaced person is one who had entered India (who left or who was compelled to leave his home in East Pakistan on or after October 15, 1947) on account of civil disturbances or on account of setting up of the two dominions of India and Pakistan.⁷

Later on it was stated that a 'displaced person' means any person who in the opinion of the competent authority (a) was ordinarily resident in East Bengal but on account of communal disturbances occurring after the 1st day of October 1946, left East Bengal and arrived in West Bengal on or before the 31st day of December, 1950, (b) has no land in West Bengal of which he is the owner, and (c) has affirmed in an affidavit filled in the office of the competent authority that he does not intend to return to East Bengal.⁸ The second definition covered wide area. The Chief minister of West Bengal B.C. Ray added a new dimension when he said that,

from the point of view of the central government the term 'refugee' carried a special meaning. Refugees, as far as central government was concerned, were the ones displaced from their homes by major communal disturbances.⁹

It is evident from the Chief Minister's statement that some of the displaced were refugees, those who were victims of the communal violence. Apparently counting strictly on the basis

of these definitions turned out to be too cumbersome and was abandoned.

At one point both the terms 'displaced' and 'refugee' were abandoned to refer to those who left East Pakistan in the sixties. Those who sought asylum in India between 1964 and 1971 were called 'new migrants' and those who arrived between 1946 and 1958 were described as 'old migrants'. Although the term 'migrant' replaced 'refugee', but for all practical purposes the uprooted were treated as refugees. By defining 'old migrant' and 'new migrant' with the help of the year of entry the government had excluded many who came in between 1958 and 1964. Moreover, those who arrived with migration certificate were officially migrants, but many of them were sent to camps as they were looking for relief and assistance. Thus migrants turned into refugees after their arrival in India. This is just one example to show how official definitions were replete with ambiguities and inconsistencies. The state defined and redefined the term 'displaced' 'refugee', 'migrant' according to its convenience. This is why one could notice indiscriminate use of terms, like 'displaced', 'refugee' 'migrant' etc. in the official literature. Narrow definition often excluded different categories of the displaced. For example, in the official census reports a person was treated as a refugee if s/he was born in East Bengal. This immediately excluded such members of a refugee household who were born in West Bengal e.g. children of a refugee couple born in India or a spouse of a refugee who lived in West Bengal. If these members were added in the census figures the number of refugees would certainly be much higher. A broader definition by taking into account diverse groups would have yielded better results as far as counting of the displaced was concerned.

Besides head count the state did very little to collect information on the social and demographic background of the uprooted. Guha (1959) is of the view that on the basis of some independent survey reports it is possible to identify four groups of displaced Bengalis. First, among the displaced there was a small minority who sold their immovable property in East Bengal or exchanged property in order to acquire capital and to reinvest the same in private industries in West Bengal. They were integrated with the local population within a short time. They belonged to the middle

and upper middle strata. Second, there was also a fairly large educated middle class who with drive and initiative seized the new job opportunities offered by the Government. They differ from the first group in one respect, most of them arrived in West Bengal without any capital whatsoever. Many of them had to leave due to communal violence. Third, there were a large number of lower middle class Bengalis who found shelter in the mushroom colonies and gradually sunk down in the social scale, they were living in the suburbs. Since most of them lived outside the camp, they had to manage without any assistance from the state. Finally, there were millions of displaced peasants and agricultural labourers. Most of them were from lower Hindu castes like the Namasudra, the Mahisya, the Sadgops, the Rajbangshis.¹⁰ We know far too little about one more social category of displaced. Tribals like the Santhals, the Hajongs, the Garos were displaced from northern districts of East Bengal. Over 9000 Hajongs, Kachains and Koches entered the former Garo Hill district of Assam (now in Meghalaya) from Mymensingh and Rangpur districts. They had very little option but to leave ancestral home and enter Assam. A media report described their plight in the following way,

It is for the first time since Partition that such a large number of tribals belonging to the Christian faith had been forcibly ejected from their ancestral homes and lands in Pakistan. Most of these refugees belong to the Garo tribe living in the border areas of East Pakistan's Mymensing district, which has a 100-mile border with the Garo Hill district of Assam.¹¹

Some patterns in the movement of displaced Bengalis from various districts in East Pakistan to West Bengal can easily be discerned. For example, refugees from Jessore mostly came to Nadia, 24 Parganas, Calcutta; refugees from Kushtia mostly arrived in the district of Nadia and refugees from Dinajpur tried to settle down in West Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri. It is clear that the movement from all the western districts of East Pakistan was towards the adjacent districts. However, displaced from central or eastern parts of East Pakistan remained in Calcutta and 24 Parganas. Refugees from North Bengal districts tried to remain in adjacent districts in West Bengal. For instance refugees from Mymensingh mostly went to Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri

districts. Similarly, refugees from Rangpur reached in large number in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Thus most refugees preferred to move into contiguous or close by districts. Most of them remained within a radius of 100 miles. It was noted in a survey in 1950 that the total number of migrant families in Nadia went up to 84,913. They came to Nadia in the following manner: 42 percent from Kushtia, 12.6 percent from Faridpur, 11.6 percent from Jessore, 10.7 percent from Dhaka and the rest from other areas.¹² In the absence of data on the spatial movement the mere head counts conveyed very little.

The Quiet East

By quoting figures that were far less than the actual number the central government presumably wanted to convey that the refugee situation was not so alarming in the eastern sector. Therefore, less resources were needed for relief and rehabilitation work. The state resources were used on a war footing to meet the refugee crisis in the western sector. The ruling party and its leadership realized that refugees in the western sector were going to be the crucial vote banks for them. The displaced people from West Pakistan did not disappoint the ruling Congress party for its generosity. The Congress did dominate Delhi city politics after the Partition. In the first parliamentary elections in Delhi it won 49.4 percent of the popular votes and the Jana Sangh managed to secure 25.9 percent. In 1957 the Congress did even better, won 54.3 percent of the votes cast. The Jana Sangh secured 19.7 percent only.¹³ Gupta noted that

the fact that the refugees had left a Muslim dominated West Punjab may have taken the communal pressure off them. It is also true that the Congress worked hard to provide relief and rehabilitation to the refugees.¹⁴

The relief and rehabilitation turned into an appeasement policy by the centre towards the refugees in the north and western India. As compared to the eastern sector the gravity of the mass exodus in north and western India was blown out of proportion.

Let us take a look at the relief and rehabilitation work. Till the end of sixties only a sum of Rs. 94.60 crores was

available for the economic rehabilitation of 42.14 lakh refugees in West Bengal. For economic rehabilitation each family received Rs. 1131. However, in the western wing Rs. 69.78 crores were spent on relief and Rs. 14.32 crores on educational and medical facilities for 47.40 lakhs refugees or 9.48 lakhs families and 115.37 crores more were available for economic rehabilitation of West Pakistan refugees. Besides 191 crores were paid to them as compensation. Together they all add up to a total of Rs. 380.47 crores.¹⁵ The western sector received four times more for relief and rehabilitation than their counter part in the east. Therefore, fewer numbers meant fewer burdens on the exchequer and less funds for relief and rehabilitation. This was the logic behind underestimating influx in West Bengal.

The discriminatory policy alienated the refugees from the ruling Congress in the state of West Bengal. It was a classic case of a zero sum game. The refugee support base in the state went out of the hands of the Congress. The refugees with their organizations and day to day struggle for a dignified living came into the political limelight. This development offered the left opposition parties a chance to win over millions of uprooted Bengalis. They did not waste the opportunity. The left parties and their numerous organizations, workers and peasants joined the refugees in their struggle for a better life in West Bengal.

The author is Associate Professor of Sociology, Delhi University, Delhi, India.

References:

- ¹ For an interesting discussion on this point see Bernard Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' in *An Anthropologists Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, pp.224-254.
- ² Besides Reports of the Department of the Rehabilitation Department, many other central and state government reports commented on the magnitude of the influx e.g. Report of the Fact Finding committee of the Government of India, 1953; Report of the Committee of Ministers, Government of India, 1954; Report of the Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, Report and Recommendation of the Government of West Bengal; A Master Plan for Economic Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, 1973; Report of the Working Group the Residual Problem of Rehabilitation in West Bengal, Government of India, Paper of West Bengal Government submitted to the 7th Finance Commission. The findings of these reports are far from uniform as far as the number of displaced people is concerned.
- ³ By independent commission I mean those that enjoy a great deal of autonomy in its work, e.g. Relief and Rehabilitation Committee (RRC) appointed in the late seventies to assess the problems of the displaced.
- ⁴ *The Statesman*, July 30, 1964.
- ⁵ *The Statesman*, July 30, 1964.
- ⁶ *The Statesman*, October 4, 1948.
- ⁷ Annual Report of the Rehabilitation department of the Government of India, 1964-65, p.43.
- ⁸ Government of West Bengal, *Manual of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation* (vol. I), 1998, p.39.
- ⁹ *The Statesman*, July 4, 1948.
- ¹⁰ B.S. Guha, *Studies in Social Tensions among Refugees from East Pakistan*, Government of India Press, 1959, pp 47-61.
- ¹¹ *The Statesman*, February 23, 1956.
- ¹² R.R. Committee Report, 1981, p. 12.
- ¹³ Dipankar Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp.29-43.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.38.
- ¹⁵ P. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Udyog, 1999, pp. 250-251.