# Scars and Adornments: The Urban Life of Calcutta since 1947



*The former colonial Indian capital city of Calcutta carries the stories of all who have come to her, for different reasons. In this post, **Urvi Mukhopadhyay** explores the changes in its urban texture and identity wrought by migration, rehabilitation programmes for 'refugees' and cultural habits and practices, as waves of people came back and forth to the city, triggered first by the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.*

Over the last two decades, urban population in South Asia has increased to over 130 million with cities experiencing huge migration from the rural hinterlands. This urban turn in the region can be dated back to the late 1940s when the two newly post-colonial nations — India and Pakistan — emerged, promising modernisation both in rural and urban areas. The modern nation-building projects envisioned technological growth that would enhance urban networks, turning the cities into nodal points of economic and cultural prosperity.  Some urban historians however locate the initial pull towards the cities in this region at another watershed event: the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 which dislocated around 15 million from their homes, of whom a huge section was forced to take refuge in the cities close to the borders like Delhi, Lahore, Calcutta (later Kolkata) and Dacca (later Dhaka). The presence of these migrant multitudes, known as 'evacuees' or 'refugees', radically altered the demographic profile of these cities.

One of the cities that went through a demographic change because of refugees was Calcutta (now Kolkata), whose experience in handling internal and external migration — having been a significant port and the capital city of the British Empire till 1911 — was hardly useful when confronted with the waves of refugees arriving since Partition. Contemporary reports (like the B. C. Roy Papers at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi) have vivid descriptions of the plight of the refugees who were forced to take shelter on pavements and railway platforms due to hesitant government policies on the eastern borders of India. Considering this populace as temporary, evacuees of a passing phase of scuffles, the authorities provided short-term shelters which spelt disaster for the rehabilitation programme. These refugee camps became the epitome of inhospitality with cramped spaces and unhygienic sanitary facilities which were grossly inadequate for the waves of displaced people coming from the other side of the border.

This flawed rehabilitation programme forced the refugees to organise shelters for themselves by occupying empty plots at the fringes of Calcutta, where they started to build their settlements with temporary materials, described in Hiranmay Bandyopadhyay's *Udbastu* (lit. 'Displaced', 1970). These settlements, better known as 'squatter colonies', radically transformed the map of the city, expanding it at its northern and southern fringes along the suburban railway tracks on marshy lands. The refugees, torn away from their land with rivers and waterways, started to build their temporary homes on these inhospitable tracts, modelling their rural dwellings with the courtyards, better known as *dawa*, in the middle and rooms around it with the kitchen and bathroom, if so, at a distance. These dwellings in these new colonies were thus distinctly different in design and material from the cramped urban slums. Approximately 133 such refugee colonies mushroomed by 1954 on the northern and southern fringes of the metropolis.

These refugees were perhaps the first group of migrants to this city who were thrust into this set-up with hardly any urban skills or aspirations. Manas Roy, who grew up in the refugee colony in Netaji Nagar, points to the incongruous rurality in these 'urban colonies'. Even as late as the 1970s, electrification of the streets was sparse, and howling of jackals marked the end of the day. Although some male residents of the colonies ventured out to the metropolitan core to secure their livelihood, none of the urban bodies (like Calcutta Corporation or Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority) had any presence in these colonies before the 1980s. There were hardly any hospitals, and the dwellers had to rely on tanks and ponds for water. Viewing the wretched

condition of their living standards, the internationally acclaimed astrophysicist Dr Meghnad Saha once referred these colonies as 'slums of the suburbs'. Despite their physical proximity to the heart of the city, the cultural highpoint in the colonies were *jatra* (lit., 'procession', roving street theatre) performances that had little to do with the glittering world of urban entertainment like theatres and cinemas.

This segregated existence of the refugee colonies was, however, transformed through organised refugee movements especially under the Left political parties. Initially directed to retain their hold on these lands, their activism was also directed against price rise and food security, issues that often merged with the Left political programme which perhaps enabled them to organise beyond community and caste boundaries.

These struggles for sustenance drove them to the mainstream of the metropolis beyond the colonies. Numbers of 'Hawkers' Markets' sprang up in different parts of the cities in the 1950s and 1960s, of which the Gariahat and Maniktala Hawkers' Corners comprised singularly of refugees; Prafulla Chakrabarti's *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (1990) discusses them in some detail. Some markets catering to the eastern Bengali taste also emerged near the refugee colonies, specialising in selling small freshwater fish, a known delicacy in eastern Bengali cuisine. The expansion of these markets with a variety of cheap commodities added vibrance to city life. As late as the 1980s, the dialect spoken on the streets near Jadvpur had the unmistakable eastern Bengal or *Bangaal* twang, which defined the culture of the once refugee-dominated suburb of the city.

The Partition not only added a sizable population to the demography of Calcutta but also caused a huge upper-class outward migration in the dominantly Muslim neighbourhoods. The once picturesque Suhrawardy Avenue overlooking Park Circus lost a number of residents after Partition. To these people, Calcutta remained synonymous with the coveted urban standards which they missed after moving out of the city. Tanvir Mokammel, the renowned filmmaker of Bangladesh, recounted in an interview with me in November 2019: 'My father, who grew up in Calcutta, always missed the city after shifting to Pakistan. As an employee of the Pakistan Civil Service, he always preferred to be posted near the borders where he could get access to the literary journals and delicacies from Calcutta, which reminded him of the city air'.

The scene at the lower end was somewhat different though. The *bustee*s near

[Beniapukur](#), once dominated by the labouring Muslim population, witnessed a demographic shift when their evacuated dwellings got occupied by the Hindus coming from the other side of the borders, saving some abandoned facades of mosques as a reminder of that uncharted exodus.

Some Muslim evacuees had to reconsider their decision after experiencing hard times on the other side of the borders (East Pakistan, later [Bangladesh](#)). A sizable Hindi–Urdu speaking Muslim population came back to Calcutta, particularly to the [Metiabruz](#) locality when the Language Movement in East Pakistan became hostile towards the non-Bengali speaking immigrant populace. Even Bengali-speaking Muslims often felt marginalised in competitive urban job markets of Dacca (Dhaka). But on their return, many discovered that their properties had already been occupied by Hindu refugees, which meant that they had to move further away from the city. The north-eastern suburbs of Kolkata today have a sizable population who once had crossed the borders but came back and started afresh in the city which, despite all odds, provided them shelter.

Once built as the colonial settlement comprising three villages, the megacity of Kolkata today is more than 200 sq. kms of which a sizable part has come under the scope of urbanity in the last 75 years. Perhaps the time has come when Kolkata should not be mentioned only as a colonial city, but a post-colonial city which expanded, grew and sustained itself with scars and adornments since Partition.

*The views presented here are those of the author and not those of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre or the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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