

The continuing legacy of partition in India's urban spaces

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Romola Sanyal looks at how the history of migration and refugees in India can help us to better understand issues of contemporary urbanisation in South Asian cities.



It has been 67 years since the partition of India, and yet its legacy continues to haunt the spaces and narratives of many Indian cities. These cities emerged through the ashes of violent urban conflicts on the eve of partition and through the different agendas of state officials, politicians, ordinary citizens and refugees. Can these histories help us understand contemporary urbanisation issues in India?

It can be argued that cities like Delhi and Calcutta have in the 20th century been remade by refugees. The partition of India in 1947 displaced approximately 15 million people, one of the largest mass displacements of people in contemporary history. Millions of these people came to cities in India to seek shelter and work as their lives were turned upside down. The repercussions of such large number of displaced people and their families were significant for the central and state governments and for cities that hosted them. In both Delhi and Calcutta, the vast numbers of refugees overwhelmed urban systems, including housing. Many were housed in refugee camps such as those in Kingsway (Delhi) and Coopers Camp (outside Calcutta). Others attempted to – and often succeeded in – squatting in the city itself as camp life and emergency living over a long period of time became impossible. In Delhi, areas that are today considered middle class and upmarket areas such as Malviya Nagar, Kalkaji and Lajpat Nagar were used by the Ministry of Rehabilitation to rehouse refugees.



In Calcutta, due to far more limited funds and lack of cooperation from the central government, the state government was unable to intervene significantly in rehousing refugees. Nevertheless, like their Delhi counterparts, the state government did acquire few properties to rehouse some families. The remaining refugees, still numbering in their thousands, were compelled to seek out their own shelter solutions. As a result, many took over and squatted on land around the outskirts of Calcutta and developed the space often through their own sweat equity and in defiance of state and private attempts to evict them. Many of the neighbourhoods around Tollygunge and Jadavpur such as Netaji Nagar, Bijoygarh and Azardgarh were former refugee colonies. Today these colonies are a far cry from their beginnings as lengthy formalisation and legalisation processes also ushered in the process of gentrification. What were once more temporary structures built with tin and tile are today multi-storey houses marked by clear middle

class wealth.

These heroic stories of refugee resettlement are important in understanding the expansion and development of Indian cities, but also require several caveats. Histories of relief and resettlement rarely focus on rural discussions, privileging urban narratives instead. Even within urban histories, discussions of enterprising refugees overlook the deep class, caste, gender and communal divisions and complexities that have marked the process. For example, the rehabilitation process privileged those who came from better-off backgrounds and higher caste standings. In contrast, the most vulnerable refugees, single women, the old and infirm, lower caste members were given few options. “Permanent Liability” camps for unattached women and the old were set up in West Bengal for example. In Delhi, as Ravinder Kaur (2008) points out, lower caste members were settled in camps and localities that were far removed from upper caste areas, such as Rehgar Pura (now near Karol Bagh).

A perhaps more crucial role of partition was the ways in which it changed the demographics and land ownership in cities. Not only were city sizes affected, but population sizes also radically changed. In 1941, for example, Delhi’s population was 53.2% Hindu, 40.5% Muslim and 2.3% Sikh. In 1951 it was correspondingly 82.1% Hindu, 8.6 % Sikh, 6.6% Muslim (Copley, 2008). These population changes have affected not only the cultures of cities, but the power dynamics and politics as well. These demographic shifts were partly achieved through the conflicts that took place during and after partition between different communal groups in the cities themselves. As is well known, Hindus and Muslims alike were displaced from their homes. In Delhi, many Muslims who fled or were driven out were housed in refugee colonies such as those in Jama Masjid, Purana Qila or Humayun’s Tomb (Pandey, 1997). Many properties were in turn taken over by incoming refugees. Kaur notes that Karol Bagh for example used to be a middle class Muslim locality which after partition was populated by Punjabi refugees. In Calcutta as well, Hindu refugees coming in from East Bengal pushed Muslims out of many areas in which they squatted. The atmosphere of fear and mistrust also compelled Muslims to settle closely together in larger settlements unlike before where they lived in smaller clusters. In many ways one could therefore argue that partition led to segregation of communities and ghettoisation of Muslims (Chatterji, 2005). But these narratives of conflict and suspicion in the post-partition history of India is far from black and white, as support, trust, friendships ebb and flow across communities as evidenced sometimes in the reflections of the refugees themselves. This is as much a story of conflict as it is of cooperation.

As Gyan Prakash notes, we have seen an ‘urban turn’ in the studies of India in the two decades or so. This turn has brought about many nuanced studies on urbanisation and urbanism in India, including on urban violence, infrastructure, poverty and so forth. Yet the engagement with refugees remains limited mostly to studies in history. Engaging with it in urban studies not only adds depth to understanding the sometimes complex land tenure arrangements in some Indian cities, or the communal relationships between people, but reminds us that as India continues to receive refugees from around the region, they often make their homes in cities. Through their presence, both overt and covert, and over long periods of time, they remake the cultures, economies and spaces of cities, while having varied and often limited legal rights in the country. We need to make them part of the urban stories of India, not just from the past, but in the present and future as well.

About the Author

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