

B.S. Guha's Studies in Social Tensions Among the Refugees from Eastern Pakistan

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A psychological investigation into the Social tensions hindering Refugee Rehabilitation in Bengal after partition

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[I have accessed Dr. B.S. Guha 's text from Prof. Abhijit Guha's collection and I am grateful to him for his guidance and help during my research stay in Kolkata. For Prof. Guha's publications on B.S. Guha see
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350500157_Social_anthropology_B_S_Guha_2018]

In 1954 the Indian government's Department of Anthropology published its report on the *Studies in Social Tensions Among the Refugees from Eastern Pakistan*. The report was the culmination of a series of conferences and meetings between the representatives of the Indian Government and UNESCO to deal with the refugee crisis in India, particularly in Bengal, following the partition of the country in 1947. Birija Shankar Guha (1894-1961) an anthropologist and the founding director of the Anthropological Survey of India was at the helm of this project. Guha had completed his doctoral research at Harvard University and returned to join the first ever department of Anthropology in the country at Calcutta University in early 1920's. Subsequently he joined the Zoological Survey as an anthropologist and was instrumental in broadening the government's ethnological research in India facilitating the establishment of the Indian Anthropological Institute at Calcutta. Guha's phenomenal career includes executive stints as the Secretary of the Asiatic Society and the National Institute of Sciences of India, finally securing the establishment of the Anthropological Survey of India in 1946. He was the Survey's founding director and the Anthropological advisor to the government until his sudden demise in 1961. In his advisory role it was part of his responsibility to apply anthropological research to the formation of the independent Indian nation that was struggling to recover from successive waves of refugee migration caused by the partition. In his capacity as the Director of the Anthropological Survey Guha proposed that the most effective contribution that could be made by the anthropological department was to look into the conditions of refugees from Eastern Pakistan and their relations and attitude towards the Indian government and local residents, in order to be successfully rehabilitated.

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Guha organised a multidisciplinary team of researchers to investigate the causes of social tension that were preventing integration of refugees into the social fabric of Bengal. He selected two refugee colonies for the study: Jirat, a refugee settlement

managed and funded by the West Bengal Government in the sub-urban district of Hooghly, and Azadgarh colony near Jadavpur in south Calcutta which was established by displaced people on illegally occupied land and developed and administered by elected ward committees from among the refugees themselves. The economic and social composition of these two places varied significantly. The people at the Jirat settlement had come to India after the communal riots and had lost most of their property and belongings along the way with very little to invest in building a new life in a new country. They had made their way to Jirat after being stationed at various government relief camps and were completely at the mercy of official relief measures which by government's own admission were inadequate and unreliable. The people at Azadgarh were early refugees who had not borne the worst brunt of the communal conflicts. They had the means and organisational skills to acquire land and administer their own community protecting it against violent onslaughts from landowners and government officials who wanted to evict them under the Rehabilitation Law. All refugees in both camps were Hindus who were forced to give up claims on their ancestral land and livelihood in the wake of communal tension in East Pakistan. The study opted for random sampling from among the refugees at both the camps and divided them according to caste and gender for analytical purposes.

The surveyors of this project—as government officials—were perceived as a threat in both these settlements. The refugees at Jirat suspected the project to be a covert means of assessing their needs and feared that whatever help they were receiving from the government was going to be curtailed if they answered the questions posed to them. To resolve this the project officials adopted affective means of social bonding, emphasising the scientific basis of the project in ways that would be comprehensible to their subjects and inviting feedback as a means of building trust. However, a turn in relations came with the patronage of Shayma Parasad Mukherjee - a Hindutva icon and founder of the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, later to become the Bhartiya Janta Party. Mukherjee's work for alleviating the conditions of the refugees was praised by the project officials. Religion was central to Mukherjee's political solidarity with the refugees and their grievances against the Muslims of Eastern Pakistan who were primarily held responsible for their displacement. Situating this project as an objective scientific enquiry was also a chief means of mitigating the hostile stance at Azadgarh. However, having illegally occupied the land on which the settlement was built at Azadgarh the inhabitants were pacified with the promise that the findings would assist their claims to the land.

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The intent of this project in using the psychological construct of *social tension* was to infer the *causative factors* that induced the instabilities in the psychology of the subjects as revealed through their life histories—within this construct, the project recorded allegations made by the refugees against Muslims from East Pakistan, against whom they were helpless. It was inferred by the project that the communal tension linked to their trauma of loss and displacement was *displaced* by emotions of antagonism against

the Indian government and its people. However, the study meticulously documented government's neglect in providing aid in Jirat and the corruption of local officials, which tended to counter this theory of displaced frustration as the only reason for tensions with the government. To complicate things further, the report inferred that participants were restrained in their articulation of communal hatred as they feared being critical of and offending the secular stance of the Indian government.

The report interpreted the trauma suffered by the refugees as a deprivation of opportunities of 'self-actualisation' and 'self-attainment' (terms used in the report). Therefore, a sympathetic attitude from the government that engages with them and satisfies their 'ego-needs' (term used in the report), i.e. acknowledges their right to self-determination would help them realise self-worth and a sense of belonging and help contribute positively to the community. The Azadgarh colony, in a sense, was an experiment in community-motivated social cohesion. The self-administration of the colony through elected representatives fostered group morale and community feeling generating a sense of belonging and optimism. Azadgarh was not plagued by the regressive pessimism and naïve dependence on the government witnessed at Jirat. However, the investigators came across a different problem here. The social cohesion and political solidarity were exposed to be too fragile, a case in point being the factions that developed in support of and against the work of the project officials at Azadgarh.

After the initial activity of founding the Azadgarh colony was over, there remained a pressing anxiety regarding the Rehabilitation Bill generating frustration against the government. This anxiety, the project officials argue, was expressed in intra-group and intra-family conflicts within the settlement which in turn disturbed the possibilities of building morale under a strong leadership. The project officials believed that Azadgarh could be integrated within the national fold and the hostile relations with the Indian government made productive if the government would relieve anxieties about eviction and assure them of genuine and rapid help in establishing their ownership of the land on which the settlement was built. This could only be achieved through transparent communication of Government policies of rehabilitation while alerting the inhabitants of Azadgarh to the problems faced by the Indian government in managing the large influx of refugees. Reflecting back on the definition of social tension as a psychological field, Dr. Uma Guha (in charge of collecting Life History materials) insisted that this would facilitate the refugee subject's ego-involvement and identification with the government activities and attitudes, easing tension against government and initiating constructive work.

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The book squarely interprets the societal tensions generated by the refugees as misplaced aggression, resulting from thwarted expectations of support and acceptance in India. Guha and this team insisted that this rejection of peaceful integration is what fuelled their independent and illegal occupation of land and aggression towards

governmental discipline at Azadgarh. However, like the regression of the Jirat refugees to an infantile state of dependence, the social aggression of the refugees from Azadgarh was ultimately diagnosed a state of *helplessness* in their 'subliminal consciousness'. What remained unaccounted for in the project's analysis was the deep-seated trauma of being evicted from ancestral land and familial environment in Eastern Pakistan. Confessions of personal loss during the communal strife that took away land and hence a sense of being was included in the life history sections but not really connected or evaluated in the way the resolution of social tensions was imagined in this report. The residual communal tension was, by the admission of the surveyors, sparingly articulated given the secular approach of the Indian Government. All social tensions including the residual communal hatred was expected to be set aside when the refugee subject was integrated into the body politic of the Indian nation state and its secular ideals. The report lacked any suggestion towards memorialising this trauma in ways that might make the articulation of the loss of ancestral land and *poitrik bari* (ancestral home) possible within the social integration processes. By arguing that such impulses were displaced and therefore expunged through tensional attitudes towards the Indian government and the local people, the report helped to impose a cultural repression of trauma that has made the future state of West Bengal vulnerable to sudden violent returns of this feeling of loss in the form of communal hatred.

Cover photo: In Cooper's camp lying 700 kms north of Calcutta, partition refugee are still struggling to gain recognition as Indian nationals. (Express Archive Photo)