



## Refugee Problem in Malda District after Partition, 1947–1950

Utpal Haldar 

State-Aided College Teacher, Department of History, Gazole Mahavidyalaya  
Malda, West Bengal, India, Email: [utpalmalda7@gmail.com](mailto:utpalmalda7@gmail.com)

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### Abstract:

In the aftermath of Indian partition (1947), Malda district (northern West Bengal) became a focal point for refugees from East Pakistan. Successive waves – beginning with the 1946 Noakhali–Tippera riots and culminating in post-1949 communal violence – altered Malda’s demography and strained its resources. Using archival sources (census records, government reports, legislative debates) and recent historiography, this article reconstructs the pattern of influx (refugee totals by year, origin districts) and critically assesses relief and rehabilitation policies. The study shows that Malda’s district administration initially treated refugees as temporary asylum seekers, but by 1950 was forced to expand camps, lease urban land, and sanction colonies. However, relief was uneven: wealthier refugees often rebuilt lives relatively quickly, whereas many poor peasants languished in camps or as squatters. Finally, the analysis situates Malda within broader debates on partition refugees – including alternative narratives of agency versus victimhood – and highlight how Malda’s case exposes the limits of state planning and the persistence of “partition as process” in Bengal.

### Keywords:

Partition of India;  
Refugee Rehabilitation;  
Malda District;  
Bengal;  
Migration

### Introduction

The Partition of 1947 did not redraw political boundaries; it set in motion a prolonged social crisis whose consequences were felt unevenly across eastern India. In Bengal, displacement was not confined to the moment of independence. It unfolded in waves, shaped by recurring communal violence, fragile border regimes, and the slow failure of expectations that migration would soon reverse itself. Malda district, on the northern edge of West Bengal, offers a particularly revealing case. Bordering East Pakistan, it absorbed refugees over several years and was transformed in the process, not only demographically but also in its land use, municipal burdens, and local political economy. As Prakash (2010) observes, the history of Malda after Partition cannot be understood without the refugee influx. That point is worth pressing further, because the district was not simply a passive recipient of “displaced persons”; it became a site where state policy, household strategy, and class inequality collided in unusually sharp form.

This article reconstructs the refugee situation in Malda between 1946 and 1950 through district handbooks, census records, government reports, and existing scholarship. Its central concern is not only the scale of arrival, but the uneven texture of settlement. Early arrivals, often more urban and comparatively resourceful, were in a position to rely on family assets, kinship links, or informal employment. Later migrants, by contrast, were more likely to arrive destitute and with few social anchors, which made their rehabilitation far more difficult. That contrast matters. It complicates any simple language of victimhood and also keeps alive the more uncomfortable fact that refugee experience was structured by caste, class, and access to networks,

not by displacement alone (Kudaisya 1992; Samaddar 2002). Malda therefore helps move Partition history away from broad generalization and toward a more grounded account of how emergency became routine.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, it maps the annual flow and composition of refugees into Malda. Second, it examines administrative responses, especially the shift from temporary relief to improvised rehabilitation. Third, it considers the social consequences of that shift for both refugees and local residents, while situating Malda within the wider historiography on Bengal Partition and the unfinished politics of displacement.

## Literature Review

The literature on Partition refugees is substantial, yet it remains uneven. A first strand, represented most clearly by Joya Chatterjee, treats Partition as a major political and institutional rupture, one that reconfigured sovereignty, citizenship, and the administrative imagination of the new state (Chatterjee 2007). That line of argument is important because it prevents refugee movement from being reduced to a merely humanitarian problem. Still, it can sometimes flatten local variation. The Bengal borderlands did not experience displacement in a single, uniform way. They absorbed it in stages, through districts, towns, riverine tracts, and improvised settlements that never fit neatly into one national narrative.

A second body of work shifts attention from policy to memory, trauma, and everyday life. Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of "remembered villages" remains influential because it shows how Partition lived on in household recollection and cultural injury long after the boundary had been drawn (Chakrabarty 1996). That intervention opened an important field, though the emphasis on memory can occasionally obscure the practical side of survival: how refugees found work, secured land, negotiated rent, or depended on kin and patrons. Bipasha Samaddar's work helps restore that material dimension by focusing on sanitation, dignity, and the ordinary struggle to remain human under conditions of prolonged displacement (Samaddar 2002). Read together, these studies suggest that refugee life was never just symbolic. It was also infrastructural, cramped, and deeply administrative.

A third cluster of scholarship examines rehabilitation, mobility, and the politics of resettlement. Kudaisya's work on East Bengali refugees is especially useful here because it treats refugees as socially differentiated rather than as a single undivided category (Kudaisya 1992). That point matters for Bengal, where class position, caste location, and access to property often determined whether displacement became temporary dislocation or long-term ruin. Prakash and Rogers, writing from a more demographic and policy-oriented angle, similarly stress the scale of migration and the inadequacy of official relief, though their accounts are broader and sometimes less attentive to district-specific variation (Prakash 2010; Rogers 1992). Their contribution lies in showing that refugee movement in eastern India was not a brief emergency. It was an extended process that outlasted the moment of Partition itself.

Work on Bengal's borderlands complicates these themes further. van Schendel's discussion of making a living in the Bengal borderlands is especially valuable because it restores agency to refugees without romanticising it (van Schendel 2005). Survival, in that account, is practical and often improvised. It involves small trades, informal labor, squatters' settlements, and the patient conversion of uncertainty into a livable routine. Nandy's study of refugee colonies takes the argument into the post-1947 decades and shows how displacement was gradually institutionalised in West Bengal through colonies, land allotments, and urban expansion (Nandy 2017). Ghoshal, by contrast, approaches the question through identity and diaspora, drawing attention to the ways refugees were made and remade as political subjects in new settings (Ghoshal 2021). The contrast is useful. One scholarship strand tracks institution; another tracks selfhood. Both are necessary, but neither is sufficient on its own.

Against this backdrop, Malda remains surprisingly understudied. Existing district histories, census-based accounts, and memoirs hint at demographic change, yet they rarely combine archival records, local government files, and refugee statistics in a systematic way. That gap is not minor. Malda reveals how refugee settlement was shaped by class inequality, municipal improvisation, and the slow failure of assumptions about return. In that sense, the district pushes Partition historiography toward a more grounded conclusion: displacement in eastern India was neither brief nor homogeneous, and its consequences were not confined to the border itself.

## Research Methodology

This article uses a historical and interdisciplinary method, combining archival reconstruction with close reading of secondary scholarship. The core evidence comes from the *Census of India 1951: West Bengal, District Handbook: Malda*, together with district-level government reports, files of the West Bengal Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Assembly debates, and parliamentary questions from 1947 to 1950. Contemporary newspaper coverage from *The Statesman* and *Amrit Bazar Patrika* was used sparingly, mainly to trace public language around influx, relief, and municipal strain. Where figures appeared in more than one source, the counts were cross-checked against official compilations, including Asok Mitra's district handbook and the later state report on displaced persons, since refugee statistics in this period are rarely clean and often carry the mark of bureaucratic improvisation (Mitra 1954, 72–79; Government of West Bengal 1956).

The analysis proceeds in two moves. First, it reconstructs the annual pattern of refugee arrival in Malda and identifies broad changes in origin, class location, and settlement form. Second, it reads those patterns against the wider historiography on Partition and rehabilitation, especially the work of Chatterjee, Kudaisya, Samaddar, and van Schendel, whose accounts differ in emphasis but together make clear that displacement was at once administrative, social, and deeply uneven (Chatterjee 2007; Kudaisya 1992; Samaddar 2002; van Schendel 2005). That comparison matters. Census tables are useful, but they can flatten lived experience; narrative scholarship restores texture, though sometimes at the cost of precision. The present study tries to hold both together.

Because this is not an ethnographic project, oral histories are used only where they have been previously collected and published by others. The result is necessarily incomplete, yet that incompleteness is itself revealing. It suggests not a single refugee crisis, but a layered process of arrival, delay, adaptation, and partial rehabilitation.

## Refugee crisis in Malda

Malda's refugee crisis did not arrive all at once. It unfolded unevenly, and that unevenness is precisely what makes the district so revealing. The census handbook for Malda records 60,198 displaced persons entering the district between 1946 and 1951, with the sharpest rise occurring in 1950, when 43,235 refugees arrived in a single year. This pattern matters because it unsettles any neat story of Partition as a one-time rupture. In Malda, displacement worked more like a sequence of shocks: the first, relatively limited movement after the Noakhali and Tippera violence of 1946; then the stronger wave after 1947; and finally, the far larger influx after the communal violence of 1949-50. The district was not merely receiving refugees. It was being reorganized around their arrival.

**Table 1: Year-wise refugee arrivals in Malda, 1946–1951**

Year	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	Total
Males	105	2,307	2,536	3,233	22,243	494	30,218
Females	86	1,978	2,685	3,041	20,992	498	29,280
<b>Total</b>	191	4,285	5,221	6,274	43,235	992	<b>60,198</b>

Source: Asok Mitra, *Census of India 1951, West Bengal District Handbook: Malda*, pp.72–79.

The early phase was still treated by officials as temporary. That assumption shaped policy in a rather telling way. Until late 1949, the district administration expected many refugees to return to East Bengal once conditions stabilized, so relief remained thin and improvised. Camps were not a priority, and many of the first arrivals settled through family help, savings, or informal rental arrangements. This was especially true of the earlier urban or semi-urban refugees, many of whom had at least some economic resources. They were not comfortable, but neither were they entirely destitute. That distinction is important, because the category "refugee" can hide more than it reveals unless it is broken open by class, caste, and access to networks (Kudaisya 1992; van Schendel 2005). Malda's experience shows that migration did not produce a single social type. It produced layered vulnerability.

The real crisis came in 1950. Once the later wave began, especially from Rajshahi and adjoining districts, the district could no longer rely on the fiction of temporary asylum. Malda suddenly had to absorb a much larger population of poor peasants and rural labourers, many of whom arrived with few assets and little prospect of

returning soon. The contrast with the earlier arrivals was stark. The later refugees were more likely to enter the district exhausted, landless, and dependent on relief. Their situation was not just materially worse; it was structurally different. A refugee household with cash, business contacts, or urban relatives could improvise a future. A land-poor peasant family, by contrast, often faced an extended period of camp life, squatting, or seasonal labour. The scholarship on East Bengali displacement has long emphasized this point, though not always with enough force. Refugee movement was never socially neutral. It reproduced old hierarchies even as it unsettled them (Chatterjee 2007; Samaddar 2002).

The administrative response in Malda was necessarily reactive. Once the scale of the influx became impossible to ignore, local authorities shifted from minimal relief to a patchwork of emergency measures. In Englishbazar, municipal land was leased at nominal rates, and settlements grew around places such as Sadarghat, Fulbari, and Banshbari. Three state-sponsored colonies were also created, eventually accommodating around 600 families. Rural resettlement followed a different logic. Vacant doab lands, marshy patches, and forest clearings were used to absorb people who could not be housed in the town itself. Some refugee settlements emerged as tolerated squatter zones in flood-prone or marginal land. These were not elegant solutions. They were, at best, political improvisations. Yet they mattered because they marked the point at which the state began to recognize that displacement was no longer temporary. The government of West Bengal's own report on displaced persons makes clear how late and uneven this recognition was (Government of West Bengal 1956). The district did not develop a master plan so much as a series of stopgap arrangements, each one responding to the failure of the last.

The social consequences were immediate. Housing pressure intensified, rents rose in and around Malda town, and the pressure on water and sanitation became hard to ignore. Englishbazar in particular faced a visible strain. Municipal officials worried about overcrowding, disease, and the burden on already fragile services. Agriculture was also affected. Land that might have remained in cultivation was diverted to refugee colonies, while competition for labour and rent sharpened local resentments. None of this should be exaggerated into open conflict at every turn, because local accommodation was real too. Still, tensions did surface, especially when long-term residents felt that the newcomers were receiving land, work, or political attention at their expense. That kind of tension is familiar in refugee histories, but Malda gives it a specific shape: a district economy already under pressure was forced to absorb a sudden demographic shock. The result was not simply humanitarian crisis. It was a slow reordering of everyday life.

There is another point that deserves emphasis. The refugees were not only victims of violence and administrative neglect. They were also actors who made choices under severe constraint. Some rebuilt livelihoods quickly, especially those with money, business skills, or family networks. Others entered petty trade, transport, market labour, or informal cultivation. This is where van Schendel's work on borderlands is especially useful, because it restores a sense of practical agency without romanticizing survival. People made lives where they could, often in ways that were messy, improvised, and morally ambiguous. A family might sell remaining assets in East Bengal, borrow from relatives, and open a small shop in Malda town. Another might occupy land at the edge of a canal or road embankment and slowly turn it into a homestead. These were acts of endurance, but also acts of claim-making. Refugee history in Malda is therefore not only a history of suffering. It is also a history of negotiation, adaptation, and sometimes quiet defiance (van Schendel 2005; Ghoshal 2021).

Even so, the limits of agency should not be overstated. The better-off could recover much faster than the poor, and that difference shaped the social memory of the crisis. It is tempting, especially in retrospective accounts, to imagine refugees as a unified political subject. Malda does not allow that comfort. The *bhadralok* refugee, the small trader, the landless peasant, and the destitute widow did not experience rehabilitation in the same way. Some gained footholds in the local economy, while others remained trapped in relief dependence or insecure squatting. Samaddar's discussion of dignity and sanitation is useful here because it reminds us that rehabilitation was not just about shelter. It was about whether people could live without humiliation, whether they could bathe, cook, work, and educate their children under conditions that did not continuously mark them as surplus (Samaddar 2002). That is a quieter but more revealing measure of state failure than formal policy statements.

Viewed in this light, Malda complicates two common narratives. First, it challenges the idea that Partition displacement in eastern India was confined to the immediate aftermath of 1947. In Malda, the decisive demographic rupture came later, in 1950, and its consequences continued well beyond the moment of legal

independence. Second, it complicates any simple opposition between helpless refugees and indifferent state power. The state did act, but late, unevenly, and usually under pressure. Refugees also acted, but from radically unequal starting points. The district's history sits in that tension. It is a history of improvisation rather than design, of survival rather than settlement, and of rehabilitation that never fully caught up with displacement.

Malda therefore stands as a compact example of the larger Bengal crisis. It shows how Partition was lived not only at the border but in district towns, village edges, municipal offices, and everyday routines of scarcity. It also shows that refugee rehabilitation was never merely a technical matter of land allotment or camp management. It was a social process, shaped by class, timing, and local politics. On that point, Malda is especially instructive. It reveals how a district could be transformed by refugees while never fully succeeding in absorbing them.

## Conclusion

Between 1947 and 1950, Malda witnessed one of the largest refugee influxes of West Bengal. Census records show that over 60,000 East Pakistani displaced persons settled there – mostly by 1950. This demographic shock highlights Bengal's unique post-Partition dynamic: not a one-off, but a drawn-out crisis. The initial reluctance of authorities to set up camps, based on the assumption of a quick return, gave way by 1950 to emergency measures (subsidized housing, relief camps, land leases). However, the state's response remained ad hoc. Many refugees – particularly those of lower caste or class – struggled to acquire even the land or loans needed to rebuild livelihoods. Politically, the refugee situation in Malda foreshadowed the region's later identity politics and the eventual demand for statehood of North Bengal (often argued to have roots in perceived neglect during this era).

This study's findings speak to broader debates. The Malda case supports those who view Bengal's Partition as a process – one that lasted into the 1950s and beyond – rather than a singular event. It also nuances views of refugee agency: while some refugees capitalized on networks and capital, many did not. By critically engaging governmental and scholarly accounts, we show that relief policy was shaped by both compassion and by prejudice (for instance, early 1950s language about “intruders” by some officials). In the end, the Malda experience underscores the limitations of a relief model premised on short-term displacement: in Bengal, millions never returned. These conclusions highlight the need for future research on how such districts coped in the long run – a topic that could involve oral histories, comparative study of other districts, and an examination of post-1950 resettlement programs. For now, this article has provided a comprehensive portrait of Malda's refugee problem, situating it firmly in the twin contexts of Partition and Indian state formation.

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### Notes on contributor(s)

**Utpal Haldar**, is a State-Aided College Teacher in History at Gazole Mahavidyalaya, Malda, West Bengal, since 2015. With over 11 years of teaching experience, he is engaged in research work. He qualified State Eligibility Test (SET) West Bengal in the year 2025. His is specialized in History of Medieval Bengal.