

DISPLACEMENT AND CONTESTED STATECRAFT: REFUGEE REHABILITATION IN WEST PUNJAB (1947–1970)

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ABSTRACT

I examine the Pakistani state's response to the Partition refugee crisis in West Punjab between 1947 and 1970, which constituted one of the largest coerced migrations of the twentieth century. I propose that although official policies—including those establishing the Custodian of Evacuee Property and land redistribution programs—aimed to rationalize resettlement, they were fundamentally compromised by severe bureaucratic failure, corruption, and inherent social inequalities. This study asserts that a massive disjunction existed between state rhetoric, which promoted justice and national unity, and the lived realities of displaced communities. I suggest that refugees were not passive recipients of aid; instead, they emerged as active political agents who contested bureaucratic oppression, negotiated for property claims, and utilized legal and political avenues to assert their status in the nascent nation. I also examine the gendered experiences of rehabilitation, revealing that women faced distinct forms of institutional exclusion and trauma that the state mechanisms largely failed to address. The rehabilitation process was thus a contested and transformative crucible that indelibly marked West Punjab's institutions, demographics, and post-colonial political identity.

KEYWORDS: Refugee Rehabilitation, West Punjab, Evacuee Property, Gender, State Formation.

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I address the most defining, yet consistently under-examined, chapter in South Asian history: the protracted process of refugee rehabilitation following the 1947 Partition. This cataclysmic event, which marked the end of colonial rule, simultaneously initiated an unparalleled human crisis, compelling over fourteen million people to cross newly drawn borders (Khan 2007). The province of Punjab, divided into East and West, became the epicentre of violence and demographic upheaval, with nearly four million Muslim refugees flooding into West Punjab, the foundation of the new state of Pakistan. I propose that the twenty-three years between 1947 and 1970 represent a critical, formative phase, where the Pakistani state was simultaneously defined by the chaos of its birth and the gargantuan task of national consolidation through mass resettlement.

The core of this investigation challenges prevailing histories that prioritize the violence and political negotiations of 1947. The succeeding phase of state-led rehabilitation was the true crucible of post-colonial state formation. The state quickly established a framework of legal and bureaucratic instruments—including the Custodian of Evacuee Property and specific land allotment schemes—to manage and redistribute property abandoned by Hindus and Sikhs (Chattha 2009). I argue that these efforts consistently fell short: institutional inefficiency, elite capture, and entrenched corruption created a chasm between policy design and equitable outcomes, often denying justice to the neediest and most vulnerable segments of the displaced population.

The larger context of the debate centers on the concept of citizenship in a post-Partition state. Did the state's mechanisms truly integrate the displaced as full citizens, or

did they establish permanent hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion based on class, political connections, and gender? By focusing on the friction between bureaucratic logic and the lived experience of the displaced (as explored through the methodology of “history from below”), we can re-read rehabilitation not as a technical administrative task, but as a contested space where the meaning of belonging and governmental legitimacy was negotiated. This approach reveals displacement not merely as an epilogue to Partition, but as a foundational element that dictated Pakistan's socio-political trajectory.

Historiography on Partition has historically concentrated on the immediate trauma and the political failures that necessitated mass migration. Yasmin Khan, for example, critiques the hurried British withdrawal, arguing that the resultant lack of administrative preparation in both new states exacerbated the human suffering and often overshadowed the elite political negotiations (Khan 2007). Ayesha Jalal similarly emphasizes the diplomatic calculus and elite decision-making that gave rise to Partition, often at the expense of regional realities and communal harmony (Jalal 1998). While these foundational works successfully establish the origins of the crisis in the political collapse, they typically offer limited sustained analysis of the succeeding decades of state response mechanisms, which remain critically under-theorized.

A crucial body of research focuses on the post-colonial state's specific institutional response to property management. Ilyas Chattha's pioneering work meticulously investigates the evacuee property regime in West Punjab, concluding that property redistribution became the central pillar of rehabilitation, yet its execution was deeply

marred by corruption and institutional incompetence (Chattha 2012). Vazira Zamindar extends this critique, framing the bureaucracy as an active force that helped fashion the identities and legal rights of displaced populations beyond the immediate borders, revealing how state-centric mechanisms codified new forms of displacement (Zamindar 2007). However, these studies, while essential for institutional critique, often analyze state policy in a top-down, structural mode. They rarely delve into the granular reality of refugee agency—how ordinary individuals resisted, negotiated, and rebuilt their lives under these flawed bureaucratic controls.

We can identify a significant lacuna in the exploration of the gendered dimensions of the rehabilitation process. Landmark studies by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin primarily focus on the trauma of abduction, sexual violence, and the social stigma faced by women immediately following Partition (Butalia 2000). Their work rightly establishes that the post-Partition state largely viewed women as passive "objects to be recovered," rather than as survivors with autonomy (Menon and Bhasin 2018). I suggest that the existing literature rarely interrogates how the official state policies—especially concerning property claims and relief distribution—specifically neglected or actively reinforced patriarchal biases against women in West Punjab (Rabia Umar Ali 2009). This omission is a major scholarly gap that I intend to fill by analyzing how administrative design mediated women's access to dignity and resources.

Comparative analysis and regional specificity also deserve more sustained attention. While scholars like Sarah Ansari explore refugee integration in Sindh, demonstrating the importance of ground-

level administrative capacity, a comprehensive, longitudinal study of West Punjab extending through the 1960s is lacking (Ansari 2005). The majority of research concentrates on the chaotic emergency period of 1947-1949. My intent is to lengthen this timeline to 1970 to identify broader patterns of social integration and institutional evolution. By triangulating the official state records with oral testimonies and grassroots reports, I will move beyond institutional critique to construct a socially located narrative of displacement and post-conflict resilience.

I anchor my methodological framework in "history from below," a theoretical approach derived from subaltern studies that deliberately privileges the lived experiences and agency of marginalized people (Talbot 2009). This methodology challenges the traditional, top-down historical accounts that center state policy and elite narratives, allowing me to recover the stories of ordinary refugees—men, women, and families—who were often silenced in official records (Butalia 2000). This lens allows me to view refugees not as passive recipients of state aid but as active agents who contested exclusion, negotiated for land, and actively shaped the trajectory of post-Partition state formation in West Punjab (Zamindar 2007).

My approach relies heavily on qualitative historical research drawing from a diverse body of primary sources. I use archival documents—government files, official correspondence, and circulars from the Rehabilitation Department and the Custodian of Evacuee Property—to reveal the stated policies and bureaucratic limitations of the Pakistani state (National Archives of Pakistan, File F-80). Simultaneously, I incorporate oral histories from survivors—including the seven interviews I conducted across Faisalabad,

Lahore, and Rawalpindi—to act as an essential foil to the state documents (Appendix Table no.1). These personal narratives, while subject to the inherent limitations of memory and trauma, provide the emotional and human texture of the rehabilitation process, illuminating how policies were reinterpreted and resisted on the ground.

I employ source triangulation by cross-referencing archival sources with contemporary public discourse. This includes analyzing newspaper clippings from *The Pakistan Times* from 1956 and 1957, which often contain letters, local reports, and public critiques of the evacuee property system and corruption, thereby linking state mechanisms directly to public perception (Punjab Public Library, File PT/Arch/1956). This process allows me to mitigate the bias often found in state documents, which typically portray policies as efficient and equitable regardless of the implementation reality (Chattha 2012). Furthermore, I utilize records from institutions like the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP) to embed visual and testimonial evidence of the displacement experience (CAP, Oral History and Image Collection).

The initial 1947 moment represents the catastrophic break, while 1970 marks the close of the foundational institutional period before the major national crisis of 1971. This 23-year temporal scope enables me to assess the transformation of state frameworks, track the long-term patterns of social integration and political mobilization, and evaluate the final legacies of the rehabilitation project, providing a depth of analysis often missed in studies confined to the immediate post-Partition years.

STATE POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The 1947 Partition delivered an unprecedented humanitarian nightmare, transforming West Punjab into the primary receiving area for millions of displaced Muslim refugees (Khan 2007). The violence and ethnic cleansing that characterized the land exchange left refugees physically, emotionally, and symbolically traumatized. The new Pakistani state, lacking both resources and administrative precedent, found itself overwhelmed, with the collapse of colonial law enforcement compounding the crisis (Talbot 2009). This systemic failure, evident in the chaos along the Grand Trunk Road and the breakdown of transport networks, meant that refugee rehabilitation was not merely a matter of relief; I propose it became the fundamental cornerstone of early state-building.

I identify three distinct phases of response to the refugee influx. The initial period, 1947–1948, was characterized by chaotic emergency relief and mass evacuation, managed primarily by ad hoc bodies like the Punjab Refugee Council and the Joint Evacuation Organization (Punjab Refugee Council, Records 1947–1948). The second phase, from 1949 to 1958, focused on long-term settlement and institutionalization, establishing legislative instruments such as *The Displaced Persons (Compensation and Rehabilitation) Act* of 1958 to formalize the distribution of abandoned properties (Government of Pakistan, Act 1958). The final phase, 1959–1970, saw the government shift from basic relief to development planning, promoting satellite towns and industrialization to integrate refugees economically (Punjab Provincial Government, *Annual Development Reports* 1970).

Property formed the material substrate of rehabilitation, necessitating the creation of the Custodian of Evacuee Property (Chattha 2009). The Custodian's office, theoretically a rational legal mechanism, quickly devolved into a "battle field" for power and exploitation. The logic of custodianship demanded impossible documentary evidence of ownership, a requirement that neglected the sheer disorder of the refugees' escape. Many claimants, lacking records, found their cases unjustly denied or stalled on bureaucratic technicalities, leading to a profound sense of institutional disillusionment and the birth of a complex system of legal resistance (Zamindar 2007).

The state's humanitarian infrastructure was built upon gendered exclusions. The state's focus on "recovering" abducted women primarily treated them as passive victims rather than survivors with agency, and many who returned faced acute social stigma and familial rejection (Menon and Bhasin 2018). Furthermore, patriarchal norms embedded within the Custodian system routinely denied women—particularly widows and single survivors—Independent property claims, dissolving their legal identity into that of male relatives. This system of property redistribution became a patriarchal practice under the cloak of legal rehabilitation, effectively making the custodian a powerful and discriminatory gatekeeper of citizenship (Rabia Umar Ali 2009).

CHALLENGES AND EFFECTIVENESS OF REHABILITATION POLICIES

The post-Partition policy environment was characterized by a fundamental contradiction between rhetoric and reality. While official narratives promoted national solidarity and equitable resource sharing, implementation

was compromised by endemic corruption and political favouritism (Chattha 2012). The Custodian system, initially conceived to secure assets, was quickly colonized as a centre for elite appropriation. Political kingpins and their followers consistently secured the best properties, side-stepping the legal queues and utilizing administrative discretion to ensure that economically disadvantaged migrants, such as landless laborers and widows, were systematically excluded from fair access (Chattha 2009).

The structural difficulties of managing the massive influx strained both provincial and federal authorities beyond capacity. Bureaucratic failures—including procedural delays, missing revenue records, and contradictory claims—became the norm in West Punjab (Sayeed 1958). The legal architecture, ostensibly designed for fairness, was routinely undermined by a logic of expediency, where bribes, forged affidavits, and backdoor networks replaced transparent legal processes. Archival records and personal accounts consistently confirm this institutional breakdown, highlighting that the structures meant to secure justice often merely reproduced new forms of exclusion (National Archives of Pakistan, File 188-CF-60).

The effectiveness of policies was severely limited by the corrosive diplomatic disputes between India and Pakistan. Inter-dominion agreements aimed at establishing mutual custodianship and guaranteeing the return of movables (livestock, jewelry) yielded symbolic progress (Schechtman 1953). However, key issues like the legal ownership of immovable property and the calculation of restitution payments remained stalled at an impasse. The inability to standardize procedures and enforce reciprocal arrangements fostered deep distrust and bureaucratic

paralysis, reducing humanitarian concerns to geopolitical pawns in the escalating Indo-Pak hostilities (Zamindar 2007).

The Custodian system, armed with sweeping powers under acts like the 1957 *Pakistan Administration of Evacuee Property Act*, became the most prominent target of public critique (Government of Pakistan, Act 1957). Widespread reports of officials abusing their powers—renting properties to allies, manipulating transfer records, and demanding bribes—circulated widely in the public sphere (The Pakistan Times, March 1956). Refugees attempting to contest these injustices found limited recourse; the judiciary was swamped, and legal appeals were often rendered ineffective by administrative lethargy (Sayeed 1958). This entrenched opacity confirmed that a legalistic approach to allocation had become a deeply exploitative bureaucratic machinery.

REFUGEE RESPONSES AND INTERACTIONS WITH THE STATE

Refugees actively contested the state's flawed rehabilitation process rather than suffering silently. Facing rampant corruption and legal manipulation, many sought justice through formal channels, filing petitions and engaging in protracted court battles against the custodian system (Naseer Ahmed Khan vs. West Pakistan, 2009). The case of Maryam Bibi is a notable example of the long, often frustrating struggle for correct ownership, demonstrating that legal resistance became both an instrument of empowerment and a stark indicator of systemic bureaucratic inefficiencies (Maryam Bibi vs. Custodian, West Punjab, 1987). This engagement confirmed the refugee community's active will to claim their rights and dignity.

As refugee populations consolidated demographically in urban centers like Lyallpur (Faisalabad) and Rawalpindi, they successfully leveraged their numbers into significant political assertion. Refugee leaders contested local elections and allied with provincial political parties, creating powerful refugee blocs capable of directing municipal and provincial decisions on services and representation (Afzal 1976). This mobilization not only altered local power structures but also injected the refugee voice directly into the policy-making process. Refugees deliberately framed their displacement as a patriotic sacrifice, a perception reinforced by official state narratives, thereby enhancing their claims for inclusion and state support.

The gendered experience and generational shift profoundly altered how refugees interacted with the state. Women, often excluded from property claims by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms within the administrative apparatus, engineered alternative forms of agency through vocational training and literacy drives (Rabia Umar Ali 2009). The second generation—born in Pakistan and largely spared the trauma of migration—approached the state differently. This youth engaged in formal civic participation, forming student unions, joining government services, and organizing cultural bodies, injecting a new dynamic of professional integration and challenging the image of the perpetually traumatized refugee (Talbot 2009).

The state's attempts at reform, such as those implemented during General Azam Khan's tenure to enhance verification and punish fraud, consistently failed to resolve the fundamental structural injustices. Although new regulations were established, claims verification remained unreliable and subject to administrative discretion (The

Pakistan Times, March 1956). Official archives reveal systemic difficulties, such as the massive number of claims disallowed due to irregularities in Indian revenue documents, confirming the persistent chasm between legal triumph and practical administrative relief (Government of Pakistan, *Annual Reports* 1958–1969). The enduring leniency towards elite fraudsters, in contrast to the strict application of rules against the marginalized, continued to affirm the system's inherent arbitrariness and delegitimized the rehabilitation process.

LONG-TERM LEGACIES AND IMPACTS

The initial demographic shock of migration evolved into a permanent feature, fundamentally restructuring the social and spatial composition of West Punjab. The influx of Muslims and the corresponding exit of Hindus and Sikhs redrew urban boundaries, accelerating the growth of cities like Lahore and Sialkot (Kudaisya and Yong 2004). This reconfigured population quickly consolidated into a powerful political constituency. The collective memory of displacement became imprinted onto the nationalist discourse, which continues to enhance the legitimacy of their claims for inclusion and state support, cementing the refugee identity as central to Pakistan's foundation (Talbot 2009).

The institutional interventions, while providing basic stability, left a significant legacy of bureaucratic malaise. The state's investment in satellite towns and infrastructure under development plans did transition many families from camps to permanent houses, achieving a measure of dignity (Punjab Provincial Government, *Annual Development Reports* 1970). However, the systemic corruption and lack of accountability ingrained during the years of

the Custodian system established a long-term pattern of mismanagement and public distrust (Chattha 2012). The unaddressed property disputes and legal conflicts arising from these flawed systems continue to plague Pakistan's legal and administrative framework to the present day.

The process of resettlement drove a rich cultural integration and the formation of hybrid identities. The introduction of distinct languages, rituals, and culinary traditions by the displaced populations mixed with local practices to create a synthesis often labeled "Muhajir Punjabi," blending integration with distinction (Talbot 2006). Refugee neighborhoods became zones of cultural innovation and negotiation, with many successfully establishing new schools, literary societies, and religious bodies. This cultural syncretism, supported by state narratives that canonized refugees as nation-builders, fundamentally diversified the social fabric of Punjab and redefined its post-Partition sense of identity.

The most enduring legacy of the rehabilitation project is the persistence of legal insecurity. Disputes over property claims, fueled by the opaque practices of the Custodian system, continued well into the 1970s and beyond (Goel 2020). Many refugees, having lost faith in the legal process, transferred unresolved claims to the next generation, perpetuating generational inequality and distrust of administrative establishments. This structural failure ensures that the memory of displacement remains not a closed historical chapter, but a living historical force, where the unresolved legal and social injustices continue to define the consciousness and political temperament of contemporary Punjab.

CONCLUSION

The process of refugee rehabilitation in West Punjab between 1947 and 1970 was a defining moment in the early political and administrative history of Pakistan. The state's deployment of legal mechanisms and institutional power was a necessary, bold response to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. However, the fundamental contradiction between the state's aspirational ideals of justice and the reality of corruption, elite capture, and bureaucratic fragility meant that the rehabilitation project, while averting total chaos, ultimately entrenched new and persistent structural inequalities (Chattha 2012). This period was a crucible where the state's capacity was severely tested, forging a complex relationship between governance and the displaced populace.

The refugees themselves were the active agents who determined the on-the-ground efficacy of the policies. Through relentless legal resistance, effective political assertion in urban centres, and the cultural creation of a hybrid identity, they contested the boundaries of exclusion and laid claim to their rights as citizens (Zamindar 2007). The long-term legacies—from the accelerated growth of urban centers and the permanent political ascendancy of the refugee constituency to the enduring gendered injustice in property allocation—underscore that displacement was not a singular event. It was an extended, transformative process that indelibly marked West Punjab's socio-political fabric, with the structural failures of the Custodian system continuing to shadow the legal and administrative integrity of the state today. The lessons from this experience concerning the necessity of transparency, accountability, and the absolute need for participatory

governance remain critically relevant for navigating the complex challenges of forced migration in the post-colonial world.

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