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Nowhere to Call Home: Dalits, Displacement and the Politics of Being ‘Un-wanted’ in Post-Partition South Asia

Astik Mukherjee¹

¹Independent Researcher

Abstract

“Space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us.” Edward Said’s observation underpins this study of the complex interplay between geography, identity, and political structures in post-Partition South Asia. The paper examines the persistence of caste identities among Dalits in India and Pakistan, exploring how spatial transformations and historical occupations shaped their status despite the reconfiguration of national boundaries. In Pakistan, Dalits, officially subsumed under broader minority categories, continued to face entrenched caste hierarchies despite the Islamic ideal of egalitarianism. Their traditional roles as sanitation workers and manual labourers became indispensable after Partition, while the reorganization of refugee camps, urban centres, and rural enclaves blurred distinctions between Scheduled Castes and caste Hindus. In India, Dalits were similarly recruited into their hereditary occupations, acknowledging while exploiting their labour in essential urban infrastructure and public health services. Despite legal and social reforms, occupational segregation and spatial marginalization persisted across both countries.

Drawing primarily on archival material and recent secondary scholarship, this study explores how Partition’s reconfigured geographies shaped Dalit experiences and their socio-political recognition. Through a comparative historiographical synthesis, it demonstrates how space, identity, and historical occupation continued to structure the contested terrains of post-Partition South Asia, revealing how Dalits were displaced but not desired.

Keywords: Partition, Caste Politics, South Asia, Displacement, Dalits, Identity, Space

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Corresponding Author: Astik Mukherjee | **Email:** astikhere01@gmail.com

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Introduction

The borders of the newly formed nations after the independence of India and Pakistan were announced two days after 15 August 1947. This marked a migration on a mammoth scale — one of the largest of the twentieth century. Hindus and Sikhs mostly came to India and a majority of Muslims migrated to Pakistan. These are the religious communities most often mentioned in the dominant Partition discourses. But did India and Pakistan comprise only these three groups? The overwhelming focus on religion has overshadowed the migrations of the depressed classes (the term popularised by Dr B.R. Ambedkar), who crossed borders in both directions.¹ For instance, the *Namasudras*, a marginalised Hindu community concentrated in East Bengal before Partition, suddenly found themselves citizens of East Pakistan. Similarly, the *Rajbanshis* — a related community — were split across the new borders, with part of the population in India and the rest in East Pakistan. These communities did not migrate immediately after the Partition was announced and their migration to and from India was slow compared to the upper-caste migrations. These communities did not also have the necessary means and resources to arrange for their own “displacement” across the borders.² Jinnah’s promise that “every man would be equal” and the inclusion of Jogendranath Mandal, a prominent *Namasudra* leader, in Pakistan’s first cabinet as Law and Labour Minister, reassured these particular communities that their interests would be protected.³ On the other hand, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, was initially resistant to the idea of large-scale Bengali migration from East Pakistan. He is quoted as saying, “everything should be done to prevent Hindus in East Bengal from migrating to West Bengal”.⁴

The situation in West Pakistan was grimmer. Depressed caste communities, for their own survival, began converting — or were coerced into converting — to Islam, despite the foundational promise of a unified and inclusive Pakistan.⁵ Reports soon emerged of forced conversions, and these caste-based communities were thereafter reclassified under the broad and vague category of “non-Muslims,” ef-

1 While the contemporary term “Dalit” is used throughout the paper as its primary analytic term. “Depressed Classes” is used specifically when describing the terminology of the colonial and the Poona pact era political debate itself, in line with Dr. Ambedkar’s own usage. “Harijan” is used only when naming or quoting official Congress, Gandhian and their own self-description.

2 Akanksha Kumar, “Locating Dalits in the midst of Partition and Violence,” *Journal of Studies in History & Culture* 2, No. 2 (2016): 5-6 <https://jshc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Akanksha-Kumar-Locating-Dalits-in-the-Midst-of-Partition-and-Violence.pdf>

3 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, *In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition* (Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2014), 3-4.

4 Pallavi Chakravarty, “Post-Partition Rehabilitation of Refugees in India,” *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library* (2014): 16.

5 Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, *Long Behind Schedule: A Study on the plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan* (New Delhi, 2008), 102.

fectively becoming the responsibility of the Indian government for rehabilitation.⁶ This paper begins at this juncture: how these communities navigated their identities and locations in the newly independent states, and how their respective governments perceived and treated them as citizens — if at all.

To understand the persistence of caste in the postcolonial moment, it is crucial to acknowledge its embedding within the colonial administration. The British codified and bureaucratised caste identities, transforming fluid social categories into rigid, hereditary classifications through census operations, job reservations, and land tenure systems. As Nicholas Dirks argues, colonialism did not invent caste but reified and bureaucratised it in a manner that had long-lasting institutional consequences.⁷ This framework persisted into the post-independence state structures of both India and Pakistan. The very state machinery that administered refugee rehabilitation, land redistribution and welfare schemes in the aftermath of Partition inherited the bureaucratic legacy of caste recognition, even when it disavowed its existence. Therefore, caste did not fade with decolonization — it simply mutated under the language of modern governance.

Lastly, this paper seriously incorporates Said's framing of space through the narrative and political work of converting distance into significance for a particular community. "Space" in the sections that follows operates less as a geographical variable to be mapped than as an interpretive lens: the segregated colonies, peripheral *bastis* and the Dandakaranya are all treated as sites where the definition of citizenship was contested and thereby denied. The paper is accordingly best understood as an archivally informed historiographical synthesis which draws upon primary quotations, official reports and rehabilitation records embedded within secondary scholarship. Its contribution lies instead in reading India and Pakistan through a comparative lens in their rehabilitation practices of Dalit refugees; that is largely absent from the present literature.

The Defeat of Dalit Political Economy

Representation in the Indian political space and autonomy thereby, was the single most important demand that the Dalit organizations, especially led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strove for before independence in India. Temple-entry satyagraha movements were relegated to the background for the rights that the depressed classes were now striving for in the 1930s and 1940s India. Ambedkar and Jogendranath Mandal gave calls for special safeguards for the Dalits within the Indian political

6 Ravinder Kaur, "Narrative Absence: An 'Untouchable' account of Partition migration," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 42, No. 2 (2008): 291 <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996670804200204>

7 Nicolas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 9-10.

space as they thought that the Poona Pact of 1932 was a “political fraud” and that the Dalits were as a population were betrayed through this pact.⁸ Despite attempts by Dalit organizations, independent of the Congress, the marginalized communities entered both India and Pakistan with a political weakness and this was not a condition that was given: this was through the deliberate dismantling of an independent depressed classes’ political platform that had projected a different vision of post-colonial citizenship. This collapse is primarily attributed to two divergent trajectories: Jogendranath Mandal’s Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) and its alliance with the Muslim League in Bengal and B.R. Ambedkar’s consistent, albeit, futile negotiations with the Congress at the all-India level. These trajectories explain exactly why the depressed classes came out of the partition without any political leverage to resist the discriminatory rehabilitation, spatial segregation and most importantly the cultural erasure that was to follow.

SCF and Muslim League’s alliance was said to have been rooted in the “perceived political-economic congruence” of the two communities. The depressed classes and the Muslims were said to have been treated similarly in Bengal and both these communities voiced common grievances against the Congress and the British.⁹ This alliance reached its peak during the years of 1943-47 when Mandal served as a minister in the Muslim-league led government in Bengal. The SCF and Muslim League even brought out joint demonstrations and as reports suggest the SCF had garnered a substantial support base throughout Bengal by 1945.¹⁰ However, the organizational fragility of this alliance was well known even to the members of this alliance. When Mandal convened the Federation’s first provincial conference at Gopalganj in April 1945 to formalize the pro-League stance, only three of Bengal’s thirty-one SC MLAs attended.¹¹ Black flag demonstrators greeted Mandal enroute to the conference location and Ambedkar also had to cancel his participation in the event, last minute. These were the warning signs that began to show up — one year before the 1946 elections. The 1946 elections, however, sounded the death knell for the SCF — according to the Poona Pact, the Scheduled Caste (SC) candidates in reserved seats had to appeal to a general electorate overtly dominated by caste Hindu voters. Moreover, there were reports of manipulation during the elections as well. Mandal, even, sent a petition to the Governor detailing Congress candidates’ attempts at preventing SC candidates from voting. Even the Bengal governor at that time, F.J. Burrows had suspiciously predicted that “at least

8 Ramnarayan S Rawat, “Partition Politics and Acchut identity: A Study of the Scheduled Castes Federation and Dalit politics in UP, 1946-48,” in *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, ed. Suvir Kaul, (Permanent Black, 2001), 119.

9 Dwaipayan Sen, “‘No matter how, Jogendranath had to be defeated’: The Scheduled Castes Federation and the making of partition in Bengal, 1945–1947,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, No. 3 (2012): 323 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0019464612455273>

10 Sen, “‘No matter how, Jogendranath,” 327.

11 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India* (Curzon Press, 1997), 202.

24” out of the 30 SC seats would go to the Congress.¹² On the other hand, the political ideology of Mandal and SCF’s alliance with the League was unacceptable to the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha. They wanted to stifle the Dalit political autonomy. As it happened, out of the 151 reserved SC seats throughout India, the Federation won only two — one from Bengal and one from the Central Provinces. The marginalization of Dalit political autonomy in India had already started and it began to show its results through this election.

Amidst this depravity, Mandal is credited with securing Ambedkar’s election to the Constituent Assembly in 1946 from Bengal. Mandal spearheaded this endeavour: from filing Ambedkar’s nomination papers to directing student activists to rapping up MLA’s support. However, it is significant to mention here that despite this feat, the Cabinet Mission refused to grant the Federation formal recognition. The cabinet mission in its May 1946 statement stated that it was sufficient to only recognize three main communities in India — ‘General’, Moslems and Sikhs and the ‘general’ included all those who did not fall into the Moslems and Sikhs’ categories.¹³ This is worth noting then that the depressed classes from the 1917-18 were seeking patronage from the British, which after they got, shifted their allegiance for most part of the decades after this, to speak in their favour. However, with India’s independence at the horizon, this scenario is seen to be changing and colonial government’s patronage shifted towards the Congress. The Secretary of State in February 1943 noted that the Scheduled Castes were “neither one thing nor the other” and that their “betterment lay, not on the political side, but gradually winning their way socially in the Hindu community”.¹⁴ This was exactly what the Congress wanted and Gandhi himself wanted to incorporate the Dalits into the Hindu fold, to the extent of claiming the Dalits to be part of Hinduism.¹⁵ Ambedkar always wanted political autonomy for the Dalits and he fought for this throughout his whole life, however, the dominant forces in the country at that time were not really averse to that idea and this further helped in isolating the Dalits from the political landscape of India. The Federation’s organization base was further eroded through Congress’ integrationist activities: like, in Bombay, the local Congress Harijan committee launched a programme from January 1945 which included cleaning the Harijan localities and organizing separate social gatherings; in Bengal, Subhash Bose and later Sarat Bose¹⁶ had cozied themselves to Dalit leaders through the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League while the communist led Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha was consolidating its base among the Dalit peasantry. In Bengal, on the other

12 Sen, “No matter how, Jogendranath,” 322.

13 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Transfer of Power and the Crisis of Dalit Politics in India, 1945-47,” *Modern Asian Studies* 34, No. 4 (2000): 924 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/313135>

14 Bandyopadhyay, “Transfer of Power,” 895.

15 Bharat Patnagar and Gail Omvedt, “The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, No. 7/8 (1979): 419 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367359>

16 An independent activist and Sarat Bose’s brother

hand, the Federation's alliance with the League has also been blamed for distancing itself from the Scheduled Caste population. After the Great Calcutta killings of 1946, Mandal became particularly a target of the communal anger — because he was the sole non-Muslim member of the Suhrawardy cabinet. A published "open letter" from the riot victims directly criticized Ambedkar and Mandal for not speaking out against the riot: where hundreds of SCs were killed, lynched and their houses burnt. The letter also credited the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha for rescuing the survivors. Additionally, another letter from the Bengal Depressed Classes League unearthed a "secret conspiracy" between the League and Ambedkar's followers and declared curtly that the SCs were "Hindus first and Hindus last".¹⁷ This popular backlash mattered as much as Cabinet Mission's institutional refusal to recognize the Federation. These incidents made it clear that the SCF had been relegated to a political party in name only because it had lost the communal consent that is indispensable to any political platform.

The final nail on the head was said to be Ambedkar's induction into the first Nehru cabinet and this was more out of compulsion rather than a choice as Bandopadhyay points out: with the colonial state withdrawing recognition, the Federation losing its legitimacy after their electoral defeat and most importantly the general consensus of the country moving in favour of the Congress predominantly and for the minorities in some cases, "non-cooperation with the Congress would mean a total political marginalization".¹⁸ However, this reconciliation with Congress in whatever degree was short lived as Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet in 1951 over the Hindu Code Bill and he was also subsequently defeated in the elections from Bombay by a political non-entity representing the Congress.

While, Ambedkar negotiated his entry into the Indian cabinet, another battle was waged by Jogen-drath Mandal in Bengal. He launched the most sustained anti-Partition campaign mounted by any political formation during that time in Bengal. Mandal's argument was that the Scheduled Castes of East Bengal overwhelmingly were employed in agriculture and led their lives by fishing and cultivation of fields. He therefore demanded a referendum on the question of partition as he said that the opinion of the Hindus cannot be taken as the views of the majority in Bengal. The British government obviously did not accede to this demand and they proceeded with the assumption, which was unverified, that since the Dalits had voted for Congress in 1946, they also therefore supported partition. H.S. Suhrawardy, the Bengal Muslim League chief and the current chief minister of the state argued that the existing legislature did not represent Dalit interests. He voiced similar opinions like Mandal: when he pointed out that representatives of the Hindu community in the Legislature do not represent the interests of the Scheduled caste community in the Legislature. However, as history went, partition was carried on without the will of the majority of the MLAs in Bengal: 127 MLAs voted against the

¹⁷ Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 204-206.

¹⁸ Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 893.

partition, while 93 voted in favour.¹⁹

Taken collectively, the three factors — the manufactured defeat of the SCF, the co-optation of Ambedkar into the Congress cabinet and the refusal to entertain Dalit opinion on Partition ultimately was responsible for the political weakness with which the depressed class communities entered the two states. In Pakistan, Mandal's eventual disillusionment with the government there and his return to India left the Dalit population without any advocate, especially at the moment when Jinnah's death opened up the space to Islamist fundamentalist forces in the country. In India, on the other hand, Ambedkar's importance within the India's Dalit political fold diluted, firstly when he resigned from the cabinet and subsequently lost in the elections from Bombay. It was the most opportune moment for the Congress, who having absorbed the face of Dalit representation while failing to provide substantive protection to the Dalits, was now free to design rehabilitation policies like the Dandakaranya scheme, which treated the Dalit refugees as problems to be displaced and not integrated into the state.

An Islamic State: A Promise of Egalitarianism

In October 1949, a steamer carrying caste Hindus and other marginalized castes was preparing to depart Karachi for India when Pakistani police prevented its departure and detained approximately two hundred individuals on board.²⁰ Under the Essential Services Ordinance enacted earlier that year, which classified sweepers and sanitation workers as providers of essential services, the Indian High Commission secured the release of all detainees except six who were professionally designated as sweepers. This incident exemplifies the central argument of this section: in the newly established state of Pakistan, Dalits were promised egalitarian citizenship as proclaimed by both Jinnah and Islamic principles, yet in practice, they were incorporated as an immobilized, essential labour force rather than as free citizens.

This outcome is often narrated through the figure of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, himself. The suggestion that has been popularized over the years is that had he survived longer, depressed caste communities in Pakistan might had the opportunity to retain a greater bargaining power, much as Nehru's longer tenure is sometimes credited with protecting minority rights in India. Jinnah's recorded statements are known to have addressed religious minorities in general terms rather than caste specifically, whereas he only appointed Jogendranath Mandal as Pakistan's first Law and Labour Minister. However, Jinnah's early death in 1948 created a vacuum in Pakistan which led to the political ascendancy of

¹⁹ Sen, "No matter how, Jogendranath," 351.

²⁰ Uttara Shahani, "Bonded Citizenship: Caste, Partition, and the prevention of exit," *Modern Asian Studies* 59, (2025): 429 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25000034>

Islamist forces within the Constituent Assembly and this cleared the way for the 1949 Objectives Resolution, later incorporated into Pakistan's Constitution in 1956. Caste was reproduced through bureaucratic and constitutional logics that would likely have operated regardless of who held power in Karachi.

This ordinance aimed to "contain" the "sweeper castes" within their state who seemed to be indispensable to the state at that time. It was subsequently amended to include further categories of labourers so that future migrations of "such people" could be restricted. With the communal riots of 1948 in Karachi, migrations to India accentuated. In this instance the Pakistani government was unable to halt the exodus of the bankers and traders; on the other hand, there were reports that Karachi had been transformed into a "cesspit". There was an unbearable stench that had covered the city. In its wake, a ministry statement proclaimed that due to an "apprehended blow" to the social and economic structures of the state which was caused due to the wholesale migrations of the "depressed classes", the Government of Sind was compelled to "slow down" the migrations of "such persons" who was said to have been constituted under the "Essential Services" provision.²¹ It is interesting to note here, that they were unable to halt the migrations of the traders and bankers, whose services should also have been necessary to a nascent economy; but the important point here was that their services were replaceable despite they being indispensable to the economy. However, the services provided by the depressed classes were both indispensable and irreplaceable to the economy.

As we observe in India, caste hierarchies remained intact in Pakistan as well. The primary difference was the scale of religious conversion. Many "non-caste Hindus" converted to Islam and were reclassified as "Nau-Muslims". These individuals were assigned new Muslim-sounding surnames and incorporated into an Islamic identity. However, their traditional caste status did not change. As Gyanendra Pandey has argued, this conversion drive was motivated less by Islamic solidarity than by economic utility of caste-bound labour. The conversion helped in restricting their out-migration, extracted their labour and silenced their political voice.²² The category of "Nau-Muslims" thus performed the double function of erasing Dalit caste identity through an Islamic surname while binding converts to the Pakistani state through a religious obligation that had been imposed on them without their choice. Most continued working in sanitation sectors, particularly in urban centres such as Lahore and Punjab. Social mobility, where it existed, was confined to forms of labour not frequented by upper-caste Muslims. Land redistribution policies following Partition further exacerbated this inequality. Incoming Muslim migrants were allotted vacated lands, while converted depressed castes remained landless.

²¹ Shahani, "Bonded Citizenship," 438.

²² Gyandendra Pandey, "Nobody's People: The Dalits of Punjab in the forced removal of 1947," in *Removing Peoples. Forced Removal in the Modern World*, eds. Richard Bessel and Claudia B. Haake (Oxford University Press, 2009), 310.

For instance, the *Gagare* community — akin in social status to the *Chuhra*s in India — migrated from East Punjab to Lahore and were promptly absorbed into municipal sanitation work. Butt notes that this community was mostly identified as rag pickers and people who dealt with carcass of animals — these people were despised by the upper-caste populace and therefore were rehabilitated into the fringes of the cities of Lahore and Karachi after they migrated from East Punjab.²³

Despite the seismic rupture of Partition in 1947 and the ideological promise of equality in the newly formed state of Pakistan, caste-based exclusions endured in the everyday geographies of the newly formed state. As *Achoot Logon Ka Adab* reveals, Dalit communities such as the *Bheels*, *Meghwals* and *Balmikis* were re-inscribed into spaces of marginality not through discriminatory laws but through the silent violence of spatial and occupational segregation.²⁴ Their settlements — “katchi bastis” on the peripheries of cities like Karachi — were not accidental but intentional sites of exclusion, replicating colonial and precolonial caste boundaries. In a country where caste was formally unacknowledged, it persisted nonetheless — invisibilised yet firmly entrenched. These communities remained numerically marginal, politically voiceless and conceptually erased from Pakistan’s national imagination. Partition, thus, did not liberate them; it merely redrew the boundaries of their enclosure. Their bodies moved, but their caste locations remained unchanged — forever on the periphery, serving the centre.

The enduring exclusion of Dalit communities in Pakistan — both materially and symbolically — remains deeply under-researched, pointing to a broader epistemic silence surrounding caste in South Asian Muslim societies. The syncretic entanglement of caste and religion, particularly in Sindhi Sufism, is often romanticised in nationalist discourse, leaving little room to acknowledge caste’s structural violence. Even where traces of caste are admitted, they are displaced onto “Hindu remnants” or “non-Muslim” homogenous categories rather than addressed as systemic and indigenous to Pakistani society.²⁵ The spatial and occupational marginalisation of Dalits is thus not just a social reality, but also an academic blind spot — one that reinforces their peripherality in civil society and the postcolonial nation’s historical memory.

It is to be explicitly noted here that the evidentiary base available for this section is considerably thinner than that of the Indian section examined below. This is not incidental to the argument but is itself a historiographical finding. The comparative silence in the Pakistani archives and secondary scholarship on caste — set against the more developed literature and better preserved bureaucratic record on

23 Waqas H. Butt, “Beyond the Abject: Caste and Organization of Work in Pakistan’s Waste Economy,” *International Labour and Working-Class History*, No. 95 (2019): 19-24 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547919000061>

24 Asif Ali, *Achoot Logon Ka Adaab* (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2015), 76.

25 Ghulam Hussain, “‘Dalits are in India, not in Pakistan’: Exploring the Discursive Bases of the Denial of Dalitness under the Ashrafia Hegemony,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, No. 1 (2019): 3-4 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909619863455>

Dalit rehabilitation in India — directly is symbolical of the silence mentioned above. The asymmetry between the two case studies that follows is therefore not simply a limitation of this paper's research but a reflection of the differential archival visibility that caste has been viewed in the two states since its inception.

A Mirage of Equality in Democratic India

The myth that “the depressed classes have got more than they deserved” in India post-Partition has long served as a deflection from interrogating caste oppression in postcolonial policies. As this paper has sought to bring to the fore, that caste distinctions did not disappear with migration. Rather, caste identities travelled across borders and reasserted themselves at every stage of the refugee experience. Upon arrival, Dalit migrants were labeled as “Harijan refugees” in government documents, a term derived from Gandhi's vocabulary, ostensibly to erase stigma but which practically reinforced segregation and consequently dictated the rehabilitation policies surrounding these communities. While upper-caste refugees were categorised as “displaced persons”, the specific nomenclature for Dalits marked them out for differentiated treatment. The symbolic vocabulary surrounding these terms carried real consequences. Dalits found themselves disproportionately excluded from decision-making roles in rehabilitation committees and refugee welfare boards. Moreover, the invisibilisation of caste-based trauma in the popular media — such as in Partition films and literature — have further obscured the unique suffering and resilience of Dalit refugees. Their stories are rarely found in school curricula, museum archives, or oral history projects, which continue to centre upper-caste and middle-class voices. The marginality experienced by the Dalit refugees were not just material but representational.

Rehabilitation practices reflected this hierarchy. Dalit families were resettled in segregated housing areas, such as Rehgar Pura in Delhi, where “untouchables” had previously lived, in the pre-partition era. Proximity to upper-caste colonies were avoided and caste-specific logic governed the spatial ordering of the new city. Relief provisions were unequal too. In 1949, the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation transferred responsibility for Dalit refugees to the Harijan Sewak Sangh (HSS), a non-governmental organisation founded by Gandhi. While upper-caste refugees were managed by the central government, the HSS faced financial constraints and implemented a hire-purchase housing scheme for Dalits, requiring payment for mud houses located in city outskirts. These were unfit for sustainable living, and many families abandoned them within years.²⁶

26 Akanksha Kumar, “Making of the ‘New City’: The Overlapping Structures of Caste and Class in Post-Partition Delhi,” in *Neighbourhoods in Urban India: In between Home and the City*, eds. Sadan Jha, Dev Nath Pathak and Amiya Kumar Das (Bloomsbury, 2021), 148-149.

The instrumentalisation of Dalits as a labour force rather than as citizens in need of protection is exemplified in a record from Punjab's rehabilitation department. R.L. Jadav, a special officer, encouraged the state to relocate the Megs — a dominant Scheduled Caste group from Sialkot — to East Punjab on the grounds that they were efficient cultivators and weavers, “the best stock of the Scheduled Castes”.²⁷ This language highlights the transactional logic at work: where the upper castes were resettled for safety, the depressed classes were brought in for productivity and their labour. Therefore, they were not treated as “national citizens” but “citizens of need”.

The discriminatory attitude of the state towards the Dalits comes out in the machinery's own account itself. The same 1950 International Labour Office report that vividly and elaborately described the land resettlement that was going to be carried out in Punjab — devoted only a paragraph for Harijan rehabilitation programmes. The Harijan section of the Ministry of Rehabilitation was closed and was entrusted to the All-India Harijan Sevak Sangh — Gandhi's private welfare organization, which received an annual government grant of one-lakh rupees: “It was closed, however, at the end of May 1949, and its work was entrusted to the All-India Harijan Sewak Sangh...”. Whereas, defence personnel displaced who were displaced from West Pakistan were assigned their own dedicated organization: the Defence Services Rehabilitation Organization which was established specifically to secure their “speedy rehabilitation” and also reserving housing quotas in the model townships.²⁸ The asymmetry in this report is palpable — a government capable of building an entire technical bureaucracy dedicated to the resettlement of the elite upper caste Hindu and Sikh refugees found a lone single paragraph sufficient for the Dalit population.

The state's willingness to treat Dalit refugees as a productive labour reserve, rather than as citizens requiring protection, was rooted in a pre-existing caste-occupational structure entrenched in Bengal's economy. By the 1940s, Calcutta's leather tanning cluster in Tangra, Tiljala and Topsia, operated almost exclusively by migrant Chamar labourers who handled raw hides and skins — materials regarded as highly polluting within the caste hierarchy — had become the paradigmatic site where caste-based assumptions about workers' capabilities determined labour allocation. A 1946 labour survey reported that 61 percent of registered tannery workers belonged to the Scheduled Castes, with the vast majority being migrants from Bihar and the United Provinces who performed the “wet work” of liming, scudding and fleshing, tasks from which upper-caste workers and even Bengali *Muchis* were exempted. Even when the colonial and later provincial state invested in modernising the industry through institutions such as the Bengal Tanning Institute, these reforms primarily sought to attract

27 Akanksha Kumar, “Revisiting Partition of India 1947- The Voice of Dalit Refugees,” *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research* 4, No. 3 (2019): 2117 <https://ijsser.org/more2019.php?id=155>

28 International Labour Office, “Rehabilitation and Resettlement of Displaced Persons in the Indian Union,” *International Labour Review* 61, No. 4 (1950): 413-423.

bhadralok capital and management to the sanitised segments of the trade, while the direct handling of hides and skins remained the exclusive, caste-marked domain of Chamar labour.²⁹ In this context, Jadav's praise of the Megs as "the best stock of the Scheduled Castes" was not an anomaly but rather an expression of a logic that already structured the valuation and confinement of caste labour within Bengal's industrial economy.

In eastern India, the situation was even more dire. Joya Chatterjee notes that the central government abdicated responsibility for East Bengali migrants, arguing that these refugees came "in fits and starts," unlike the Punjabis who were "driven out" of their homes.³⁰ For *Namasudras*, Partition marked the beginning of systemic abandonment. Initially persuaded to stay back in East Pakistan, they were ultimately driven out by increasing religious discrimination and landlessness. On arrival in West Bengal, their caste status became a liability. The state sought to remove them from the political heartland by sending them to distant camps. This policy reached its most comprehensive implementation in the Andaman and Dandakaranya dispersal schemes. Beginning in 1948, the Government of India recruited East Bengali refugees to settle the Andaman Islands, explicitly prioritizing Scheduled Caste settlers over upper-caste bhadralok refugees. As one selection officer stated, "We would not take the upper caste, so called *bhadraloks*, the scheduled castes and other labouring population were most welcome."³¹ This approach culminated in the Dandakaranya Scheme, which was approved by the National Development Council in June 1957 and formally inaugurated in September 1958. The scheme proposed relocating refugees to 78,000 square miles of un-irrigated tribal land in Koraput and Kalahandi (Orissa) and Bastar (Madhya Pradesh). Officials justified this decision in explicitly developmental, rather than humanitarian, terms. The scheme's Chief Administrator described the region as rich in untapped mineral and forest resources that lacked only labour and asserted that refugee "man-power" had been designated to address this deficit.³² Refugees were promised a "New Bengal" with employment opportunities, schools, and Bengali-speaking staff. However, one settler who arrived in 1959 reported finding "no land, no home, no job... We were ordered to cut trees and clear jungles. No work no bread."³³ Even the state's Rehabilitation Minister privately acknowledged to his central government counterpart in 1960 that Dandakaranya could not yet guarantee "chances of economic rehabilitation." Nevertheless, the central government, eager to close the camps and end what Finance

29 Shahana Bhattacharya, "Caste, Stigma, and Labour: Leather Tanning in Calcutta c. 1900–1970," in *Caste in Bengal: Histories of Hierarchy, Exclusion, and Resistance*, eds., Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Tanika Sarkar (Permanent Black, 2022), 448–458.

30 Joya Chatterjee, "Right or Charity?: The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–50," in *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, ed. Suvir Kaul (Indiana University Press, 2001), 83.

31 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal: The Story of Dalit Refugees, 1946–1961* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 140.

32 Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal*, 149.

33 Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal*, 150.

Minister Morarji Desai termed an “infructuous drain on the public exchequer,” proceeded with the scheme. By 1973, more than 25,000 families had been relocated to the area, many through coercion rather than voluntary choice.³⁴

The International Labour Report cited above which only sparsely mentioned the Dalit refugee rehabilitation in its report — the same silence is found in the case of East Pakistan as well, but here the *Namasudra* refugees are treated differently. Nearly nine-lakh people had registered themselves with the West Bengal government for assistance by early 1949, but, interestingly, the occupational profile was found to be lopsided in the sense that it stressed heavily on trade, business and salaried service which accounted for over 61% of the registrants compared to only 16% of the agriculturalists — majority of the *Namasudras* who migrated to Bengal were agriculturalists. However, this report does not disaggregate the aforementioned population by caste. Though, the occupational skew deserves attention here: the “voluntary registration” system that was administered by the state was disproportionately more accessible to an educated and propertied refugee population — who were better equipped to navigate the rehabilitation bureaucracy than the poorer, agriculturalist *Namasudra* population.³⁵

Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury’s 2022 study of Dalit refugee rehabilitation in Bengal provides a comprehensive account of the dispersal machinery, detailing the internal bureaucratic contest between state and central government over land, camps and desertion. While this paper offers only a brief overview of these processes, it contributes a comparative perspective. Unlike Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury’s focus on internal Indian dynamics, this analysis examines the dispersal-as-development logic in relation to Pakistan’s contemporaneous absorption of Dalits as a bonded sanitation-labour force under the Essential Services Ordinance. It is argued that both states, through distinct bureaucratic mechanisms, ultimately refused to recognise Dalits as citizens, instead defining them primarily as labour.

Resistance emerged in the form of mass protests and satyagrahas, often led by leaders like Jogen-dranath Mandal and Hemanta Biswas. Yet, their efforts were branded as communal. Dominant refugee narratives — shaped by caste Hindu elites and leftist parties — deliberately erased the caste question, insisting on a homogenised Hindu refugee identity. This denial, however, did not erase the reality. Mandal’s pointed question about how many Scheduled Castes had been appointed as bus conductors at Cooper’s Camp remains a haunting reminder of caste’s continuing invisibility in refugee politics.³⁶ The trend remains the same: as is evinced throughout this paper, that of employing the Dal-
its hurriedly into jobs that have traditionally seen people from the lower castes, thereby, solidifying

34 Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal*, 153.

35 International labour report, 424.

36 Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhuri, *In Search of Space*, 8-10.

on the notion that “certain jobs are meant for certain people”. In the long run, this facilitated in the discriminatory practice of identifying a profession with a particular caste.

Throughout this paper, it has been argued that Dalit refugees were rendered peripheral not only by state policies but also by the national imagination itself. While academic, administrative, and political discourses often erased the caste dimension of Partition, Dalit literature has served as a site of counter-memory. In Pakistan, texts like *Achoot Logon Ka Adab* subtly illuminate the continuities of caste even after conversion — tracing how *Bheels*, *Balmikis* and *Meghwals* were denied land, citizenship and dignity despite their utility to the postcolonial state. These accounts are often published outside the mainstream, reinforcing the idea that Dalit suffering exists beyond official archives.

In India, a more pronounced tradition of Dalit autobiographical writing emerged in the decades following independence. These texts articulate not only historical violence but also the failure of independence to liberate those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. As Daya Pawar laments in *Baluta*: “For us, independence brought no dawn. It brought another long night”.³⁷ This alternative archive of Partition complicates the dominant Hindu-Muslim binary and insists that caste was not erased by the trauma of national division — it was reinforced by it.

Paradox of Invisibility in India and Pakistan

The violence that ensued during partition was organized along a binary that did not have any place for the Dalits. The classification into two separate monolithic groups of the entire population of the subcontinent — helped in the process of double erasure: in Pakistan, Dalits were being forced into an identity that they had not chosen and in India they were being absorbed into a Hindu identity that they had fought against for decades. Both these processes stripped them of the political autonomy and rendered them in Gyanendra Pandey’s words: “nobody’s people”. They were never given the option of which side of the border they want to stay in. It was up to the governments of the two states that their place of living was decided upon that too vastly depended on their labour.

Over the years, dominant Dalit narratives have shown how the Dalits only featured tangentially in the violence that ensued during partition. Where Urvashi Butalia’s interviewee, Maya Rani, plainly and crudely said: “the fighting was between Hindus and Muslims. We didn’t fight with the Muslims, it had nothing to do with us”.³⁸ This was in consonance with a widely circulated joke about the *Chuhra* sweepers of Lahore, who said: “We don’t need to escape to another place and nobody is going to

37 Daya Pawar, *Baluta*, Tr. By Jerry Pinto (Speaking Tiger, 2015), 138.

38 Urvashi Butalia, *The other side of silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, (Penguin Random House, 2013), 8/24.

touch us”.³⁹ Similarly, Akanksha Kumar’s interviewees said that they left Pakistan because of fear of violence and communal riots that had already started in their villages.⁴⁰ Though, the violence did not touch them, they left the country in fear of the violence that had started. For Maya Rani, her case was similar, but only, that they were in a place that happen to fall inside India. On the other hand, Kumar’s interviewees were from Pakistan and they were considered “caste Hindus”, for which they also had to face the wrath of the rioters, which compelled them to leave the state and come to India. Shekhar Bandopadhyay and Anasuya Roychowdhury’s research also brings out a similar narrative where, *Namasudra* people in East Pakistan had to face the brunt of the state’s police because they were considered as “caste Hindus”. The important thing to note from all these accounts were: the supposed invisibility of Dalits from the communal conflicts and their actual invisibility in the political settlement that followed.

The official drive to segregate everything into homogenous and monolithic categories of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh led to the classification of the entire population into Muslim and non-Muslim. Indian Liaison Officers and evacuation workers operated under the impression that Schedules Castes, because they were classified as Hindu or Sikh, were veritably incapacitated in independent Pakistan and therefore they wished to leave the state. The consequent reports that came out consistently asserted that the Dalit converts were unhappy after being converted and desperately wanted to migrate to East Punjab.⁴¹ An April 1948 estimate, of the people who were still awaiting evacuation from West Punjab showed 25,350 people yet to be evacuated, majority of whom from this group were already converted. The same report also noted that these figures are “very likely” an underestimate. The report also stated that all those people who had till then refused to migrate to India would do now when they would see that converts like themselves have also now started migrating.⁴² The word “converted” in these reports appears throughout as an administrative category: as if the people’s religious identity were being processed by the state and not chosen by the community.

Interestingly, for the Indian side, the administrative classification of the Dalits as Hindus went a long way in their decades old attempt at getting the Dalits into the Hindu fold firstly and also it had grave consequences for their rehabilitation in India. The East Punjab government had initially reserved 45 lakh acres of land left by the Muslim evacuees for landowners among the incoming refugees; but it did not include the Harijan refugees here. This can also be evidenced from Kumar’s interviewees who says that they had lands in Pakistan and that they never got any equivalent piece of land after they migrated to India. Therefore, the classification that made the Dalits Hindu enough to evacuate them from

39 Pandey, “Nobody’s People,” 299.

40 Kumar, “Locating Dalits,” 15.

41 Pandey, “‘Nobody’s People,’” 309.

42 Pandey, “‘Nobody’s People,’” 303.

Pakistan did not make them Hindu enough to share in the resources allocated to other upper-caste Hindu refugees on Indian soil. It is imperative to note here, that India needed to claim Dalits as Hindu in order to justify their evacuation from Pakistan and to swell the non-Muslim population counts that ultimately determined the territorial division.

Conclusion

“The problem is not that they are forgotten, but that they were never meant to be remembered”, as Gyanendra Pandey rightfully opines about the depressed population displaced through partition of 1947.⁴³ The epistemic and political marginality of caste in Partition studies is not a gap but a symptom of a larger denial — a refusal to acknowledge how power operates through silence, displacement and misrecognition. The Partition of 1947, remembered for its cataclysmic violence and large-scale population exchanges, has often been narrated through the binaries of Hindu-Muslim communalism and territorial dislocation. Yet, as this paper has attempted to foreground, beneath these dominant narratives lies a quieter, insidious form of violence — one inflicted on caste-marked bodies that were neither adequately recognized by the state nor humanized in the national memory. In both India and Pakistan, the so-called “depressed classes” were not merely refugees; they were caste refugees — rendered surplus to political compassion and reduced to their historical labour utility. Whether it was in the peripheries of Lahore’s sanitation workforce or in the scattered refugee camps of West Bengal, Dalit migrants were absorbed not into citizenship but into the same structures of social and spatial degradation that had marked their lives under colonial rule. In Pakistan, the promise of egalitarian Islam dissolved under the weight of majoritarian politics, while in India, the democratic scaffolding failed to dismantle the upper caste Brahmanical codes embedded in rehabilitation policies. Both states relied on administrative euphemisms and symbolic gestures, but their actions — such as the creation of distant, inhospitable zones like Dandakaranya — betrayed a deeper truth: these communities were never meant to belong; they were only meant to serve.

This history has not ended. In India, sanitation and manual scavenging labour remains disproportionately performed by Dalit communities, notwithstanding the legal prohibition of the practice. Similarly, in Pakistan contestations are still very much present surrounding the issue of recognizing Dalits as a category distinct from the generalized Hindu minority. The vocabulary has transformed — from “depressed classes” and “Harijan” to “Scheduled Caste” and “minority”, but the underlying logic that the paper traced — of Dalit bodies valued only for their labour and denied recognition as citizens, continues to persist into the present day, in both the states.

⁴³ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 25.

This paper, then, is not just a call to reinsert the Dalit subject into the historiography of Partition — it is a call to reframe Partition itself, not as a singular moment of rupture but as an enduring process of exclusion. A process in which caste did not end at the border, but traveled with the body, survived conversion, bypassed citizenship and continued to shape the terrain of the everyday.

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