# *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India,* by Anindita Ghoshal, Routledge (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors), 2025, *xxvi* + 310 pp., price: ₹ 1595.00 (hardback), ISBN – 9780367706951

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Anindita Ghoshal's book *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India* is a significant and timely contribution to refugee studies and South Asian Partition historiography. While much existing scholarship has focused on Punjab's refugee experience, Ghoshal foregrounds the underexamined histories of displacement in Bengal, Assam, and Tripura between 1946 and 1977. The book discusses the large-scale demographic transformations in the eastern borderlands and the complex processes by which refugees negotiated identity, rights, and belonging in postcolonial India. At its core, the work challenges simplistic binaries that have often defined Partition narratives—Hindu/Muslim, Punjabi/Bengali, refugee/citizen—insisting instead that refugee identity was never static or monolithic but "complex and multi-layered," shaped by region, caste, class, and political affiliation. As Ghoshal notes, "the categorisations of refugees were made either as a 'political or economic block' or a 'religious community,' which had negated both the complexity of their compositions and the historical contexts" (Preface, xiii).

The book's Introduction situates the region historically as a space of cultural syncretism, where Hinduism and Islam had coexisted through shared cultural practices in an agrarian context. Ghoshal argues that colonial policies such as the Permanent Settlement disrupted this balance, creating rigid hierarchies that redefined communal relations. Drawing on Richard Eaton's notion of Islam as the "religion of the plough," she shows how religion in Bengal was deeply intertwined with agricultural expansion. The colonial census and administrative practices institutionalized religious identities, encouraging binaries of "Hindu" and "Muslim" and sowing seeds of communal consciousness later exploited by political organizations such as the Congress, the Muslim League, and Hindu Mahasabha. The Introduction thus establishes the central question: why did centuries of coexistence dissolve so quickly under nationalist politics, transforming neighbours into refugees? The Introduction's analytical framing—connecting land, identity, and state policy—makes for a compelling prelude to the study of refugee experience in eastern India.

Chapter 1 explores how Partition produced unprecedented displacement and how the Indian state struggled to define and manage refugees. Ghoshal demonstrates that "the term 'refugee' was more than a literal expression of homelessness and insecurity, and less than a full legal categorisation" (73). Refugee experiences were shaped by the "political culture of contemporary nationalist ideology," where arbitrary labels—

"displaced persons," "evacuees," "illegal infiltrators"—determined entitlements and relief. Policy implementation was inconsistent and discriminatory: while Punjabi refugees benefited from systematic resettlement, Bengali refugees faced *ad hoc*, regionally biased responses. As Ghoshal observes, "the implementation part of the rehabilitation policies was not only uneven … it was further discriminatory" (83). The bureaucratic process of issuing refugee cards, essential for rations, housing, and employment, at once formalized and stigmatized their status.

Chapter 2 deepens this analysis of the discrimination at work in rehabilitation policies. Ghoshal shows that "the process of appropriate arrangements to settle [refugees] permanently and accepting them in the mainstream … was never completed" (93) for Bengali refugees, in contrast to Punjab's swifter resettlement. The Delhi Pact of 1950, intended to stabilize migration, was undermined by the reclassification of refugees as "old migrants," "new migrants," or "illegal migrants," each with differing entitlements. Nehru's justification for denying Bengal a Punjab-style population exchange—that it would create "tremendous misery … which hardly any Government would have been able to face"—left Bengali refugees pressured to resettle in "deserted places" like Dandakaranya (85). Such dispersal severed kinship ties and cultural networks. Ghoshal effectively shows how this process reduced refugees to "dole-beggars," entrenching rather than redressing marginalization.

The demographic and political transformations that occurred in Assam and Tripura are explored in Chapter 3. Here, Ghoshal demonstrates that Partition ruptured earlier migration patterns, replacing them with large-scale movements driven by religious identity: "Hindu refugees from neighbouring areas of East Bengal started crossing notional borders for settling down either in Cachar districts of Assam or the princely state of Tripura" (120). In Assam, fierce resistance to refugee settlement was shaped by linguistic rivalries: "[t]he Assamese were afraid of the prospective numerical strength and the nature of the cultural arrogance of the Bengalis" (120), which translated into policies that obstructed relief and rehabilitation. In Tripura, demographic transformation was even more dramatic: tribals "began to lose their habitat, their land, their hills and their economy to the aggressive refugees" (155), creating resentments that shaped state politics.

In response to this, Chapter 4 explores how East Bengali refugees in West Bengal transformed from vulnerable masses into decisive political actors. Ghoshal argues that "refugees formed a socio-political group with definite religious connotations" who demanded "permanent rehabilitation, a defined national identity, citizenship rights and a share in the power structure" (162). Their politicization stemmed from the Congress's failure to integrate them and perceptions that the Center viewed them as "foreigners" (169). Leftist parties seized this opportunity, "unleashing the spirit of redistribution of wealth and land amongst the refugees" (163), organizing squatters' colonies, satyagrahas, and gheraos (194). The chapter is notable for its attention to gender: East Bengali refugee women, driven by desperation, "came out from the private domain of domesticity" to

become “symbols of courage and determination” (163). These movements helped to reshape Bengal’s politics, culminating in the Left’s rise and later betrayals like the Marichjhhanpi tragedy (195). In Chapter 5, this analysis is extended to Assam and Tripura, where refugee communities evolved into active political forces. Ghoshal argues that “the migration issues, related policies and polities were often contradictory, confusing and complex in the whole of post-1947 Northeast India” (201). In Assam, memories of Sylheti “colonial elites” and entrenched rivalries fuelled resentment, culminating in restrictive measures such as the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950 (208). In Tripura, Bengali refugees quickly became socially and politically dominant, displacing tribals with Congress and Communist support. Organizations such as the Tripura Central Relief and Rehabilitation Association mobilized collective action and shaped state policy (228).

*Refugees, Borders and Identities* excels in its use of diverse sources—archival documents, official reports, newspapers, and oral histories—which give depth and authenticity to the analysis. The interdisciplinary approach—blending history, sociology, and political science—also allows for a nuanced understanding of displacement and identity. The extensive bibliography and glossary enhance its scholarly value, making it a robust resource for further research. The book’s key intellectual contribution is the analysis of refugees as political actors, detailing how refugee organizations and “refugee parties” emerged to negotiate with and challenge state power. Ghoshal’s central thesis—that refugees were not passive recipients of policy but active agents who reshaped the political cultures of Bengal, Assam, and Tripura—is compellingly argued. The work also offers a rigorous critique of state policies and nationalist historiography, showing how categories such as “refugee,” “immigrant,” and “outsider” became exclusionary tools that shaped access to resources and citizenship.

Despite its ambitious scope and rich detail, the book could benefit from deeper engagement with recent scholarship on gendered refugee experiences, which would further extend its analysis. A more robust theoretical framework connecting regional case studies could also enhance conceptual coherence. In places, the abundance of empirical detail overshadows thematic clarity, potentially diluting the narrative’s focus. These minor shortcomings, however, do not detract from the book’s value as a sophisticated, comprehensive study of the refugee experience in East and Northeast India. Indispensable for sociologists, political scientists, and historians of Partition, migration, and the politics of belonging, this is a landmark contribution which centers refugees as protagonists in the remaking of eastern India.