



Partition, Migration, and Socio-Economic and Political Changes in Uttar Dinajpur District of West Bengal (1947-2011)

DR. CHANDAN SINGHA

Guest Lecturer (History P.G. Section)

Saheed Kshudiram College

University of North Bengal

West Bengal, India

Date of Submission: 03-02-2026

Date of Acceptance: 12-02-2026

ABSTRACT: The Partition of India in 1947 created a significant change in the district of Uttar Dinajpur in West Bengal. After the Partition, many people migrated from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to this area. This migration did not occur only once but continued in phases, especially during the 1950 riots and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Due to this, the population of the district increased very fast. Census reports show that the population growth rate was much higher than the West Bengal average. Migration also changed village settlement patterns and land ownership. Many refugees settled on unused lands and made new colonies. Politically, refugees played an essential role in supporting left-wing parties through land reforms and rehabilitation programs. Economically, the district remained largely dependent on agriculture, but land fragmentation and the lack of industry created problems. Literacy, health services, and infrastructure also remained weaker compared to other districts. Even today, Uttar Dinajpur faces many challenges like poverty, unemployment, and migration for work. This study highlights how the Partition left long-term effects on the district's society, politics, and economy.

KEYWORDS: Partition, Migration, Uttar Dinajpur, Bangladesh Liberation War, West Dinajpur district, Refugee Settlement.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most important events in Indian history. It divided Bengal into two parts and created a new international border. Uttar Dinajpur, located in North Bengal, was deeply affected by this change.

Unlike Punjab, where violence was sudden and large-scale, the migration in Uttar Dinajpur happened slowly over many years.¹The Radcliffe Line divided Dinajpur into two parts. Families, markets, and social connections were broken overnight. Many Hindu families from East Pakistan crossed the border and entered West Bengal. This created a long-term refugee problem in this region. The migration affected not only the population but also changed land distribution, politics, village life, and economic conditions. This study examines how migration and settlement after Partition influenced the social, political, and financial structures of Uttar Dinajpur since 1947.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PARTITION AND ITS IMMEDIATE IMPACT

After Partition, North Bengal did not face massive violence like Punjab, but there was still fear and uncertainty. Many Hindu families left East Pakistan due to insecurity and communal tension.² West Dinajpur district (which later became Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur in 1992) received a large number of refugees. The government had to open refugee camps and provide relief. This became a major administrative challenge. Another significant change occurred in 1956, when parts of Bihar were added to West Dinajpur district under the State Reorganization Act.³ Later in 1992, West Dinajpur was divided into two districts- Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur. Blocks such as Raiganj, Islampur, Chopra, Goalpokhar, Karandighi, Hemtabad, and others became part of Uttar Dinajpur.⁴



III. NATURE OF MIGRATION AND REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

The migration to Uttar Dinajpur occurred in stages. At first, many migrants were educated and came from upper-caste Hindu families. They mostly settled near towns. Later, poorer rural people also arrived, with very few resources. Many refugees settled in camps first. Later, they formed colonies and even occupied unused lands. These squatter settlements were often built on wastelands. Refugees cleared the land and started cultivation. This changed the rural settlement structure and also affected land ownership patterns.⁵

IV. MIGRATION PATTERNS AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Migration in Uttar Dinajpur was not limited to one time. It occurred in several phases⁶:

1. Immediately after Partition (1947).
2. Significant migration during the 1950 communal riots.

3. Another primary wave during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.
4. Later internal and seasonal migration for work.

In the 2001 Census, population growth in Uttar Dinajpur outpaced the state average, reflecting not only demographic momentum but also ongoing migration.⁷

Despite efforts at relief and rehabilitation, government schemes often failed to keep pace with needs. Early rehabilitation favored settlement near towns or industrial centers, but refugee cultivators also seized wasteland for agriculture, dramatically altering land use. Records of trespassers or later arrivals remain incomplete.

Census data shows that population growth in this region was extremely high. The district saw tremendous growth during the 1951-61 and 1961-71 decades. In the 1951 census, about 115,510 people said they came from East Bengal due to Partition. The highest migration was recorded in 1950.⁸

TABLE 1. DISPLACED POPULATION IN WEST DINAJPUR FROM 1946 TO 1951

Year	Males	Females
1946	162	60
1947	3816	3410
1948	6271	8253
1949	5701	7459
1950	42585	33074
1951	1096	1019

Source: Census 1951, West Bengal, District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, p. 13

TABLE 2. TOTAL NUMBER OF MIGRANTS OF WEST DINAJPUR DISTRICT IN THE 1961 CENSUS

Total migrants		Males	Females
Total	273,771	144,838	128,933
Rural	210,456	108,959	101,497
Urban	63,315	35,879	27,436

Source: Census 1961, West Bengal, District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, p. 45

In the 1961 census of India, in the West Dinajpur District, only 366 persons returned themselves as belonging to non-Indian nationalities. Of them, 312 claimed to be Pakistani nationals. Nepal nationals numbered 44. They account for 15.1 percent of the total migrants to the district's rural areas and 6.4 percent of the total urban migrants.

About 62.9 percent of the total migrants were born in Pakistan. They make up 61.1 percent among males and 65 percent among females. Among persons from other states of India, the contribution of Bihar is the greatest, accounting for about 20.2 percent of the total migrants into the district.⁹



TABLE 3. DECADAL VARIATION AND PERCENTAGE OF DECADE VARIATION OF POPULATION FROM 1951-1971 CENSUS

Census Year	Population	Decadal Variation	Percentage of Decade Variation
1951	976,882	+142,156	17.03
1961	1,323,798	+346,915	35.51
1971	1,859	+536,098	+40.50

Source: District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part X-C, 1971, p. 4

In the 1971 census of India, West Dinajpur district recorded very high population growth due to migration from East Pakistan during the Bangladesh turmoil. The Decadal growth for 1961-1971 was 40.50 percent, the highest for any district. An essential aspect of the district's population growth is that the newly created Islampur Subdivision (which was transferred from Purnea, Bihar) has witnessed

tremendous growth since the late fifties. In 1951-1961, the rate of population growth in Islampur was 47.9 percent, as against 37.9 percent and 23 percent in the Raiganj and Balurghat Subdivisions, respectively. During 1961-1971, the growth rate of the Islampur district was 50.08 percent, while the two other subdivisions, taken together, had a growth rate of only 36.14 percent.¹⁰

TABLE 4. PERCENTAGE DECADE VARIATION IN SUBDIVISION OF WEST DINAJPUR (LATER PART OF NORTH DINAJPUR)

Subdivisions	1941-1951	1951-1961	1961-1971
Raiganj	18.2	37.9	35.2
Islampur	2.0	47.9	50.08

Source: District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part X-C, 1971, p. 5

Migration played an essential role in shaping the district's demographic situation since independence, disrupting it as violently as it did until 1971.¹¹ The migration pattern changed during 1991-2001. People migrate to other places for work during a particular season and return to their usual place of

residence after three or four months. All such workers are treated as migrants. During this time period, migration has been seen in three ways: (i) migration within the state, (ii) migration from one state to another state of the country, and (iii) migration from one country to another country.¹²

TABLE 5. DECADAL GROWTH RATE (IN PERCENTAGE) OF THE POPULATION OF UTTAR DINAJPUR FROM 1951-2011

T/R/U	1951-1961	1961-1971	1971-1981	1981-1991	1991-2001	2001-2011
Total	43.8	43.0	30.2	34.0	28.7	23.2
Rural	37.2	42.3	28.6	27.6	30.6	23.2
Urban	263.7	52.3	48.5	98.8	16.4	23.0

Source: District Census Handbook, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part A & B, 2001, p. 20; District Census Handbook, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part XII-A, 2011, p. 40.

From the above table, it can be observed that during 1981-1991, the decadal growth rate has been on a declining trend and a drastic decline during 1971-1981 (12.8 percent).

V. SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS; IDENTITY POLITICS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Refugees played an essential role in politics. Many of them supported left parties



because they got help through land reforms and rehabilitation schemes. Over time, political activities became strongly linked with refugee identity and demands.¹³ However, migration also created tensions. Refugees and local people competed for land, jobs, and government services. Groups like Rajbanshis and other local communities sometimes felt neglected. This situation increased identity politics in the district. Politics often became divided based on caste, religion, economic status, and origin (local vs migrant). Refugees also created their own institutions, such as clubs, associations, and social groups. This helped them, but also created separate social divisions.¹⁴

VI. ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE

Partition also caused many administrative changes. Since Dinajpur was divided, West Bengal had to reorganize the district system. In 1992, Uttar Dinajpur was formed as a separate district for better administration. New blocks, police stations, and panchayat structures were created. The government tried to improve infrastructure and services, but the results were mixed. Some areas developed better, while many remote blocks remained backward.

VII. ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Agricultural Change and Land Tenure

Agriculture remained the main occupation of the people. Refugees were mainly settled as

cultivators or agricultural labourers. But due to rapid population growth, land was divided into smaller parcels. This reduced productivity. Many people became landless or had tiny land holdings. Unemployment and poverty increased.¹⁵

Uttar Dinajpur did not develop strong industries. Only a few agro-based rice mills exist. Some cottage industries and handloom work are present. Sericulture is one notable activity, especially in Karandighi and nearby areas. The silk produced here is considered of good quality. But overall, poor roads, weak transport, and a lack of industries slowed economic development. Many people migrate outside the district in search of jobs. Blocks like Goalpokhar and Islampur are still lagging behind Raiganj.¹⁶

VIII. GENDER, EDUCATION, AND HEALTH

Migration affected women in many ways. Women faced difficulties in refugee camps and colonies. They became more vulnerable during displacement. Literacy rates improved slowly but remained lower than the West Bengal average. For example, in 2011, Uttar Dinajpur had a literacy rate of 59.1%, while West Bengal had a literacy rate of 76.3%.

Health and education facilities are also weaker, especially in rural areas. Government programs like Sarba Shiksha Abhiyan helped, but improvement is still limited.

TABLE 6. COMPARATIVE LITERARY RATE, WEST BENGAL AND UTTAR DINAJPUR, WITH CHANGE IN DECENNIAL PERCENTAGE POINT IN PARENTHESES FROM 1951- 2011

Year	West Bengal	Uttar Dinajpur
1951	25.0	14.0
1961	34.5	20.7
1971	38.9	27.0
1981	46.3	31.1
1991	57.7	34.6
2001	68.6	47.9
2011	76.3	59.1

Source: District Census Handbook, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part A & B, 2001, p. 23; District Census Handbook, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part XII-A, 2011, p. 43.



The table above shows that the district's literacy rate has consistently been lower than the state average during the 1951-2001 censuses. During the 2001 census, the literacy rate in Uttar Dinajpur district was 47.9 percent, well below the state average of 68.6 percent.

IX. PERSISTENT ISSUES AND WAY FORWARD

Even after many decades, Uttar Dinajpur continues to face problems due to its historical background. The Partition created long-term pressure on land and resources. The district needs special attention in areas such as: better agricultural productivity, Stronger health infrastructure, More schools and improved literacy, Better roads and transport, Industrial development and employment opportunities, and Social harmony between migrants and local communities. If these steps are taken, the district can overcome its backwardness and grow in a balanced way.¹⁷

X. CONCLUSION

The partition of 1947 changed Uttar Dinajpur forever. The district faced continuous migration from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. Migration increased the population rapidly and changed settlement patterns. Refugees created new colonies and occupied wastelands, which changed land use and village life. Politically, refugees became a vital force, supporting left-wing politics through rehabilitation and land reforms. But this also created tension with local communities and increased identity-based politics. Economically, the district remained dependent on agriculture, but land division and lack of industries created poverty and unemployment. Literacy and health facilities improved slowly but remained lower than the state average. Even today, the district suffers from poor infrastructure, low development, and labor migration. Therefore, special development programs and inclusive policies are needed to reduce the long-term adverse effects of Partition and build a better future for the people of Uttar Dinajpur.

REFERENCES

- ¹Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India. Orient Longman, 2004, pp. 438-465.
- ² Chatterji, Joya. The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967. Cambridge UP, 2007.
- ³ Roy Chaudhury, P.C., *Bihar District Gazetteers, Purnea*, the Superintendent Secretariat Press, Bihar, Patna, 1968, p. 8
- ⁴ Singha, Dr. Chandan, *Socio-Economic Alterations and Cultural Hybridity of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the Twentieth Century* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of North Bengal), p. 43
- ⁵ Chhotan Basak, "Partition of India and the refugee resettlement in West Dinajpur district (1947-2011): A historical study", *International Journal of History*, 2022, pp. 1-2
- ⁶ Government of India. *Census of India 1951*, p. xiii
- ⁷ Roy, Chandan, "Economic Backwardness of Uttar Dinajpur: A Block Level Analysis", *MPRA Paper No. 40376*, 2011, pp. 5-6.
- ⁸ *Census 1951, West Bengal, District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur*, p. 13
- ⁹ *Census 1961, West Bengal, District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur*, pp. 44-45
- ¹⁰ *District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part X-C, 1971*, pp. 4-5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25
- ¹² *District Census Handbook, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part A & B, 2001*, p. 18.
- ¹³ Kohli, Atul, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*. Cambridge UP, 1990, pp. 140-151
- ¹⁴ *Historical Geography of The Rajbanshis of West Dinajpur*, Social Research Foundation. pp. 1-4.



¹⁵ District Gazetteer: West Dinajpur.
Government of West Bengal, 1967.

¹⁶ Roy, Chandan, "Economic Backwardness of Uttar Dinajpur: A Block Level Analysis", MPRA Paper No. 40376, 2011, pp. 8-9, Census, 2001; District Census Handbook, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, Part XII-A, 2011, p. 19.

¹⁷Ibid.,