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## Bidhan Chandra Roy: A pioneer of social reform Pintu Das

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### Abstract

*Bidhan Chandra Roy is recognised as one of the most prominent figures in Indian history. Starting his career as a physician, he served as the second chief minister of West Bengal. As a physician, politician and social reformer, he dedicated his career to improving public health, education and establishing hospitals and quality medical care across rural and urban Bengal. He believed that social reform depends on healthcare and education, which were the two pillars of society. He established many colleges, universities and medical institutes and also planted modern cities, including Durgapur, Kalyani, and Bidhannagar (Salt Lake City). He played a significant role in bridging the world of politics and professional ethics. He worked clearly to reduce social inequality and improve the lives of the common man. Awarded India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, for his extraordinary contribution and also in his memory, July 1st is celebrated every year as National Doctors' Day. Dr Roy remains an epitome of integrity, compassion and a developmental vision. Combining medical excellence with a commitment to social justice, Dr B.C Roy emerged not only as a healer of individuals but also as a reformer of society, leaving behind a legacy of progress that inspires India.*

**Keywords:** Social reformer, Education, Bengal, Politician, public health

### **Introduction:**

In 1947, after the partition, Bengal was severely affected by the economic, political and social imbalance compared to other states. In this time, one of the leaders who led Bengal to lift it out of such a situation was Bidhan Chandra Roy (1st July 1882-1st July 1962), a prominent leader whose vision and dedication fundamentally transformed the social, educational and healthcare landscape of Bengal in the mid-20th century. He was not only an eminent physician but also served as the second Chief Minister of West Bengal. Dr Roy's social reform efforts were primarily focused on the development of marginalised people and underprivileged communities, through which he expanded access to healthcare, promoted education, facilitated the resettlement of refugees, and implemented comprehensive social welfare programs.

Dr Roy established many medical colleges during his tenure, like Chittaranjan Cancer Hospital, Kamala Nehru Memorial Hospital, etc. He laid great emphasis on health centres, and with the increase in rural population, many health centres were built dramatically during his tenure. He laid special emphasis on education, especially in the field of higher

education. He established many colleges and universities, such as Jadavpur University, Kalyani University and various technical education centres, to allow people to learn through direct practice. He gave equal opportunities in education, which established equality in society.

After the partition, he encountered Namoura's challenge, one of the most pressing being the rehabilitation of incoming refugees. He took significant measures to address these issues by establishing rehabilitation settlements in various locations, including Ashoknagar, Habra. Among his social responsibilities, he rehabilitated these refugees and provided them with equal opportunities and facilities so that they could return to their previous lives. In addition, his leadership not only created planned cities, but also started steel factories, thermal power plants and public welfare projects in various places, including Durgapur, which resulted in economic development and employment opportunities in West Bengal.

Bidhan Chandra Roy emerged as a reformer and visionary leader whose initiative in healthcare, education, refugee rehabilitation and public welfare helped restore stability and progress in Bengal. His work consistently highlighted the values of social justice and inclusive development, setting a lasting example of good governance. Remembered for his transformative reform, his policies continue to inspire a contemporary approach to equitable growth.

### **Healthcare Development:**

Dr. Roy made significant strides in expanding the healthcare infrastructure by establishing numerous hospitals, clinics, and medical colleges, with special focus on the needs of women, children, and refugees. His efforts aimed at improving public health access led to the eradication of major diseases like tuberculosis and malaria, alongside the creation of specialised hospitals such as neurosurgical, tuberculosis, maternal and child health centres.

A frequent visitor to Vienna, Dr. Roy travelled there almost every other year for medical purposes. During one such visit in late 1953, he expressed to Dr. Asoke Kumar Bagchi<sup>1</sup> his desire to establish the first neurosurgical department in Calcutta. To gain firsthand insight, Dr. Bagchi accompanied him to the surgery theatre at Vienna General Hospital, where they observed Dr. Herbert Kraus<sup>2</sup> performing a brain tumour operation. Deeply impressed, Dr. Roy proposed to Dr. Bagchi the creation of a neurosurgical department in Calcutta and arranged for the expert Dr. Kraus to undergo one year of specialised training there.<sup>3</sup>

After the department was established, Dr. Kraus worked with remarkable dedication and skill, which greatly popularised brain surgery among the people not only of West Bengal but also of other states. This initiative marked a milestone in West Bengal's medical history, showcasing Dr. Roy's vision for bringing advanced healthcare services closer to the public. The North Bengal Medical College and Hospital, also the first medical college in the region, was established in 1968. The idea was originally conceived by Bidhan Chandra Roy, its implementation was carried out under the leadership of the then state health minister, Ajit Kumar Panja.<sup>4</sup>

### **Refugee Rehabilitation:**

In the aftermath of India's Partition, Dr. Roy tackled the refugee crisis in West Bengal by reforming the Ministry of Rehabilitation to expedite the resettlement of thousands of displaced refugees from East Pakistan. He directed administrative consolidation for more

effective refugee rehabilitation policies, established relief camps, and coordinated with state and central governments to provide shelter, education, and employment opportunities for refugees. He also advocated for national-level involvement to solve the refugee problem comprehensively and supported projects like the Dandakaranya project to resettle refugees outside Bengal.

Bidhan Chandra Roy faced numerous challenges after taking office as the second Chief Minister of West Bengal, the most important of which was the issue of refugee resettlement. With the cessation of communal violence in East Pakistan after independence, a large number of refugees left their homes and properties and migrated to India. At that time, the government did not establish any dedicated department for relief or resettlement. Not only did the previous Chief Minister assume that the Central government would also assume that once the situation stabilised, these refugees would eventually return to their original places of residence; however, this expectation did not match reality. After taking office, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy took several decisive steps for refugee resettlement. This context also led to tensions with the central government. In the early 1950s, especially after the riots in East Pakistan, the number of migrant refugees in West Bengal increased significantly. Although some individuals were able to secure accommodation through their own efforts, the number of people taking shelter in shelter camps continued to increase.<sup>5</sup>

From January 1950, the number of refugees was 1,150, although it decreased slightly in February. 75,596 in March, 14,960 in April and 27,440 in May came to West Bengal as refugees.<sup>6</sup> Although Bidhan Chandra Roy did not openly oppose the different policies adopted by the Central Government for the refugees of East Pakistan and West Pakistan. But he wrote a letter to the Prime Minister protesting the discrimination and deprivation of relief and rehabilitation provided to the refugees by the central government and stating that the amount of assistance provided by the central government was meagre.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the sudden influx of refugees from West Pakistan immediately after Partition, migration from East Pakistan occurred gradually. Between 1946 and 1956, a total of 41 lakh 17 thousand refugees entered Bengal.<sup>8</sup> Bidhan Chandra Roy acquired 29,084 acres of land for the rehabilitation of refugees, where 20,010 displaced families were resettled. Additionally, 20,000 houses were secured, providing shelter to nearly 100,530 displaced people. Beyond this, around 10,000 acres of government *khas* land were distributed among refugees, while many refugees also forcibly occupied both agricultural and non-agricultural land, amounting to 53,826 acres of agricultural land and 68,335 acres of non-agricultural land.<sup>9</sup>

As the influx of refugees continued to rise, arrangements were initially made to accommodate nearly two lakh refugees in various relief camps. However, with the steady increase in numbers, the refugee crisis became increasingly complex. In response, during 1957–58, the central government established the Dandakaranya Refugee Rehabilitation Project, covering an area of about 80 square miles. This initiative, later known as the Dandakaranya Development Authority, was aimed at providing organised settlement and rehabilitation for the displaced population.<sup>10</sup>

### **Educational Initiatives:**

Dr. Roy promoted education for marginalised groups by founding and supporting several educational and technical institutions, including the Indian Institute of Social Welfare and

Business Management, the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta, engineering colleges, and universities, to enhance opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged populations.<sup>11</sup>

During this period, greater emphasis was placed on the establishment of universities rather than on primary or upper primary education. Several institutions, such as Jadavpur University, Burdwan University, Kalyani University, and Rabindra Bharati University, were founded. The government justified this expansion by arguing that Calcutta University not only had to impart education but also bore the burden of affiliating and supervising colleges, which created additional responsibilities and ultimately hampered the quality of education. To ease this pressure and to extend higher education opportunities to remote regions, new universities were set up. Initially, Birla Agricultural College in Haranghata and Kalyani Teachers Training College were both affiliated to Kalyani University. The agricultural university itself was built on 200 acres of land, while an additional 150 acres were allocated for a central research laboratory, which included agricultural and vegetable gardens, as well as poultry and dairy facilities.<sup>12</sup>

### **Social Welfare and Urban Development:**

He contributed to the development of urban infrastructure and welfare homes for the destitute and underprivileged. He was instrumental in city planning and development of new townships like Salt Lake (Bidhannagar) and industrial cities such as Kalyani and Durgapur, which indirectly benefited marginalised communities by creating jobs and improving living conditions. Alongside his institutional initiatives, Dr. Roy personally devoted time each day to treating poor patients and even donated his own property to expand healthcare access for marginalised communities, demonstrating his profound commitment to social welfare at the grassroots level.

One of the notable social initiatives of Bidhan Chandra Roy was the Haringhata Milk Scheme. To develop this project, he visited the Milk Colony in Bombay and envisioned a modern, scientific system of milk production for Bengal. His plan aimed at removing the traditional cattle sheds from Calcutta and establishing a new colony at Haringhata, located some distance away from the city. Around three thousand acres of land were allocated for this purpose, providing sufficient fodder for the cattle and leaving scope for future expansion.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Haringhata Milk Colony was successfully set up, it faced a major challenge: its location was nearly 80 kilometres from Calcutta, which made the transportation of milk difficult. To address this problem, another milk colony was later established in Belgachia, within Calcutta itself. Despite these challenges, the Haringhata project played a crucial role in alleviating the food crisis in Bengal after Partition. At its peak, the Haringhata Milk Colony supplied nearly ten thousand litres of milk daily.<sup>14</sup>

The First Five-Year Plan was launched in 1951, with the primary objective of achieving food self-sufficiency and addressing the issue of unemployment. Among the notable developmental initiatives during this period were the Mayurakshi Project (1951) and the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) Project, which included the establishment of a thermal power plant at Bokaro. Alongside these, a series of dams and irrigation schemes were undertaken on various rivers, supported by the *Jaladhar* program, with the goal of irrigating nearly ten lakh acres of land.

The DVC was envisioned to meet three critical needs of West Bengal: adequate power generation, flood control, and irrigation. However, the central government displayed considerable reluctance in supporting the initiative. According to the Damodar Valley Act, no other institution was permitted to generate electricity within the area under the corporation's jurisdiction. When the Planning Commission was formed, its chairman, Gujarilal Nanda, even requested that the Act be withdrawn. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, however, stood firm in his stance. He declared unequivocally that he wanted the thermal power plant and would not tolerate external interference in the matter. Under his determined leadership, the DVC project was successfully implemented.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, his vision extended beyond power generation he also established the Chittaranjan Locomotive Works, which became a landmark in India's industrial growth and demonstrated his remarkable foresight.<sup>16</sup>

Another significant initiative of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy was the Durgapur project, which was undertaken in 1954 through industrial planning. Durgapur casually became an industrial city in West Bengal, along with the Steel factories; several other industries were established there, transforming Durgapur into an economic hub. This project not only increases industrial production but also opens up new avenues of employment, giving a new direction to the workers of West Bengal.

### **Conclusion:**

Bidhan Chandra Roy began his career as a doctor, and he rose to prominence as Chief Minister of West Bengal, earning the title of the 'Architect of Bengal'. After India's independence, West Bengal faced some of the most severe challenges in the country. When he assumed office, the foremost crisis was the massive influx of refugees, compounded by the pressing needs of food, shelter, and employment. If we analyse his period of leadership in stages, the first and most urgent issue he had to address was the refugee crisis, followed by unemployment, food scarcity, and finally the broader task of ensuring the state's overall development. He also laid the foundation for planned cities and sought to improve the quality of life of the people through systematic reforms and policies.

Being a doctor himself, Bidhan Chandra Roy clearly understood the urgent need for progress in the medical field. From the very beginning of his tenure, he concentrated on establishing new hospitals and modernising the existing ones. After Partition, unemployment became another pressing issue, prompting him to set up several universities and technical institutes. He placed great emphasis on technical education, which helped people become self-reliant. However, his comparatively limited focus on primary, secondary, and higher secondary education drew criticism from the opposition. During Bidhan Chandra Roy's tenure, the majority of educational funding was directed toward higher education, while primary and secondary levels received comparatively less attention.<sup>17</sup> One possible justification is that a significant number of refugee students had arrived in the state during this period, creating an urgent need for universities and technical institutes to accommodate them.

In almost every major social development initiative he undertook, whether it was building Durgapur city, setting up the steel plant, launching the Chittaranjan Locomotive Works, or advancing the Damodar Valley Corporation, he faced resistance not only from the opposition but also from the central government led by his own party. As a result, considerable time was lost in carrying these projects forward. Yet, despite such obstacles

and criticism, Bidhan Chandra Roy's legacy endures as the architect of modern Bengal.<sup>18</sup> In recognition of his contributions, he was honoured with the 'Bharat Ratna', and today, National Doctors' Day is observed in his memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ashok Kumar Bagchi was a renowned neurologist, educationist and writer who had a deep personal relationship with Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy. Born in 1925, he matriculated from Gopal Chandra Institution, Pabna, completed his MBBS from Carmichael Medical College in 1948 and his Master's in Neurosurgery from the Post-Graduate Academy, Vienna Medical College in 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Herbert Kraus was a pioneering Austrian neurosurgeon and neurologist who became the first chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at the Medical School of the University of Vienna in 1964. Under his leadership, specialised neurosurgical departments were established in Vienna, which included paediatric and stereotactic neurosurgery, and advanced techniques such as micro neurosurgery were introduced after 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Bagchi, Ashok kr, *Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, A Jewel Of India*. The Asiatic Society. Kolkata, 2004, pp. 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> Ajit Kumar Panja served as the Cabinet Minister in the Ministry of Health and Family Planning in the Government of West Bengal from 1972 to 1977. During this tenure, he was responsible for overseeing the state's health policy and family planning initiatives. His role as Health Minister was part of his larger political career, where he also held important positions in the West Bengal government, such as Judiciary, Parliamentary Affairs and Water Supply. Panja later served in various central ministerial positions in the Government of India. His tenure as West Bengal's Health Minister was notable for his efforts to develop public health infrastructure and expand family welfare programmes in the state.

<sup>5</sup> Chakrabarti, Prafulla K. *The Marginal Men*. Lumiere Books, Calcutta, 1990, p.16.

<sup>6</sup> Bandhyapadhyaya, Hiranmay. *Udbastu*. Sahitya Sansad. Kolkata, 1970, pp. 92-93.

<sup>7</sup> Chakraborty, Saroj. *With Dr. B.C. Roy and other Chief Ministers*. Benson's, Calcutta, 1974, pp. 140-42.

<sup>8</sup> *Proceedings of the West Bengal legislative assembly*, 1951 volume. iii no.2, p.692.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.693.

<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, Alok Kumar. Bengali refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation, Pradip Kumar Bose(ed), *Refugees in West Bengal* (Calcutta Research Group, 1999) Calcutta, pp. 106-129.

<sup>11</sup> Sengupta, Nitish K. *Builders of Modern India: Bidhan Chandra Roy*. Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2016, pp.108-109.

<sup>12</sup> *Universities Handbook India*, Volume 17, Inter-University Board, New Delhi, 1973, pp.396-97.

<sup>13</sup> Chakraborty, Saroj, *op.cit.*, p.40.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 241-42.

<sup>15</sup> Sengupta, Nitish K. *op.cit.*, p.84.

<sup>16</sup> Sengupta, Nitish, *Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy: Jibon o Somokal*. Dey's Publication, Kolkata, 1960, p.86.

<sup>17</sup> *Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly*. vol. II, no. 1, no-1, 1948, p. 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Sengupta, Nitish, *op.cit.*, p.1