



**Politics, Displacement and Identity: Kazakh  
refugees from Xinjiang in Bhopal  
during World War II**

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# **Politics, Displacement, and Identity: Kazakh refugees from Xinjiang in Bhopal during World War II**

## **Abstract**

The 1940s saw an unprecedented movement of thousands of Kazakhs from northern Xinjiang province in China to British India. Many of them ended up in Bhopal, a city in Central India completely different from the environs that these nomadic people were used to. Based on materials in the National Archives of India, this study explores the factors leading to this unusual and understudied phenomenon. It also explores how the Kazakh refugees adapted to their new circumstances and alien environment, as well as the knotty questions of nationality, identity, and jurisdiction that their arrival in India posed to the government of British India, Republican China, and the then princely state of Bhopal. It suggests that the presence of these Kazakh refugees in India reflects the complicated geopolitics of the wider region as well as the relative fluidity of borders and increased movement of peoples during World War II.

**Keywords:** Xinjiang, Refugees, National Archives of India, World War II

## **Introduction**

This is a micro-history about a group of several hundred Kazakhs from Xinjiang who, during World War II, migrated en masse to Bhopal, which is about 2500 km away as the crow flies. Overland movement of people between different parts of China and northern India was not unusual, but a mass flight of this nature was unprecedented.

The aim of this study, however, is not just to tell their story, unusual and dramatic though it may be. The larger significance of the odyssey of these Kazakhs is that it was intricately connected with several major developments taking place in the wider region and the world at this time. It throws light on the volatile politics within China, the delicate state of the wartime alliance between Britain and China, the fraught relations between the governments of Republican China, British India, and Tibet, the strength of Islamic networks, and the sometimes prickly relationship between the GOI and the Indian princely states. How this community of Kazakh refugees navigated all these complexities and managed to survive as a group, although with great losses, is quite extraordinary.

The story presented here is based largely on documents found in the National Archives of India. It is strange that, despite the fact that there are hundreds of pages of documents in the Archives about these Kazakh refugees, not much seems to have been written about them. Compared to the reams that have been written about, for instance, the Polish wartime refugees in Jamnagar, Gujarat, there is hardly anything one can find even on the internet about these Kazakhs. There are a few studies about the presence of Xinjiang Kazakh refugees in Turkey, that go into the history of their exodus, but even these hardly pay attention to the ten years that they spent in South Asia before they eventually proceeded to Turkey. (Kara 2019, Noda 2019)

## **Exodus from Xinjiang**

The Kazakhs were the second largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, after the Uighurs, and at the time that we are concerned with, numbered a little less than 450,000. (Benson 1990: 30) They were pastoral nomads who moved eastwards into the northern regions of Xinjiang in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Compared to the relatively loose domination exercised by the Qing empire (1644-1911), the warlord governors who ruled Xinjiang after the 1911 Revolution, particularly Sheng Shicai, sought to consolidate their power over the province. In this process, they came into conflict with the fiercely independent Kazakhs. Various measures taken by Sheng to keep the Kazakhs under tight control were deeply resented. These included curtailment of the education of Kazakhs in their own language, confiscation of their land, imposition of heavy taxes, and the arrests of some of their leaders. Faced with these challenges, some leaders of the Kazakhs from the Qumul and Barkol regions met clandestinely in August 1935 and considered getting help from Ma Bufang, a fellow Muslim and the general controlling the neighbouring provinces of Gansu and Qinghai. From the spring of 1936, one group of Kazakhs after another began to move to Gansu. On the way, they had to engage in fierce fighting with the troops of Sheng Shicai, but apparently received a cordial reception once they arrived in Gansu. A total of about 18,000 Kazakhs, including women and children, thus moved out of Xinjiang in this period, accompanied by their livestock and pack animals. (Kara 2019: 3-4)

The migrating Kazakhs spent about two years in Gansu, and another year in Qinghai, before they decided to move again. The reasons for this move are not clear. According to one report, the Kazakhs, unable to support themselves in their traditional way while in Qinghai, began to resort to robbery and pillaging. This brought them into conflict with the local people. (National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 104-9) However, according to another version, General Ma Bukang, who controlled the area where the Kazakhs resided, was under pressure from the National-ist Government at Nanjing, with whom he was allied, to drive the Kazakhs back to Xinjiang. He began to harass the Kazakhs, confiscating their horses and guns. (Kara 2019: 4)

Under these circumstances, in 1939, groups of Kazakhs again began to move. This time they headed towards Tibet. On the way, troops sent by Ma Bukang attempted to block their passage and Tibetan troops tried to stop them at the border. The Kazakhs however could not be stopped from entering Tibet. There followed a tortuous passage through Tibet that lasted two years, during which the Kazakhs apparently resorted to loot and plunder to sustain themselves in the face of hostility from the local people. Despite losing many of their numbers due to the harsh conditions, including one of their main leaders, as well as much of their livestock, the Kazakhs kept moving. Tibetan troops pressed them all the way to western Tibet and attempted to head them off in the direction of Ladakh in India.

### **Travails in India**

The decision to head for India, however, may not have been forced on the Kazakhs by the pursuing Tibetan forces but could have been a well-considered decision taken by them. This can be understood in the context of the times. At a time when both the eastern and western parts of Asia had been turned into active theatres of war, and when China itself was in the throes of domestic conflict and foreign occupation, India presented itself as a relatively safe space. Thousands of refugees, evacuees, deportees, and stranded persons of different nationalities poured into India during the War by sea and overland routes. The fleeing Kazakhs were running out of options, and making for India was not an illogical move on their part.

However, the troubles of the Kazakhs did not end at the borders of India. Troops of the Kashmir state fired on them when they appeared at the border of Ladakh near Demchok, killing several of them. It was only when they laid down their arms that they were permitted to enter the state. They were then taken to a camp near Muzaffarabad. The difficult journey over the Zoji La pass from Ladakh proved too much for many of the refugees, already weakened by their passage through Tibet. A number of them died of exhaustion and cold. Moreover, arrangements at the Muzaffarabad camp were primitive. Poor sanitary conditions, shortage of food, and disease led to the deaths of nearly one thousand of the refugees there. (Kara 2019: 5)

In contrast to the grudging tolerance shown by the state authorities in Kashmir under the rule of the Dogras, local Muslim leaders were stirred to action by the conditions of the Kazakh refugees. They tried to organize help and put pressure on the authorities to take remedial action. Among them was Sheikh Abdullah, later the Prime Minister of Jammu & Kashmir in independent India. The Muslim League also interested themselves in the condition of the Kazakh refugees and visited their camp. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 107) Partly due to the efforts of these individuals and organizations, the government of British India eventually assumed responsibility for the Kazakhs. After six months, it relocated the refugees from Muzaffarabad to a camp in the Hazara district of the then North West Frontier Province, where conditions were apparently a considerable improvement from their earlier camp. Nevertheless, the cumulative effects of the trauma that they had endured, coupled with the heat in the summer of 1942, took their toll. Of the 2548 refugees in the camp, nearly 650 died in the first year after their arrival. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 104) Two-thirds of these died in the first four months alone. But by the following winter, the health of the refugees began to improve, and the number of deaths in the camp greatly reduced.

As the immediate issues of shelter and health began to get resolved, the attention of the authorities turned to putting a basic administrative system in place and providing sustenance to the Kazakhs. Overall, the authorities found little occasion to interfere in the activities of the Kazakhs in camp, who were governed on most matters by the two pashas ('kings') and several wazirs among them. The refugees were not confined to the camp and were allowed to move more or less freely in and out of the camp and to visit neighbouring towns and villages as they pleased.

However, the issue of providing a livelihood was more problematic. The Kazakhs were cut off from their traditional means of livelihood and had lost much of their livestock as well as possessions en route. Initially, Muslim voluntary organizations like the Red Crescent Society and the Kazak Relief Committee of Abbottabad raised funds and donated food, clothing, and medicines, as well as some cash. The administration also set up a system of providing basic weekly rations of food, fuel, and fodder. With the encouragement of the administration and the voluntary organizations, some of the Kazakhs turned to trade and tried their hand at new occupations like shoemaking to supplement their income.



By January 1943, the Government of India felt that the condition of the Kazakhs had stabilized to the extent that it could consider shifting them to a more permanent settlement elsewhere. Two possible sites presented themselves -- in Hyderabad and in Bhopal. The rulers of both these states had visited the Kazakh camp in person and extended offers of hospitality to them when the distressed situation of the Kazakh refugees in India became more widely known. While the Government of India lost no time in accepting their offer, the Kazakhs themselves have split down the middle over the issue of moving once again, and this time to a part of India known to have a warm climate. In the end, it was only a group of 588 Kazakh men, women and children who left for Bhopal by train on 4 April, 1943. The 651 Kazakhs who remained behind thereafter began to trickle out of the camp, looking for opportunities wherever they could find them. By early May, no one was left in the camp, and it was closed down.

The Bhopal Government under Nawab Hamidullah Khan set up a Bhopal State Kazak Committee to monitor arrangements at the camp for the Kazakhs that was set up at Putlighar, a suburb of Bhopal, on the grounds of a rundown factory. It was decided to give each of the Kazakhs a maintenance allowance for themselves and their animals for a period of only one year, after which it was expected that the Kazakhs would learn to become self-supporting. Again, this proved to be problematic. An attempt to induce the Kazakhs to take up agriculture was, as an official memo admitted, "an utter failure", with the Kazakhs abandoning their plots and returning to the city. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 170) Recruiting them for military service was considered, but the Kazakhs were opposed to it. The factory on the grounds of the Putlighar camp could not provide steady employment. Ultimately, with the encouragement of the Bhopal authorities, many of the Kazakh refugees tried to sustain themselves by making or embroidering items like shoes, caps, bags, table cloths, and so on.

The lack of suitable employment or income was certainly a major reason for the Kazakhs to feel dissatisfied and unsettled. Officials blamed the difficulty that the Kazakhs faced in settling down anywhere in India on their nomadic way of life. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 170) Nevertheless, the Kazakhs had in some ways certainly adapted to the conditions they found in India. In stark contrast to their record of fighting and pillaging, while they were on the move from Xinjiang to India, the Kazakh refugees were largely peaceable while in India. Apart from

their tendency to wander and to not stick to any particular occupation, they do not appear to have troubled the authorities unduly.

### **Under whose jurisdiction?**

After relocating the Kazakhs in Bhopal, the Government of India was happy to wash its hands off them. As a note to the authorities in Bhopal about the refugees reads: "Now that they are safely settled in, the Government of India consider that their responsibilities in this matter have ceased.... Government is most happy to leave it entirely in the hands of the state authorities." (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 93) However, just when it seemed that the problem of the Kazakhs had been settled, a new concern arose. In June 1944, nearly three years after the Kazakhs entered India, the Chinese Consul General in Calcutta, CJ Pao, informed the GOI that a group of Kazakhs had come to meet him and had requested his help. He expressed a wish to visit their camp at Bhopal. Once the Government of China started to get involved, the GOI found it difficult to take a backseat.

Until this time, the Kazakhs were viewed by the GOI largely as a domestic concern, and as objects of charity. With the Chinese CG's letter, their identity as foreign nationals and the question of who had responsibility for them came to the fore. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 78) As far as the Government of India was concerned, they considered it very irregular that the Chinese Consul General had first communicated directly with the Government of Bhopal about the Kazakhs, and that the Nawab of Bhopal had responded by directly inviting the Consul General to visit their camp. During CJ Pao's visit to Bhopal, the Government of India's Political Agent there made sure that he stuck to him like a leech throughout his trip. As far as the Bhopal government was concerned, it made it clear that while it welcomed the visit, it was not to be construed as an official visit, and certainly not as an inspection, since it considered the Kazakhs to be subjects of the Bhopal state. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 89-91) The Chinese Government, meanwhile, while expressing gratitude for the help rendered by India, made it clear that it meant taking full responsibility for the Kazakhs and their welfare as Chinese citizens. Moreover, it attempted to take measures to discipline the Kazakhs and mould them into responsible Chinese citizens, through various educational and public health measures that it sought to introduce into their camp. What was interesting was that none of the concerned

authorities seemed to be able to make the Kazakhs do their bidding and so for the most part, little changed on the ground, and the Kazakhs remained where they were, moving freely in and out of the camp, and collecting their rations and stipends on a weekly basis.

### **Independence, Partition, and the eventual fate of the Kazakhs**

The Chinese authorities broached the subject of repatriating the Kazakhs to Xinjiang with the Government of India. This initiative seemed to be connected with various political developments taking place in Xinjiang and China at that time. In 1944, the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kai-shek managed to reassert its control over Xinjiang, ending the rule of Sheng Shicai. Arranging for the return of the Kazakhs who had fled Sheng Shicai's rule could have been viewed as one way of signifying the re-establishment of its authority over the province. Furthermore, in 1945, a rebellion against Chinese rule broke out in the northern Ili region of Xinjiang, and the possibility of organizing the Kazakhs in India and sending them back to fight the rebels was also considered. Eventually, both the Government of India and the Chinese govt realized that the logistical problems of shifting them back during wartime were too formidable. (NAI, For & Pol, 54-F.E./44: 47-8) Later, after the end of the War, and as the civil war between the Guomindang and the Communists in China intensified after 1947, the possibility of sending the Kazakhs back to fight - this time against the Communists in Xinjiang - was again considered by the Guomindang government. A few hundred actually did go back to China for this purpose around 1948. (Hsiao YEAR: 2010, 109-10)

Developments in the Indian subcontinent also affected the fate of the Kazakhs. With the partition between India and Pakistan and the merger of the princely states into these two new states, the previous arrangements could not be sustained. The Kazakhs in Bhopal left, some for Srinagar but mostly for Pakistan. In Pakistan, they formed an East Turkestan Kazakh Refugees Association. From there, a joint application was sent through the Association to the Government of Turkey to allow them to emigrate to Turkey, citing linguistic and cultural affinities. Eventually, in 1952, the Turkish government permitted hundreds of these Kazakhs to resettle in Turkey, along with the second wave of Kazakhs who fled Xinjiang after the Communist takeover. (Kara 2019: 7-8) Thus it transpired that, for some of the Kazakhs who

had set forth from Xinjiang in 1936, an epic journey of more than 15 years and several thousand kilometers finally came to an end.

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This movement of Kazakhs from Xinjiang to Bhopal could perhaps be viewed as part of the regular flow of people and goods between China and South Asia that had been going on for centuries. At the same time, there are some marked differences from the normal pattern in this particular case. In the first place, it was more common to find Uyghur merchants from southern Xinjiang coming to Ladakh and Kashmir than Kazakh nomads from northern Xinjiang. Secondly, this was a mass migration, and one triggered by political rather than economic factors. But perhaps the most significant difference is the salience of the issue of citizenship and identity in this case. The new regimes of border controls and defined citizenship made the traditional flows of people increasingly problematic and traumatic for those on the move. The borders were at this stage still not as rigid as they were to become later, which is why a group of hundreds of nomads with their livestock was allowed to cross the border at all. But we can already see the coming to the fore of border and citizenship issues in this case of the Kazakh refugees.

This episode of the Xinjiang Kazakhs in Bhopal is illustrative of the special nature of India-China interactions in the period of World War II. This was a period characterized by a rapid expansion and diversification of the interactions between India and China. These interactions were both state-driven exchanges as well as a product of initiatives taken by countless individuals and groups trying their best in the difficult wartime conditions to make a life for themselves.

The wartime alliance between British India and Nationalist China gave rise to a major expansion of official exchanges in fields as diverse as diplomacy, military cooperation, telecommunications, banking and finance, aviation, scientific and technical cooperation, education, and so on. Apart from this, overland trade between India and China, although not new by any means, also expanded and acquired greater significance as a way of supplying China with much-needed goods at a time when Nationalist China's access to the sea was blocked by the Japanese occupation.

At the same time, the footfall of ordinary Chinese in India also greatly increased during World War II. The ranks of the Chinese migrant community in India swelled with the arrival of refugees, deportees, evacuees, army deserters, stranded seamen, and traders, along with Chinese students, officials, military officers, and others arriving in India or transiting through India to other countries. The Kazakh refugees in Bhopal were one such contingent. Strictly speaking, these Kazakhs were not war refugees, as their displacement was due to internal politics in China rather than to actual wartime hostilities. Nevertheless, their arrival and stay in India were facilitated and affected by the wartime alliance between British India and Nationalist China, the difficulties faced by the Nationalist Govt during the War, and by its policies towards overseas Chinese in this period. While routes of trade and pilgrimage between western China and India had been active for centuries, it was the wartime conditions, this episode suggests, that permitted a group of several thousand Kazakh refugees to arrive in India with their livestock and pack animals and arms in hand, and be given a home in Bhopal for several years.

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