

## Life After Partition: A Study on the Reconstruction of Lives in West Bengal

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The partition of the Indian subcontinent was a watershed in the history of the region. On the one hand, the erstwhile British colonies were being de-colonised immediately after the World War II, and on the other, their political liberation came in a fractured state. The phenomenon of this fractured identity was not only a state affair as such. In fact, the millions living in Punjab and Bengal bore the brunt of partition in a way that still defines their existence in many ways.

The partition of Bengal not only killed thousands of people, but also uprooted and displaced millions from their traditional homeland, their *desh*.<sup>1</sup> Large number of people, either being directly victimised, or due to fear of violence, left their homes, hoping that they would find peace and security on the other side of the border.

For Punjab, partition and exchange of population – the Hindus coming from Western Punjab to India and the Muslims moving from Eastern Punjab into Pakistan – was primarily a one time affair. Of course, the exchange of population in the West was neither peaceful nor voluntary. It was accompanied by large-scale massacres. Nevertheless, the contours of the problem emerged clearly and the matter was more or less settled once and for all.

But, for Bengal, the influx continued for many years after partition, and continues in different forms. Some analysts have correctly indicated that, while “the Partition of Punjab was a one-time event with mayhem and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947-50), the Partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuing process.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, displacement and migration from East to West, that is former East Pakistan and Bangladesh to West Bengal is still “an inescapable part of our reality.”<sup>3</sup>

Even Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, confessed in a press conference at Nagpur on January 1, 1950 that, “West Bengal has suffered more from Partition and its after-effects than any province or any part of the country. The Punjab also suffered, but it suffered more in the sense of mass killing of the people, while economically West Bengal has suffered more...”<sup>4</sup> The evacuee property left by the Muslims, who migrated to West Pakistan, helped the displaced persons from the West Pakistan to settle down in Punjab and the adjacent areas. Moreover, a large number of displaced people were absorbed in the government jobs and in the jobs in the armed forces. The Government of India not only looked into the compensation claims for immovable properties of the displaced, but also made an assessment of all other assets in detail to compensate the refugees arriving from West Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> The situation in the East was definitely not so. The displaced in the East had neither adequate compensation nor rehabilitation to reconstruct their lives.

If the better-off people from East Pakistan could reconstruct their lives with relative ease in West Bengal, for those belonging to the middle class and lower middle class, it was almost impossible. Many of them had to spend ten, fifteen or twenty years in refugee camps before they could imagine a better life. Those who did not go to the camps and settled in the *jabar dakhil* colonies on the margins of Calcutta also continued with a hand-to-mouth existence for many years. Many of them could never return to their traditional family occupations and, therefore, felt a sense of alienation and irreparable occupational loss even after partial rehabilitation. In other words, the partition of Bengal had a long-term impact on the economy and culture of the region.

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Bengal was facing this unprecedented human misery at a time when the international refugee care agencies were in their nascent stage and, therefore, were unable to look beyond the displaced people on the European soil in the aftermath of the World War II. The unenviable task of rehabilitation of the refugees in the post-partition Bengal was, therefore, to be carried out within and by the impoverished economies that were left for this region. Very often the community network and support became important tools of sustenance apart from the inadequate state assistance. In this paper, we shall explore some of these experiences of the people displaced from East Pakistan and settled in West Bengal that we have gathered from the affected people themselves.

From the narratives of the displaced, it would be possible to understand how they perceived their own victimisation, their struggle to reconstruct their lives, and to what extent, it came into conflict with the identity imposed upon them. However, as the narratives are told from someone's own perspective "to take control of frightening diversity and formlessness of the world",<sup>6</sup> "the historical self configures memories differently from the way the ahistorical self does".<sup>7</sup>

But, even if the memories of the refugees remain subjective in nature, these could act as a rich archive of experiences of the displaced. A social scientist has perhaps rightly pointed out that "memory begins where history ends."<sup>8</sup>

Keeping these in mind, the present paper would intend to capture the reminiscences of the uprooted people, their struggle to resettle themselves in a partially different environment, and their agony against the Government policies of relief and rehabilitation. For the sake of our analysis and understanding, we shall depend upon the official publications, especially of the Ministry of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of West Bengal, those of the Department of Rehabilitation, Government of India and the Lok Sabha Debates and West Bengal State Legislative Assembly Debates along with the memories of a few victims of partition.

In this exploration, we shall consider 1958 as the cut-off year. This is for two primary reasons: first, the year 1957 marked as the end of an era of the first popularly-elected government, and therefore, signified the changes in the government policies towards the relief and rehabilitation of the displaced persons; and second, which is the offshoot of the first one, was the decision of the Government of West Bengal to wind up the work of relief and rehabilitation in the transit camps in West Bengal by March 31, 1958, and not to recognise any 'immigrant' as a 'displaced' in need of relief and rehabilitation beyond that date. Moreover, we shall confine our discussion to the experiences of those displaced people, who found shelter in some of the *jabar dakhil* colonies and the refugee camps set up in West Bengal.

One more small point before we proceed further. We shall frequently use the term 'refugee' in this paper, but, by 'refugee', we shall mean a person who has been uprooted from his/her *desh*, and we shall not use the term 'refugee' as it appears in the UN Convention of 1951 and the UN Protocol of 1967.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Partition and displacement in the East***

The uprooted and displaced Hindus who were termed as refugees came phase by phase from East Pakistan to West Bengal. The first batch of refugees arrived after the riot in Noakhali and Tippera in 1946. The shelter-seekers continued to trickle in till the end of 1949. Those, who came during this phase, mostly belonged to the upper and upper middle strata like the landowning, merchant and professional classes.

The next major influx took place following the massacre in several districts of East Bengal, particularly in the village called Kalshira in the Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna district on December 20, 1949 and then Rajshahi, Faridpur and Barisal in February 1950. This time, those who crossed the border were very poor, mostly agricultural labourers.

It is worth mentioning that, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, signed in April 1950, failed to provide the way for the return of the refugees to their homeland. Later on, when the 'passport system' was introduced for travel from Pakistan to India on 15 October 1952, more people started to arrive. It was a "now or never kind of situation", which scared many people during this phase.<sup>10</sup> Influx again began after 1960-61, and reached a crescendo during 1964-65. Finally, came the massive exodus, when the West Pakistani rulers took the route of genocide to silence the Bengalis in East Pakistan.

While the discourse of partition victim-hood of the East Bengali Hindus reflected their acute sense of insecurity with regard to *dhon*, (wealth), *pran* (life) and *maan* (honour),<sup>11</sup> the reason for the exodus of *bhadralok*, immediately after the partition, was largely due to a fear of losing *dhon* and *maan* rather than *pran* in a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim-majority nation. A small section of these people was able to sell their property in East Bengal or exchanged property to acquire capital to reinvest the same in private industries. Within a short period, they integrated with the local population. There was also a large educated middle class, who, though, did not have enough money with them but had 'social capital'<sup>12</sup> for their survival. Some of them found jobs, or could restart their medical or legal practice again. Almost all the Hindu government servants serving in East Bengal gave an "option" for India.

In the 1950s, also came millions of displaced peasants and agricultural labourers who possessed almost nothing but their manual labour. The threat of their *pran* forced them to leave their *desh*.<sup>13</sup> Most of them were from the so-called lower castes, like Namasudra, Mahisya and Sadgop communities. Initially they hesitated to leave East Bengal because of two reasons. First, being agricultural labourers they did not want to be detached from their traditional cultivable land, and second, due to the influence of their leader Jogen Mondal, who held a cabinet post in Pakistan at that time, they decided to stay back.

But, it is quite known now that, the people, who finally took the hard decision to leave *desh* and to cross over to the other side of the border for safety and security, contributed a lot to the progress and prosperity of their adopted land. The refugees definitely felt some kind of detachment from their new place of residence, but that detachment did not come in their way to make the adopted land more liveable.

### **Who was a refugee?**

Immediately after the partition, when the mass exodus was going on in full swing in the eastern part of India, the Government of India defined the term 'displaced' in the following words:

"A displaced person is one who had entered India (who left or who was compelled to leave his home in East Pakistan on or after October 15, 1947) for disturbances or fear of such disturbances or on account of setting up of the two dominions of India and Pakistan."<sup>14</sup>

Those Hindus, who had left East Pakistan before 15 October 1947 due to the communal frenzy, were excluded from the previously mentioned official definition. At that time, the 'passport system' was yet to be launched, and it was regarded as a special case since the refugees had citizenship rights in both the states. Therefore, the Indian Government probably thought the term 'displaced' more suitable than 'refugee'.

Moreover, although India became independent on 15 August 1947, the extended period of two months was given to the people for setting themselves in the country of their choice.<sup>15</sup> However, in the later phase these 'displaced' people were referred to as 'migrants' and were divided into two broad categories – the 'old migrants' and 'new migrants'. To quote the *Manual of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation* of the Government of West Bengal:

- “(a) Those who migrated between October 1946 and 31 March 1958 are known as ‘old migrants’. Their rehabilitation was governed by the West Bengal Act XVI of 1951...  
 (b) Those who came between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971, are known as ‘new migrants’.”<sup>16</sup>

One should not forget that, many people crossed over to West Bengal between 1958 and 1964, who were excluded from the definition of ‘migrants’. Moreover, although many people came from East Pakistan to India with ‘migration certificates’, they were treated like refugees and in many cases they were sent to the camps because they need rehabilitation and relief for their survival.<sup>17</sup>

### **East remained East**

While West Bengal was the largest recipient of refugees for her geographical and cultural proximity to East Pakistan, not all districts of the state were equally affected by the problem. In most cases, the refugees from the western parts of East Pakistan came to the adjacent districts of West Bengal, whereas, the displaced from the central and eastern parts of East Bengal preferred to resettle themselves in 24 Parganas (then undivided), and in and around Calcutta. However, the refugees from the northern part of East Bengal tried to remain in the adjacent districts of the northern part of West Bengal.

Though the Annual Report of the Department of Rehabilitation of the Government of India pointed out that, in the first phase of the refugee flow during the year 1946 to 1952 2.52 million refugees arrived in West Bengal, the year between 1953 and 1956 were marked as crucial (See Table 1). Gradually, by December 1957 the refugee influx reached the highest point in the east. The number of the refugees crossing the international border went up to 3,16,000.<sup>18</sup> Now, these figures can hardly give one any idea of the pain, trauma and agony through which the displaced might have gone due to the ruptured economic, social and cultural ties with their original homeland. Nevertheless, they are important to understand the scale and magnitude of the post-partition displacement in the East.

**Table 1: Month-wise Break-up of Refugee Influx to West Bengal**

<b>Month</b>	<b>1953</b>	<b>1954</b>	<b>1955</b>	<b>1956</b>
January	5,248	4,077	15,674	17,011
February	5,961	5,710	22,848	42,360
March	7,507	5,821	26,503	15,167
April	6,900	6,002	15,070	18,039
May	6,032	6,656	18,190	34,657
June	4,798	6,354	21,146	24,734
July	5,026	6,208	22,957	27,442
August	4,147	8,127	13,813	-
September	3,223	10,644	9,371	-
October	4,379	10,352	13,757	-
November	3,212	11,073	11,535	-
December	4,214	22,776	18,709	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>60,647</b>	<b>1,03,800</b>	<b>2,09,573</b>	<b>1,79,410</b>

**Source:** *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal* (Calcutta: Home [Pub.] Department, Government of West Bengal, 1956), p. 17.

Initially, the Government of India attempted to discourage the migration of East Bengalis to India. It became clear from the instruction given by Mohanlal Saksena, the then

Rehabilitation Minister of the Government of India to the representatives of Tripura, Assam, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, in a meeting held in the Writers' Buildings on March 2, 1950 that the Government's work would be restricted to relief only rather than to rehabilitation. Moreover, Saksena was in favour of establishing the relief camps in the border areas to facilitate their quick return to their homeland.<sup>19</sup>

But, the refugee situation in the East did not improve at all even in the late 1950s. As a result of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact (1950), a large number of Muslims who had left West Bengal before March 31, 1951, came back to West Bengal, and reclaimed their land already occupied by the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan. While the Muslim evacuees returned to West Bengal, there was hardly any reverse population flow of the Hindus from West Bengal to East Pakistan.

But, during the initial phase, the Government of India was primarily concerned about the resettlement of the refugees from West Pakistan, and the national leadership was ambivalent regarding its responsibilities toward the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan. Nehru's letter to Bidhan Chandra Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal reflected that kind of ambivalence. To quote him:

"It is wrong to encourage any large scale migration from East Bengal to the west. Indeed, if such a migration takes place, West Bengal and to some extent the Indian union would be overwhelmed ... If they come over to West Bengal, we must look after them. But it is no service to them to encourage them to join the vast mass of refugees who can at best be poorly cared for".<sup>20</sup>

It made one thing obvious that the Indian Government's policy toward rehabilitation of the Bengali Hindu refugees was not only inadequate, but also discriminatory in nature.<sup>21</sup>

Prafulla K. Chakrabarty, the author of *The Marginal Men*, and a major chronicler of the partition refugees in the East, identified two basic reasons behind the discriminatory attitude of the Indian Government. First, the refugees in the west were more close to Delhi, the capital of India, where any trouble might destabilize the Government, whereas the geographical distance from Delhi put the refugees in the east in a vulnerable situation; and second, there was a large number of Punjabis in the armed forces, and a military mutiny was possible, if their kith and kin were ignored.<sup>22</sup>

According to the report of the Planning Commission on the Rehabilitation of the Displaced Persons, the larger part of the task of rehabilitating West Pakistani displaced persons was accomplished before the end of the first Five Year Plan. Despite that, the Second Five Year Plan provided Rs.187 million for the rehabilitation of the refugees. Funds were quite liberally available for the completion of the housing scheme already approved, and for mitigating unemployment in the townships and colonies of displaced persons through schemes for setting up industries. The continuation of the training and education schemes for the displaced people also remained crucial to the policy of the government.

The Report of the Planning Commission admitted at the end of the First Five year plan that, the continuing influx of the displaced persons from East Pakistan made the problem of rehabilitation in the eastern states particularly difficult. Although the Second Five Year Plan altogether provided Rs.668 million for the rehabilitation schemes of the displaced persons in the eastern states, the Government of India decided to review the financial provision in the third year of the Second Plan, and it was said, "if needed", provisions for the additional fund would be made.<sup>23</sup> But, the sanction of this sum of money was not adequate enough to manage the entire refugee situation in West Bengal.

By and large, there was an immediate recognition of the gravity and magnitude of the refugee problem in the West, and therefore, new townships of Faridabad, Rajpura and Tripuri were constructed to permanently rehabilitate the displaced in the *pucca*

*houses*. Work centres and industries were also set up with the government help in those areas along with the basic amenities, like schools and hospitals. East did not witness any such development, except may be a small township in Fulia. Even the reception centres for the refugees in the West were of superior quality than their counterparts in the East. Whereas the cash dole was given in a standardised form in the West, that was not the case in the East. Some work centres in the West were only training centres without provision for residence, but each home was a complete unit providing not only residence but also education in different stages, professional or practical training and employment for at least a short length of time, as it was in Hoshiarpur. No such facility was available in the East. The rate of grants in the West was also in a way of a generous scale compared to that in the East. It was seldom below Rs.30 per month and was sometimes at a higher rate according to the professional training chosen. The rate of grant in the East was almost the same but several categories were excluded from this privilege. Women refugees taking a course of training in teaching or nursing in a recognised institution or hospital were not given any stipend but were only allowed to attend the vocational training centres specially set up for refugees. In addition to the stipends amounting to Rs.30 per head to the trainees, the government provided the houses, the establishment and equipment cost and a revolving cost of raw materials in the West. On the other hand, except in Titagarh and Gariahat work centres (which were for men), the grants for women under these heads in West Bengal were very meagre.<sup>24</sup>

In short, both the Governments (Government of India as well as the State Government of West Bengal) were slow in responding to the refugee crisis in West Bengal. Under the circumstances, relief and rehabilitation process was mainly restricted to those, who registered themselves in the official records and took shelter in relief and transit camps.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the problem as a displaced was, in a way, sometimes more acute for those who crossed over to West Bengal in the early years of the partition-related crisis.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Jabar dakh* colonies and the 'politics of agitation'**

Let us first consider the case of those refugees who crossed over to West Bengal from East Pakistan from the late 1940s and early '50s, and who primarily belonged to the upper or middle classes. Due to their class character, their natural destination was Calcutta where they hoped to find jobs or professional opportunities suitable for them. Many of them had friends, relatives and acquaintances in Calcutta, who initially helped them to resettle here. In a way, a social network system of these displaced people played an important role to reconstruct their lives in the other side of the border. Neither of these two groups of people was interested to go to the relief camps. Even those who belonged to the middle class and comparatively worse off families, and did not possess much resources, did not want to settle in the refugee camps mainly because of their *maan* (honour).

Against this backdrop, the squatters' colonies, an important part of the life and landscape of West Bengal, definitely a significant part of Calcutta, mushroomed.<sup>27</sup> In some cases, where the land was acquired through legal means and procedures, the government termed the areas of refugee settlement as 'private colonies'. But, in other cases, apparently vacant land, owned by the government or by big landowners, was acquired through forcible occupation. This process of 'collective takeover' was known as *jabar dakh*.<sup>28</sup>

Though the squatters' colonies flourished in other parts of West Bengal, in December 1950, there were about 149 squatters' colonies, all of which grew up in Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly districts. A large concentration of these squatters' colonies was found in the southeastern portion of the Calcutta Metropolitan District, especially in the areas like Jadavpur, Tollygange, Kasba and Behala. Approximately 40 such colonies were established by the year 1950.<sup>29</sup> (See map.)

The refugees built up their own shelters in these areas virtually without any government aid. In order to link the habitation with livelihood, the colonies were set up near the towns or industrial areas. But, the squatters' colonies were not limited to the cities and suburbs. In rural areas, the refugee peasants took over the uncultivated wasteland. Such land was seized not only for habitation, but also for cultivation. This type of agricultural colonies was established in Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapore, Burdwan, Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas, West Dinajpur, Malda, Coochbihar and Jalpaiguri districts.<sup>30</sup>

While recollecting his memories of those days' struggle for reconstructing their lives in not so alien land like Calcutta, Himanshu Majumder (75), a resident of Bijoygarh colony said:

"There was no colony as such when I came here with my father from our *desh*, Barisal. Perhaps it was November or December 1947. I knew Santosh Dutta quite well due to my political connection since the pre-partition days. Santoshda sent me a message that if we want to resettle in Calcutta, we must come here as early as possible ... In fact, when I arrived here I came to know that Santoshda, with the help of others, already formed an informal group who met and decided about a piece of land, which appeared alright. I got a plot of five or six cottah on my first night in Calcutta. We constructed a thatched hut to live in. We used *Hogla* leaves to cover our roof. The land was low-lying and marshy. We cleared the land, installed tube-well and made the place liveable ..."<sup>31</sup>

Amiyaprova Debi (74), another resident of Bijoygarh, who came from Chittagong of East Pakistan, portrayed almost a similar picture. In her words:

"There was a military barrack in the area which was constructed for the Americans during the Second World War. So, a wide concrete road already existed there connecting Jadavpur to Tollygunge. Besides the military barracks, there were huge, vacant lands, the property of the private landlords, like Layelkas. There were sometimes fierce battles with the hired goons of the landlords, who also had the support of the police. We fought back refusing to yield. At the same time, we also carried on negotiations with the private owners of the land and the Government. The area was full of snakes. There were least possible public amenities. We had to carry drinking water on our own as there were initially no tube-wells in the area, no electricity, ... We were quiet well-off there in our *desh*, and here we had to start our lives again like beggars living in a *basti* (slum)-like area without electricity, water supply, drainage and other basic sanitary amenities ..."<sup>32</sup>

It became clear to the shelter-seekers in the *jabar dakhla* colonies by the early '50s that, they had no other option but to raise their voice to get justice so far as relief and rehabilitation was concerned – what Anil Sinha calls as 'the epic battle of Kurukshetra' in order to attain 'just and legitimate' demands.<sup>33</sup> Sinha argued that, these *jabar dakhla* colonies were classic examples of the organised resentment of the East Pakistani refugees against the rehabilitation policies of the Congress government.

In 1948, with the formation of the Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad (All Bengal Refugee Council for Action), the politics of agitation among the refugees of the squatters' colonies took a concrete shape for the first time.<sup>34</sup> In the initial phase, the Parishad had two groups of members: the pro-Congress group wanted permanent rehabilitation of the refugees without antagonising the government authorities at the

Centre and the State, and the other group comprised mostly Left-minded members. In 1949, those Left-minded members took over the leadership of the Parishad, except the post of the President, which was occupied by a 'Hindu Mahasabha sympathiser'. Since then, the Parishad organised meetings and demonstrations in the squatters' colonies, and this sort of 'unionisation' helped the refugees to launch the protest movement in an organised manner.

In fact, the introduction of the Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation Land Bill (later known as Eviction Bill), which after subsequent modifications became Act XVI of 1951, triggered off the politics of agitation of the refugees in full scale against the anti-refugee policies of the Congress Government. The Government felt that, the forcible and unauthorised occupation of private and government lands and premises requisitioned by the Central and State Governments and other public bodies had created problem that could not be resolved by the normal process of legal action. In other words, the squatters' colonies violated the sanctity of private property guaranteed by the Constitution. But, Dr. B.C. Roy, Chief Minister of West Bengal, argued that the Government possessed virtually no power to evict a squatter in unauthorised occupation of land or premises except through a prolonged process of legal action and the enactment of the Bill sought to reconcile the demands of law with the needs of the refugees<sup>35</sup>.

The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), formed on June 4, 1950, launched a resistance movement against this Bill. The UCRC hastily outlined a three-fold programme of action:

- a) to start an intensive propaganda campaign by involving all refugee organisations of the colonies, barracks, slums etc.;
- b) to organise a volunteer force in each colony area with a sizable refugee population for the safety and security of the refugees; and
- c) to mobilize fund for the campaign.

In this way, the UCRC tried to help the refugees to increase their consciousness about their rights and thereby made the civil society more vibrant for the first time since independence<sup>36</sup>, which Nilanjana Chatterjee has termed as a dynamic interplay between 'official discourse' and the refugee counter-discourse.<sup>37</sup> Although in this way the Leftists gradually became influential among the squatters, the refugees never became puppets of the Communists.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the UCRC worked as the mouthpiece of the helpless, displaced persons from East Pakistan. In other words, the politics of rehabilitation by the Government triggered off a new politics, which may be termed as 'the politics of agitation.'<sup>39</sup> This politics of agitation was an active resistance to the politics of rehabilitation initiated by the Governments (the Government of India and that of West Bengal together). Moreover, this politics of agitation by the displaced persons along with their shared memories provided the shelter-seekers a specific identity.

### **Life and times in the refugee camps**

After briefly considering the struggle of the displaced in the *jabar dakhil* colonies to reconstruct their lives, let us now turn our attention to some of the camps that were set up to provide shelter to the incoming displaced persons. As the cross-border influx continued interminably in the 1950s, the helpless, uprooted people reached the reception and interception centres at the Sealdah station. From there, they were subsequently sent to the transit camps. Although many of these refugees were supposed to be sent to other parts of the country, instant arrangements could not be made possible for their travel. Therefore, the relief and transit camps were set up in different parts of West Bengal to provide immediate help to these people.

At the peak of the inflow of refugees from across the border with East Pakistan, the government mainly set up three types of camps, namely, women's camps, worksite



camps and Permanent Liability (PL) Camps. The inmates of the women's camps comprised mostly women and children who had no male member of their family to look after them. Bhadrakali and Bansberia women's camp in Hooghly district, Ranaghat Women's Home in 24 Parganas district were such women's camps.<sup>40</sup> As time passed by, many of the inmates of these women's camps were permanently rehabilitated along with their family members in and around the camp area.

Second, in order to counteract the demoralising effect of the prolonged stay in the camps, the government introduced a system of keeping able-bodied men engaged in useful work for the development of the area, where they were supposed to be rehabilitated. Accordingly, 32 such worksite camps were set up in West Bengal. Bagjola camp and Sonarpur R5 scheme in 24 Parganas are examples of such worksite camps. The refugees were also kept engaged in many Central Government-aided projects like the Damodar Valley Corporation projects etc.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the PL camps were for those refugees who were considered unfit for any kind of gainful employment through which they could be rehabilitated. They were mainly old, infirm, invalid and orphans. These PL camps were located in Dudhkundi in Midnapore district, Bansberia in Hooghly, Chandmari, Cooper's Camp (partially), Chamta and Dhubulia in Nadia district, Habra, Ashoknagar and Titagarh in 24 Parganas district. On November 30, 1952, the population of these camps and the homes was 34,000, including the population of the orphanages. The number soon increased to 37,000. According to the report on the Relief and Rehabilitation of the displaced persons in West Bengal, in 1953, the number of camp admission of the refugees was 10,474, in 1954, the number was 46,904, and in 1955, the number increased to 1,09,834.<sup>42</sup>

In most cases, the military barracks and tunnel-shaped huts made of iron constructed for Allied soldiers (during the World War II) were converted originally into camps for the refugees. Thousands of refugees, the displaced persons who arrived either by train or by truck from across the border, were dumped in these camps. When some of these camps became overpopulated and the government could not provide any more space in these makeshift military barracks or huts, the additional refugees got tents to live in.

Consequently, the camp life was not always satisfactory but sometimes sub-human in nature. While narrating her experiences in the Coopers' camp, Hironprova Das (75), a resident of the Coopers' Notified Area, said:

"Even in the dormitories of those barracks, each refugee family was allotted a little space. Each family marked its occupied area with pebbles, stones and tit-bits and sometimes did not even have a sleeping space for the members of the refugee family. So far as the tent was concerned, each refugee family comprising four members got one tent, and a bigger family (with more than four members) got two tents to live in. Under such circumstances, there was absolutely no question of any privacy. The refugees definitely got shelter far away from their home and communal hatred, but scarcity of water, lack of proper health care, irregular supply of ration (dry doles) still made their lives unbearable. In such a situation, many children died of dysentery in the camps. Dead bodies of children were sometimes buried, but very often were simply thrown away in the jungle for paucity of funds. The government used to pay only Rs.16 for the cremation of a body."<sup>43</sup>

The Government had no carefully thought-out plan for the rehabilitation of camp refugees in the East in the initial stage. It was only in 1955 and thereafter that the Government of India decided to look at the problem of the East Pakistani refugees on 'a rational basis.'<sup>44</sup> Between 1947 and 1955, the Indian Government provided *ad hoc* assistance to enable

the refugees to resettle themselves under the *Byanama Scheme*. Under this scheme a camp refugee was allowed to choose a plot of land that he wanted to buy with the Government loan.<sup>45</sup> The Government used to grant loans for the rehabilitation of refugees in the rural and urban areas depending upon the occupational background of the displaced.<sup>46</sup> However, in many cases there were tremendous irregularities to grant loan to the refugees for purchase of lands for their resettlement. Sometimes, when the refugee somehow managed to get money there was scarcity of cultivable land.

It has already been discussed that the refugees, who took shelter in the camps, were mostly cultivators. Therefore, a lack of access to the cultivable land for a long period of time naturally made them annoyed. The scarcity of cultivable land coupled with the poor living conditions in the camps, including irregular supply of food and cash doles gradually increased the grievances of the camp-dwellers. Incidents of passive and active resistance emerged in many refugee camps. According to Prangobindo Das (76), once involved in the refugee movement in the Coopers' camp:

“Initially we used to follow the non-violent methods to make the government aware about our demands for the better likelihood. At that time, we used to prefer the method of negotiation with the officers of the ‘RR’ Department of the Government as well as the method of *satyagraha*. Of all the camps in West Bengal, we were more organised in the Coopers’ and always took a leading part in launching any protest movement. We used to gather on the playground in front of the Kali temple (Hindu goddess of power), and all movements usually started from this place...”<sup>47</sup>

However, the camp protests entered a new phase in 1958 when the Government of India took the decision to wind up the camps in the eastern region by July 1959. In view of the continuing exodus from East Pakistan, the Government of India gradually realised that it would be difficult for the cash-starved West Bengal to give shelter to all the incoming refugees from the other side of the border. Therefore, it would be wise to select some of the displaced persons who could not be rehabilitated in the economy in West Bengal, and send them to other parts of the country.<sup>48</sup> After all, the Government already made it clear that there was a serious lack of available land for rehabilitation in West Bengal, especially for agriculture. In such a situation, the incoming refugees were additional liabilities for West Bengal.<sup>49</sup> Against this backdrop, the Government of India decided to treat the East Pakistani refugee problem “absolutely on a national level”.<sup>50</sup> It is interesting here to note one of the statements of Sucheta Kripalani, a Member of Parliament, in this connection. She said:

“It was not on West Bengal’s decision that this country was partitioned. This country was partitioned by a decision of India ...” “Therefore, it is a national problem and all the states should pull their weight in rehabilitating them”.

This was the spirit that was perhaps responsible for the Government’s decision to send the ‘excess’ refugees outside West Bengal to places like Dandakaranya of Madhya Pradesh and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.<sup>51</sup>

It was decided at the official level that, mainly the refugees belonging to the so-called lower castes like Namasudras, Kshatriyas, Poundra Kshatriyas, who took shelter in the refugee camps and received doles from the Government, had to go to Dandakaranya. However, the refugees, the original inhabitants of the Indo-Gangetic plains were reluctant to go to the dry, ‘alien land’. In no time, the Government stopped their doles temporarily.

Anadi Mondal, a PL member of the Chamta Camp of Nadia, said in the interview with the author on 15 March 2002, that he, like other camp dwellers opposed to go to Dandakaranya and as a result, the government stopped their doles temporarily. So they did not have any other option but to go to Dandakaranya. In his own words:

*“Jokhon Dandakaranyer haoa ailo, sarkar thika amago jor koira oi rukha sukha jagae pathaite chailo. Amra jol desher manush, kyamne oi pathura jagae thakum? Tai jaite raji hoilam na. Sarkar thika amago sahajyo bondho koira dilo. Jetuku khaite paitam tao gelo go! Pore oboshyo amra onek todbir korbar phole abar sahajyo paisilam, kintu tao bosor panch bade. Er modhye oboshyo amago family re Coopers thika Chamta camp e boshaisilo tenara.”* (When the wave of Dandakaranya came, the government tried to persuade us to go to that dry area. We are people from an area with water. How could we live in that rocky area? So, we did not agree to go there. The government stopped all assistance to us. Whatever assistance we used to get, that also was gone! We, however, managed to receive assistance once again after a lot of request, but that was after about five years. Meanwhile, our family was shifted from the Coopers to the Chamta camp.)

Gradually, the resentment of the camp-dwellers in West Bengal against the Central Government's decision to send them outside the state encouraged them to raise their voice. The camp-dwellers of Bettiah in Bihar launched a peaceful *satyagraha* movement in May 1958 for the fulfilment of their demands of improved living and economic conditions in the camp to rehabilitate them. This showed a way out to the refugees living in the camps of West Bengal. So, when the Government tried to force them to go to Dandakaranya, these refugees revolted. They launched massive civil disobedience movement in the Gandhian way and more than 30,000 camp refugees were arrested.<sup>52</sup> Though this movement did not last long, it left a major impact on the psyche of the refugees. It helped them to come out of their shell.

Initially, the refugees living in the camps expected that the organisations of the squatters' colonies would join this movement, and would give it a stronger shape. Reality was not so. The squatters' colonies stood apart with their own problems. They did not intend to take part in this movement probably because of two reasons: first, they had already acquired lands through *jabar dakhla* to start their lives afresh, and second, most of them belonged to the middle class. Moreover, when the government took the decision to recognise 133 squatters' colonies in the beginning of 1958, the camp-dwellers got frustrated and felt somewhat alienated.

The role of the UCRC was very vital at this stage, whose activities mainly confined within the squatters' colonies since its inception. Initially, the leadership of the UCRC was not wholeheartedly accepted by the camp-dwellers. As many of the camp-dwellers were of so-called lower caste Namasudra community, they chose their own leaders from among themselves, and consequently, the leaders like Jogen Mondal, Hemanta Biswas, Apurbalal Mazumder and P.R.Thakur came in the forefront.

Apart from the CPI the Proja Socialist Party (PSP)-led organisation Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (SBBS), (All Bengal Refugee Conference), and the organisation called Bastuhara Kolyan Parishod (Refugee Welfare Council), led by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), started playing dominant role in the camps. The RCPI was more active in the camps of Nadia. Since 1958, the UCRC started to bring together the camp refugees with the help of PSP on a programme acceptable to all. Slowly but steadily, rallies and demonstrations took the place of *satyagraha* as the weapon of refugee movement. In course of time, the 'politicisation' and 'unionisation' of the refugee movement inspired these uprooted, helpless people to become a part of the larger

movement against the Union and State Governments, and the struggle of the refugees through the politics of agitation continued to counter the policies of rehabilitation since then.

***Life rolled on with dreams shattered***

Life after partition in the East was not easy at all – the displaced realised that with own experiences like no one else. Their histories have not always been lettered, but their narratives remain testimony to the nature of struggle they went through to reconstruct their lives. Life definitely was not easy for the displaced in the West. But, at least there were state initiatives to resettle and rehabilitate them in India. Government assistance could not be a substitute for their loss and agony. But, starting their lives afresh was not that difficult for many in the West.

The displaced, who crossed over to West Bengal, in particular, were not so fortunate. Few among them, who could carry along a part of their past fortune, managed to make their new dreams come true. For a large number of their fellow travellers, dream was not that easily achievable. They had to fight for their existence, their means of livelihood and for putting things together again. Some were even less fortunate and could never dream again. Their *desh* was some place else and now it is a place of no return. It can only be revisited in memories and nostalgia.

Maya Das of Bejoygarh colony in Kolkata is one of those extremely unfortunate ones. She says:

*“Bhalo ghorer i to bou silam ma! Swosurer jomi-joma asilo. Chash-bash koira khaitam. Kintu dangae swami morlo. Kothae je shob haraiya gelo! Ar kaure pailam na. Gramer lokego loge ei khane ailam. Chheletar mathar byamo hoilo. Poisa silo na. Chikitsa koraita parlam na. Ekhon se to pagol, ma! Ke amago khaoaibo kao? Tai Bhikha koron chhara upay nai. Ei bhabe ei ek chilta ghore ma ar chhelete baincha asi. Ami morle or je ki hoibo, tao jani na...”* (I was indeed a bride of a well-established family! My father-in-law had some land. We used to survive on agriculture. But my husband died in the riot. I don't know where everything was gone! I could not trace anyone again. I came here with my fellow-villagers. My son became mentally unsound. I did not have money. So, I could not arrange for his treatment. Now, his situation is even worse! Who will feed us? So, I don't have any way other than begging. My son and me somehow survive in this small room. I don't really know what will happen to him after me...) <sup>53</sup>

Who will recreate her *desh*?

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The author is grateful to Ashis Nandy and Amiyaprovra Chaudhuri without whose support, advice and comments, this paper would not have been possible.

**Notes and references:**

<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakraborty would translate *desh* as 'foundational homeland'. See Dipesh Chakraborty, "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.31, No. 32, August 10,1996, p.2144.

<sup>2</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, (Kolkata: Stree), 2003: p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> S.Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. XIV, Part.1, New Delhi, 1992, p. 6 and p.23

<sup>5</sup> Ranajit Roy, *The Agony of West Bengal: A Study in Union-State Relations*, (Calcutta: New Age Publishers), 1971, pp. 165-176.

<sup>6</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India", *Subaltern Studies VII*, (New Delhi: OUP), 1993, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ashis Nandy, "State, History and Exile in South Asian Politics: Modernity and the Landscape of Clandestine and Incommunicable Selves" in Ashis Nandy, *The Romance of the State: And the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*, (New Delhi: OUP), 2003, pp. 117-118

<sup>8</sup> Pradip Kumar Bose, "Memory Begins Where History Ends", in Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Reflections on Partition of the East*, (New Delhi: Vikas), 1997, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> According to 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is a person owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. For legal exposition of the status and rights of refugees see, James Hathaway, *The Law of Refugee Status*, (Toronto: Butterworths), 1991; Guy S. Goodwin Gill, *The Refugee in International Law*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, Second edition; B.S. Chimni (ed.), *International Refugee Law: A Reader*, (New Delhi: Sage), 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta, "The Politics of Agitation and Confession: Displaced Bengalis in West Bengal", in Sanjay K. Ray (ed.), *Refugees and Human Rights: Social and Political Dynamics of Refugee Problem in Eastern and Northeastern India*, (Jaipur: Rawat), 2001, pp.98-100

<sup>11</sup> I have borrowed these terms from Nilanjana Chatterjee, "Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugees Narratives of Communal Violence", <http://www.pstc.brown.edu/chatterjee.PDF>, accessed on June 15, 2004

<sup>12</sup> See, Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work. Civic traditions in modern Italy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Please see B.S. Guha, *Studies in Social Tensions among Refugees from East Pakistan*, (Calcutta: Government of India Press), 1959.

<sup>14</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Rehabilitation, 1965-66*, (New Delhi: Department of Rehabilitation, Government of India), 1967, p.107.

<sup>15</sup> Samir Kumar Das, "State Responses to the Refugee Crisis: Relief and Rehabilitation in the East" in Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947-2000*, (New Delhi: Sage), 2003, p.107.

<sup>16</sup> *Manual of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation*, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Abhijit Dasgupta, same as note 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal: Statement issued by the Government of West Bengal*, Calcutta, 11 December 1957, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, "East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival" in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, (Calcutta: Oxford University Press), 1990, pp. 59-60.

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- <sup>20</sup> Saroj Chakraborty, *With B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers*, (Calcutta: Rajat Chakraborty), 1982, p. 106.
- <sup>21</sup> In this connection, please see *Rehabilitation of Migrants from East Bengal*, Estimates Committee, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat), 1989 and *Report of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee*, Government of West Bengal, (Calcutta: Saraswati Press), 1980.
- <sup>22</sup> Prafulla K. Chakraborty, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, (Calcutta: Naya Udyog), 1999, pp. 280-90.
- <sup>23</sup> <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/2nd/2planch30.html>. Accessed on June 2, 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> For details, see *A Report of a Tour of Inspection of some of the Refugee Homes in North Western India*, prepared by Ashoka Gupta, Amar Kumari Varma, Sudha Sen, Bina Das and Sheila Davar, in <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20ashoka%20gupta.htm>. Accessed on June 4, 2004.
- <sup>25</sup> Prafulla K. Chakraborty, same as note 22, p. 234.
- <sup>26</sup> Hironmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu* (refugee), (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad), 1970, p. 31.
- <sup>27</sup> Based on an interview of Anil Sinha, the Former Secretary of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) with the author on 22 March 2002.
- <sup>28</sup> Racel Waber, "Re(Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of refugee Colonies in South Calcutta", in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, (Kolkata: Stree), 2003, p. 67.
- <sup>29</sup> See in this connection Pranati Choudhuri, "Refugees in West Bengal: A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlements within the Calcutta Metropolitan District", Working Paper, No.55, Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1980.
- <sup>30</sup> Based on the interview of Anil Sinha with the author on 22 March 2002.
- <sup>31</sup> Based on the interview with the author on 9 October 2001.
- <sup>32</sup> Based on the interview with the author on 10 October 2001.
- It may be noted that, from the early 1950s, the Government of West Bengal seemed to be unable to deal with the refugee influx due to the paucity of land for rehabilitation and resettlement of the refugees. It is interesting to note here that, according to a report of the Department of Rehabilitation of the Government of West Bengal, in the mid-1950s, the total amount of evacuee land for distribution was 206,000 acres out of which 104,000 acres were restored to the owners. Thus, only 102,000 acres of evacuee land were at the disposal of the state. The total amount of land occupied by the refugees was 59,000 acres. 26,000 acres of land were fallow, which could have been utilized for the purpose of rehabilitation. Thus, the State Government's excuse of scarcity of land for refugee rehabilitation did not have a strong enough ground. For details, see Hironmoy Bandopadhyay, *Udbastu* (refugee), (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad), 1970, p. 217.
- <sup>33</sup> Anil Sinha, *Pashchimbanger Udbastu Upnibesh* (The Refugee Colonies in West Bengal), (Calcutta: Book Club), 1995, pp. 1-3.
- <sup>34</sup> Jagadish Chandra Mondol, *Morichjhampi: Noiswobder Ontorale* (Morichjhampi: Behind Silence), (Calcutta: Sujan Publication), 2002, p. 22
- <sup>35</sup> Ananda Bazar Patrika, 21 March 1951.
- <sup>36</sup> Samir Kumar Das, same as note 15, p.109.
- <sup>37</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, "East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival" in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, (Calcutta: Oxford University Press), 1990, p.70.
- <sup>38</sup> Based on the interview of Anil Sinha with the author on 22 March 2002.
- <sup>39</sup> I have borrowed the terms from Abhijit Dasgupta, fn. 6.
- <sup>40</sup> Anil Sinha, same as note 34, pp-20-21.
- <sup>41</sup> *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, [Calcutta: Home (Pub) Department, Government of West Bengal], August 1956, p. 2.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.
- <sup>43</sup> Based on the interview of Hironprava Das with the author on 13 December 2001.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Ninety-Sixth Report of the Estimate Committee*, Second Lok Sabha, 1959-60, p. 15.

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<sup>45</sup> Prafulla Chakrabarty, same as note 22, p. 162.

<sup>46</sup> For detailed analysis of the rural and urban schemes of rehabilitation, please see Samir Kumar Das, same as note 15, 126-136.

<sup>47</sup> Based on an interview of Prangobindo Das, 13 December 2001 with the author.

<sup>48</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, 15 July 1957, p. 3376.

<sup>49</sup> See *Lok Sabha Debates*, 31 March, 1956, p. 3874 for comments on N.C. Chatterjee.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3888, for comments of Sucheta Kripalani.

<sup>51</sup> For detailed discussions on Dandakaranya please see Saibal Kumar Gupta, *Dandakaranya: a survey of Rehabilitation*, Saibal Kumar Gupta Papers, (ed.) Alok Kumar Ghosh, (Calcutta: Bibhasa), 1999; Alok Kumar Ghosh, “Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation”, in Pradip Kumar Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and the Contested Identities*, (Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group), 2000, pp. 106-129 and for the rehabilitation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, see Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Exiled to the Andamans: The Refugees from East Pakistan”, in in Pradip Kumar Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and the Contested Identities*, (Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group), 2000, pp. 131-139.

<sup>52</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarty, same as note 23, p. 186.

<sup>53</sup> Interview of Maya Das with author on October 10, 2001.

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