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**Rehabilitation of the Partition-Displaced in the  
Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, India: How far  
Social Security was extended?**

**Moushumi Dutta Pathak**



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## **Abstract**

Author

Statement: All the views expressed in the paper are of the author(s).

# Rehabilitation of the Partition-Displaced in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, India: How far Social Security was extended?

**Moushumi Dutta Pathak**

The declaration of Independence of India in 1947 predicated the demise of colonialism in this country. In the ashes of the colonial break-up emerged two successor states of India and Pakistan that was created with the Partition of British India. With one single stroke of the 'Cyril's Scalpel', the homeland of a large section of the native population became an alien territory. The territorial demarcation on religious lines strove on communalism to bring the resultant division of hearts among the different religious groups. The result of such a vivisection was visible in the large scale uprooting and movement of population across the newly constituted borders of Bengal and the Punjab. Hostile circumstances in East Bengal/ East Pakistan virtually forced largely the Bengali Hindus of the region to migrate to different directions of India searching for 'a home'. It was in such desperate search for security that the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam appeared as a haven for a large group of displaced Bengali Hindu migrants.

The displaced to the Brahmaputra Valley were in immediate need of food, shelter, medical aid and money; necessities that fell within the purview of the term relief. Relief involved provision of food, clothing, accommodation, sanitation, medical treatment, administration of camps etc.. But a simultaneous requirement included rehabilitation measures for the displaced. It involved long-term programme in pursuance to their permanent rehabilitation and therefore could not be divorced from various reconstruction and development schemes. 'Rehabilitation' as the dictionary defines the word is the process of re-instating or re-establishing one in the esteem of others. Rehabilitation implies the restoration of lost livelihood. Resettlement refers to physical relocation of the displaced people. Rehabilitation is thus said to involve certain measures of permanent resettlement.

My paper with the help of primary archival sources would focus on the relief and rehabilitation policies

as chalked out by the Government of India and that of the State in relation to the Partition-induced displaced Bengali Hindu Diaspora to the Brahmaputra Valley but with ample field-work would seek to move into a domain of empirical reality wherein I would embark to scrutinise the initial plans and schemes laid out by the Government. Unfortunately they were found to be but exclusively in 'black and white'. The response of the State of Assam and that of the corresponding society to the rehabilitation policies that was drawn out was considered to be indifferent. Therefore through this effort an attempt has been made to understand the dichotomy that existed between the state and the society as regards the execution and implementation of the relief and rehabilitation schemes. The inadequacy of institutional frameworks to ensure full justification of the notions of humanitarianism emphasizing on the principles of care, kindness and hospitality would be reviewed. Added to it was the ethics of responsibility to the displaced sufferers that was also required to be addressed. It was found that the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees held in 1951 at Geneva was meant exclusively for the European Union and did not consider those who had fled homes in the wake of decolonisation and emergence of new states in South Asia in 1947. Nor was the UNHCR established to take care of the victims of Partition in the east and west of India.

The Partition of 1947 intensified cross-border migrations. Compared to the Punjab, the magnitude of violence in India's east was far less, but it sparked off a passionate political controversy. In India's west, the refugees were settled in the vacuum created by the departure of Muslims. However, in the east, a corresponding efflux from India had not balanced the influx from East Pakistan to India. This was the assessment of a report by the Ministry of Rehabilitation in New Delhi.

## Immediate Impact of Dislocation of the Displaced : Relief Provided

Compelled by harrowing conditions to leave their hearth and home, the displaced were initially indecisive about how and where to take recourse for safety. It had been a traumatic experience for them to leave their 'homeland'. Uprooted from their native land, they initially found themselves to be dislocated. The immediate task that confronted them was to tackle the situation that they were placed under. Since 1950, with the coming of the 'new refugees' there were border camps in all districts through which all incoming refugees were expected to pass and where arrangements were made for registration and issuance of refugee certificates ( Census of India 1951A: 359).Relief Eligibility Certificates considered passages for future rehabilitations were issued for the benefit of the displaced.

To provide immediate succour to the refugees or the displaced, entering the State of Assam, relief camps were set up in the border areas of India and Pakistan and in the different districts of the BrahmaputraValley as short-term measures (Department of Relief and Rehabilitation Letter No. RHH 221/56/17dtd.12.10.57). Initially, these camps were administered by non-official bodies or relief organizations like the Ramakrishna Mission, Marwari Relief Society, Shillong Refugee Aid Society and other *ad hoc* bodies and it was only later that responsibility of the displaced was undertaken by the State Government. But these reception centres failed to provide the minimum requirements of the displaced (Dr.Subrata Das interviewed at Shillong on 8<sup>th</sup>July, 2003).The Dauki Centre that was established on the Indian side of the border in Assam housed a few displaced where the majority took shelter in stalls made of bamboo and thin matting. These stalls were meant mainly for the weekly *hat* where trade was being carried on. During the bi-weekly market, these stalls were occupied by the traders for their transactions. Under the circumstances, the refugees could be said to have denied the roof over their head at that point of time and were compelled to live under the sun and rain (Government of India 1950C:498). Refugee camps at Dalu, 32 kms. from Tura, Matia and Bakaitari in Goalpara district (Government of Assam 1964:1) and at Lumding and Badarpur were established for the need of the displaced while on transit fleeing from their native land (Information gathered from Sri S.K. Dey interviewed on 24<sup>th</sup> February,2003 who came to Assam through this area).

**Table:1**

## Accommodation of the displaced in Camps of Assam (31<sup>st</sup> March,1950 - 30<sup>th</sup> September,1951 )

Date	No. of Camps	No. of inmates on dole
31 <sup>st</sup> March,1950	28	18,566
30 <sup>th</sup> , June, 1950	16	5,011
30 <sup>th</sup> , September,1950	15	4,488
31 <sup>st</sup> , December,1950	7	3,528
31 <sup>st</sup> March,1951	6	1,152
30 <sup>th</sup> June,1951	2	352

Source: Census of India 1951A: 361.

The statistics as indicated in Table 1, pointed that during the height of migration of the Partition-induced displaced from East Pakistan, immediately after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950, the maximum number of displaced in officially registered camps were approximately 19,000 distributed over 28 camps. Thus, on an average, each camp accommodated only 679 inmates during the peak of the flow of displaced population, in the aftermath of Partition in 1947. It could be referred to be insignificant in the contemporary situation of inflow and in consonance to the humanitarian concern that was required to be shown at that moment of crises and the assurance given by the political leaders in the post- Partition development to the victims of the carnage<sup>2</sup>. But as migrations continued, the mounting pressure of refugees and displaced forced the Government to attempt at official rehabilitations. Long-term responsibilities such as widows, orphans, old and infirm saw the creation of 'permanent liability' camps (Government of India 1969:88-90).

### State-sponsored Rehabilitation Schemes

The general pattern or schemes of rehabilitation as laid down by the government was broadly divided in two sections - rural and urban.

#### 1. Agricultural and Non-agricultural

According to the Statistical Survey of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan in Assam 1955-56, *an agricultural family has been defined as the one of which at least one member(excluding employees of the family) is an actual tiller of the soil or was so in East Pakistan prior to migration* (Government Of Assam 1958A:19).Agriculturaland non-agricultural

families were enumerated in both urban and rural areas.

For the agriculturist, the first item was the allotment of agricultural land under one or another of the several government schemes or financial help for the purchase of such land. Secondly, it was the allotment of a homestead plot or a loan for the purchase of such plot. Then a loan for building a house, followed by monetary aid for buying farming implements, seeds, bullocks and other equipment. Lastly, it was necessary to maintain the family during the period of the first harvest for a maximum period of nine months. For this purpose, grants not exceeding Rs. 60/- per month per family were paid to the rural agriculturist (Government of Assam 1951:541; Rao 1967:157). For the agriculturist again, five schemes were laid for the permanent rehabilitation of about 5,500 agriculturist families. They were sanctioned by the Central Government and laid down at the total expense of Rs.55 lakhs approximately. Four of these schemes as shown in Table 18 were believed to have been implemented only partly by 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1951. Families rehabilitated under the said schemes were found to have been paid only with the first or first two instalments of the loans by 1951 (Census of India 1951A:362).

**Table:2**

**Schemes for East Pakistan Displaced Agriculturists**

Sl. No.	Name of the Scheme	No. of Families settled	Loans issued in Rupees
1	Baghbar Scheme	1,889	1,272,000
2	Kauli Scheme	200	99,900
3	Goalpara Scheme	3,043	1,001,000
4	Nowgong Scheme	113	52,700
5	<b>Total</b>	5,245	2,425,600

Source: Census of India 1951A: 362.

The schemes of rehabilitation that were considered to be well-planned by the Government of Assam proved to be ineffective as the land selected for the purpose was found not suitable for settlement. The displaced were allotted lands mostly in hilly terrain. Covered with dense forest, such lands did not encourage cultivation and ultimately failed to serve the purpose of rehabilitation. In Kaki Reclamation scheme of Derapathor, lands were given to the people at a minimum price of Rs. 2/- per *bigha*. But those allotted lands could not be cleared off and

were unable to be used. Therefore they have been since then lying fallow (Government of Assam 1952B:1189; Interview taken of Birendra Chandra Kar, Secy. Bonda Refugee Colony Welfare and Development Association on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 07). Moreover, the State Government, during the refugee inflow embodied a proviso in the Assam State Acquisition of Zemindary Bill (Published in Assam Gazette 1948A). Therein in clause 9 proviso 2, it was paradoxically stated that “no ryot would be given the status of landholder, unless prior to the date of notification the person held the land continuously as a ryot for a period of not less than 10 years”. The question of holding the land by the displaced for a term of ten years preceding the date of issuance of the notification was largely debatable. It ultimately contradicted the government’s rural land settlement scheme.

In the case of non- agriculturists, loans were given to start business or some small trade, a homestead plot or a loan for the purchase of such plot, a house-building loan and a maintenance grant of three months of the family, in addition to the cost of purchasing equipment etc. for starting cottage industries (Government of Assam 1951:541). Schemes for rehabilitation of 800 families of the rural non-agriculturist class in Goalpara district, costing about Rs. 4 lakhs were sanctioned. Shillong Times (7<sup>th</sup> November, 1953) too reported of a scheme laid down for permanent rehabilitation of 500 displaced non-agriculturist families from East Bengal at Maj-Jalukbari, near Pandu in the district of Kamrup. Here each family was allotted three and half *kathas* of land for residential purposes with a small vegetable garden. Further, each family were in addition to receive financial assistance for clearing and leveling 400 *bighas*, construction of a two mile main road and building houses and digging 20 wells.

However, according to Government reports, 88 percent of the urban and 43 percent rural families of the total displaced families in the State of Assam were enumerated as non-agricultural (Government of Assam 1958A:19). But it was less than one third among these families who were found to be aided. *An aided family, as per classification of aided and unaided has been defined as the one of which any member (living or deceased) received rehabilitation loans* (ibid.1958A:19).

**Table:3**

**Ratio of aided to unaided non-agricultural families**

Type of family	Urban	Rural
Non-agricultural	20,513	43,331

Aided	6,322(27.0)	12,725(12.7)
Unaided	14,191(60.7)	30,606(30.4)

Source: Government of Assam 1958A:19.

Table 3 shows that unaided non-agricultural families are larger in numbers as per government statistics in the aftermath of the arrival of the displaced. Therefore it could be inferred that the schemes that were laid down by the government for the displaced non-agricultural families perhaps failed to sufficiently benefit this group of people.

## 2. Housing

Rehabilitation brought within its ambit physical relocation of the displaced i.e. they should be provided with shelter. It therefore required the government to lay down housing schemes for the migrants who were forced to come and settle in this land. As a part of the scheme of providing shelter for the displaced, they were either given a homestead plot in a government colony or loan for the purchase of a plot of land where they could construct a house, or a house-building loan (Rao1967:157).

**Table:4**

### Distribution of displaced families according to the standard of accommodation

Type of accommodation	Number of displaced families by standard of accommodation			Total
	Good	Fair	Bad	
Own house	4,289 (5.7)	24,460 (32.3)	46,957 (62.0)	75,706 (100.0)
Rented House	3,169 (12.0)	11,027 (41.6)	12,287 (46.4)	24,483 (100.0)
Vacant house Without rent	277 (12.9)	519 (24.2)	1,351 (62.9)	2,147 (100.0)
Friend's & relative's Houses without rent	1,146 (7.5)	4,012 (26.3)	10,081 (66.2)	15,239 (100.0)
Camp, refugee homes etc.	62 (12.0)	186 (36.2)	266 (51.8)	514 (100.0)
Others	1,269 (33.8)	1,420 (37.7)	1,074 (28.5)	3,763 (100.0)

(Figures within brackets indicate percentage)  
Source: Government of Assam 1958A:21.

But what could be inferred from Table 4 is that only 8.2 per cent of the displaced families were found to live in 'good' houses, 33.6 per cent housing accommodation were rated to be 'fair', and more than half of the families 58.2 per cent lived in houses that were rated as 'bad' according to local standards. The above statistics indicated the living condition of the displaced. In concurrence was stated by Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, a Member of Parliament, that the refugees and displaced were living under unsanitary conditions which not only seem to be injuring their own health but was also harming the health of their neighbours. Living in unsanitary conditions, these displaced suffered from typhoid and dysentery. It relatively affected the neighbourhood comprising of people who were however not refugees (Government of India 1952B :1990; *SadiniyaAsamiya* 30<sup>th</sup> July 1949).

The Government of India also sanctioned the establishment of Women's Home at Gauhati, Rupshi and at Nowgong wherein the inmates besides being provided a shelter were simultaneously trained for vocational services too. Arguments were raised in the Assembly regarding the improper functioning of one such home at Ulubari, Guwahati. GauriShanker Bhattacharjee, M.L.A. of the State Assembly pointed to the congestion and uninhabitable condition of the home (Government of Assam1952 A: 140). Such conditions of living were argued as degrading and correspondingly deteriorating the mental attitude and spirit of work of the displaced.

Besides, the government also established refugee colonies under the scheme of housing the displaced families. Housing colonies for the displaced came to be established in Kahilipara, Choonsali under Kamrup district and Jalannagar in the district of Dibrugarh (Rao 1967: 176). The colonies that were a result of the government rehabilitation/ resettlement schemes sheltered only a small proportion of the displaced families in comparison to the numbers that arrived. However, on a field survey among the displaced families of the Brahmaputra Valley, majority of them were found to have rehabilitated on their own through staying with their kith and kin / relatives and were barely at the mercy of the government's rehabilitation scheme. This reflected their way of self-rehabilitation.

## 3. Education

Next to food and shelter, what the displaced required

was education as it would ultimately enable them to sustain on their own in an unfamiliar and new environment in the Brahmaputra Valley. The general pattern of administration in India initially confined the responsibility of education as a 'state subject' under the individual state governments. But the post-independent Indian states with their new economic pattern were found unable to cope in providing the basic necessities to the displaced; therefore the question of accommodating them to the present educational infrastructure had been far from simple. Thus, *it became the priority of the Central Government, of creating new institutions and of expanding already those in existence, to deal with such an emergency so as not to bring about any disruption in the education of those uprooted from East Pakistan* (Rao 1967:173).

The total expenditure sanctioned by the Union Ministry of Rehabilitation for facilities of primary education in Assam was Rs.5.22 crores. In the Third Plan period, Assam received a grant to the tune of Rs.10.10 lakhs for the construction and maintenance of primary schools for the benefit of displaced children. Schemes for imparting training to displaced teachers were executed in Assam under which there were five schemes for teachers at a value of Rs.27,000/-. Colleges too received grants for imparting of education to the displaced student (Rao 1967: 157).

A review of the Assam Five Year Plans brings to light that the provision for training of 40 displaced students existed in the Assam Civil Engineering Institute. Among the schemes for vocational and technical training of displaced persons, mention may be made of the Jorhat Scheme under which refugee trainees were being taught useful crafts in the Industrial Training Institute run by the Director General Resettlement and Employment, the Nowgong Scheme under which 20 refugee girls per year were given 'dhai' training at the Maternity and Child Welfare Centre at Nowgong and the Paper Training Centre, Shillong for instructing refugee trainees in paper making, printing and book binding. However, at the Industrial Training Institute at Jorhat, seats were increased from 76 to 140 because of the additional burden of displaced population. The increased seats included 16 for motor mechanic, 16 for carpentry and 32 for tailoring (Government of Assam 1956: 39). Four schemes for the training of displaced persons in carpentry, weaving, printing, tin smithy, black smithy, cane and bamboo works, leather works, tiles and pottery, hosiery, tailoring, sheet metal work have been sanctioned at the total cost of Rs. 415,740/- (Government of Assam 1957:76).

But in the meanwhile, the state government issued a circular by letter No.27868-933 dtd.10.09.1948 from the Director of Public Instruction to the Head Masters of all Government and affiliated institutions denying scholarships to refugee students and non-Assamese settlers whose land of origin form part of Pakistan (S. P. Mookherjee Papers File No.62). This was indicative of the denial of benefits of education which had been officially laid down for the displaced by the Central government. Documents in support to reveal the ire of the Chief Minister of Assam Bishnu Ram Medhi on the issue of admitting a few Bengali Hindu displaced students in spite of the sanction of the Government of India is annexed herewith as Appendix A (Cited in Annexure-B of Kar's "*Muslim in Assam Politics*" 1997:204). The lacunae of the state government in the execution and implementation of the refugee rehabilitation programmes that were financed by the Government of India could be reasonably argued.

#### 4. Employment and Business

Resettlement refers to the physical relocation of the displaced people and rehabilitation implies the restoration of lost livelihood. It could be said that for resettlement to be securely laid and rehabilitation got across is only when an adult refugee is said to have found gainful employment. Rehabilitation is meant to create productive elements of society. Employment was considered the means to enable the displaced to survive and sustain on their own and thereby be restored to that dignity from which he had parted during his flight from East Pakistan, since Partition.

Refugee markets were planned to be set up with the intention of providing avenues of business to the displaced and a way of substantiating their income (Department of Relief and Rehabilitation File no. RHH/227/56). Schemes for markets at Haibargaon in Nowgong and Guwahati have been approved by the Government of India. It has been a part of the Government's rehabilitation plan to provide a market to each approved housing colony established as a part of the urban scheme, to facilitate trade and petty business among the displaced of the colony and for enabling them to be engaged in trading purposes. But the scheme of establishment of markets was merely a

part of the state plan. In reality the scheme was barely implemented and whatsoever execution took place was at a very slow pace. The one that was planned to be established at Guwahati with 334 stalls allotted to the displaced was stated by Motiram Bora, the Finance Minister in his Budget Speech in 1952 to be complete. But the market had not begun functioning at all (Government of Assam 1953:1017). Ironically, the proposal remained only in paper and Government Offices were gradually established at the site (Interview of Bijoy Das, Senior Advocate, Gauhati High Court and Secretary, All Assam Refugee Association on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2003). In lieu of the proposed market were established Government offices that included the Excise Office of the district of Kamrup, the Office of the Supply Department and the Office of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department (Government of Assam 1954:1165). Besides, it was decided to establish a polytechnic institution in that particular area for the training of local candidates as artisans and craftsmen (Government of Assam 1956B:228). The market stalls that were meant for the refugee market presently lay in shambles and at the entrance was set up the Industrial Technical Institute where training of local artisans are being carried out. Besides even the fieldwork at Bonda Refugee Colony where a section of the displaced from the Bamunigaon camp were rehabilitated, the market that was proposed to be set-up adjacent to the colony for the livelihood of the displaced of the locality could not be traced. Only the land that was to be used for the purpose lay barren and unused in the absence of proper implementation of the plans (Interviewed Sudhir Ranjan Sarkar, Member, Bonda Refugee Colony Welfare and Development Association on 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2007).

## 5. Loan Schemes

Rehabilitation was also in the shape of loans according to the scales that were laid down for trades, professions and industry in urban areas and for agricultural and non-agricultural pursuit in rural areas. Under The Assam Displaced Persons (Rehabilitation Loans) Act, 1948 and amended in 1951 (Government of Assam 1958C:382), loans were to be provided to class of persons coming from East Bengal for availing certain kind of benefits. These loans were provided to the displaced with the intention of enabling them to cope prior to become self-sustaining (Government of Assam 1951B:26).

But the meagre loan was decided to be disbursed in two instalments and was got by the refugee victims either after pleading before the administration or through the

payment of bribe by them to earn their rightful share (Interviewed Narayan Chandra Roy, of Nowgong on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2007). These paltry amounts that filtered in piecemeal measures failed to meet the needs of the displaced to pursue any vocations and therefore ultimately proved to be futile. A hungry family that waited for two meals a day was unable to think of any other utilisation of the trivial sum of the loan amount except to pull up the minimum resources for purchasing the daily necessities of life (Government of India 1952B: 1990).

## Implementation and Execution of the Schemes : An Analysis

Partition had consequently resulted in displacement from East Bengal/East Pakistan. This group of people were forced to migrate and settle in the state of arrival. Partition was a consequence of the decision of the political leaders at the time of independence. In the circumstances that evolved for the victims of Partition, they were assured by the leaders of physical and mental succour in their new homeland. Therefore they could not be driven off. So, rather being antagonised with their presence and looking into this aspect of migration and settlement in this land as a competition for resources within the context of 'local-outsider' conflict, these displaced were to be utilised for the benefit of the state by creating them as productive forces.

A study of the measures of rehabilitation chalked and implemented for the displaced in the Brahmaputra Valley pointed to the improper implementation of the schemes. It became important to recognise that the overall experience of the state-sponsored rehabilitation schemes for the displaced was largely dissatisfactory. The plans were laid down by the government but they were largely on paper. The displaced were found working for their self-sustenance. They did not receive adequate government aid and sustained mainly through their own effort either as daily wage labourers or in their own capacity and the help of their kith and kin. Motiram Bora, the Finance and Rehabilitation Minister of the State too stated that the displaced were rehabilitating on their own without any direct financial help from the government. He explained that according to estimates made by the district officers, about 7000 families of old and about 6,000 families of new displaced persons have rehabilitated themselves through their own efforts either as *adhiars* on land or in trades and professions in urban or rural areas of the state, excluding Cachar (Government of Assam 1952D: 140). Besides, the meagre payment of loans or the temporary relief extended to these people

without allotment of lands was fruitless. In the absence of appropriate agricultural or industrial schemes for the displaced, rehabilitation of the refugees could be nothing but a myth (Government of Assam 1952B:375). Therefore, the mere announcements of rehabilitation measures were considered to be of little use unless they were backed by concrete measures taken in right earnest with a sense of urgency (Memorandum dated 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1964 issued by ShriTarapadaBhattacharjee cited in Das 1966:1).

A reasonable number of the displaced came in through the borders neither opting for registration at transit points nor awaiting official rehabilitations in relief camps or in the settlement colonies. They initially sustained by residing with their relatives. No official figure or Census data could relocate those 'unofficial migrants' who came in unregistered and were not counted among the displaced population. They were the ones who hardly sought the rehabilitation assistance of the government and prepared for their own means of sustenance by putting in their individual labour. Self-rehabilitation thus indicated to the self-reliance initiative of the displaced that was required for their survival (Sinha2000:83). Besides, the job-sectors did not have any schemes to specifically absorb the displaced in the administrative offices of the state. Whatever employment these displaced earned for them was through their individual capacity with the attainment of the necessary qualification. The displaced were therefore not always a burden on the economy of the new state. Rather, they possessed skills that were not used by the state government.

The expenses incurred by way of relief and rehabilitation of the displaced was according to official records found largely borne by the Central Government. It was fixed that the entire expenditure on refugees was recoverable from the Government of India and was not to affect the revenues of the State of Assam (Government of Assam1951-52:54). The Government of India had agreed to reimburse the state government the entire amount of the expenditure incurred by the state with the full implementation of the sanctioned rehabilitation schemes. Land vital to rehabilitation and settlement of the displaced was acquired by the state government, but the money required for this acquisition was paid by the Government of India through the granting of loans (Government of Assam 1953:1027). By shouldering the responsibility of finances associated with the settlement of the displaced in the BrahmaputraValley and the rehabilitation of displaced in the BarakValley, the Government of India to a large extent relieved the

State of Assam from the burden of the expenses of rehabilitation. It was a tremendous respite for the state that itself was floundering with its incipient economic status in the aftermath of independence and Partition. But the nation uniformly committed itself for the cause of rescue and rehabilitation of the persecuted minorities at the moment of independence and Partition. Therefore there cannot be deflection and half-hearted measures to solve this human problem. The state also simultaneously cannot remain uncaring to this humanitarian issue and be completely excused of its burden.

### **State and Societal Response to Rehabilitation :An Analysis of the Official Records**

Politics was said to have often played an important part in shaping the rehabilitation policy of the individual states; and local interests were seen to be not helpful. An unfortunate indication of the implementation of the rehabilitation schemes of the State of Assam was that the refugees or the displaced in the state were not very willingly welcomed.<sup>3</sup> It was noted that the Chief Minister of Assam, GopinathBordoloi argued on many an occasion that Assam was unable to accommodate many refugees because of the paucity of funds and unavailability of land, corresponding to the displaced at the initial stages of the independence of the country. He carried on exchange of letters in this respect with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India<sup>4</sup>. But Nehru on numerous occasions spoke of the laxity of the Assam government towards the refugees.<sup>5</sup> According to the first Prime Minister, Rehabilitation involved not only the setting up of the person somewhere but following him up and seeing that he fits in..... the problem is not merely a financial one but essentially a social one. Similarly Ajit Prasad Jain, a Rehabilitation Minister at one time pointed out that rehabilitation is the process of economic recovery of the displaced persons leading ultimately to the disappearance of all distinctions between them and other nationals.

MohanlalSakshena, the Union Rehabilitation Minister , immediately after the Partition of India had assertively stated that the rehabilitation policy of the Government of Assam was largely governed by political considerations. He visited Assam to discuss the prospects of settlement of the refugees. The Bardoloi ministry promised that 'they would do their best to rehabilitate such refugees as have not been absorbed in the province as quickly as possible'(The Times of India, 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1949) This assurance was more than enough to help the Assam

Jatiya Mahasabha, an Assamese political organization, kick off an agitation opposing any such plan. Newspaper reports in

the *Times of India* also quoted Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury, the chief of the Mahasabha and a fierce orator, blaming the Assam government for pursuing a ‘weak-kneed policy and sacrificing the whole future of the Assamese people by accepting the harmful suggestions from the Centre’ ( ibid 1949) The Assam government, sensing opposition to the rehabilitation programme in the province, expressed its inability to offer any large-scale land settlement programme to the Bengali Hindu refugees.

In addition, in a press release dated 9 May, the Assam government flatly denied the assurances it had made to Saxena. The Report prepared on his visit to Assam in May 1949 reflected the parochial attitude of the Assam Government to rehabilitate the displaced wherein he stated, “*The refugees who have got into the state of Assam are there, in spite of the unhelpful attitude of the state government*” (Saksena1950:82). He cited the instance of the Census figures of 1941 wherein the density of population in the various districts of Assam was provided as follows in Table 5

**Table:5**

**Area and Density of Population according to the Census of 1941**

District of AssamValley	Area in sq. miles	Density of population per sq. mile
Goalpara	3969	255
Kamrup	3840	329
Darrang	2804	263
Nowgong	3898	182
Sibsagar	5128	210
Lakhimpur	4156	215
Garo Hills	3152	75
Sadiya Frontier Tract	3309	18
Balipara Frontier Tract	571	11

Source: Cited in Sakshena 1950:76

The population density figures of Assam as per the Census of 1941, stated in Table 5 indicated the ample

scope for settlement of the displaced population in the state, subject to the land-man ratio. But it was the lukewarm response of the Government of Assam to the rehabilitation of the displaced that was largely responsible in the failure of the benefit to reach out to the displaced. The inflow of the displaced Bengali Hindus to the state in the aftermath of independence and Partition, was looked upon by the contemporary society of Assam as a danger of Bengali domination with an apprehension of the extinction of the Assamese culture (Sakshena1950:82; Ajit Prasad Jain Papers, Sub.Fno.1 - Report of Sri Prakasa, Committee of Enquiry on the Rehabilitation of Refugees, 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1951:9). This societal attitude was to a large extent responsible in influencing the government of its attitude to these new settlers.

In the aftermath of independence and Partition, since 1950, the Budget Speeches of the Finance Minister and the Governor’s addresses of the State claimed that rehabilitation work for the displaced from East Pakistan was carried out by the ‘receiving’ state of Assam. But an analysis of the official reports of the government corroborated with oral narratives indicated that the government schemes were only in writing. The attitude of the government towards the implementation and execution of these rehabilitation schemes was not much favourable. Lands acquired by the state government under the ‘The Land Acquisition and Requisition Act’ in 1948 allotted surplus wasteland through a ministerial decision, first to indigenous landless cultivators, then to Assam’s tea garden labourers and lastly to the refugees/ displaced. This action evoked opposition from the Union Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. He felt that the concerned Minister of the State while dealing with rehabilitation was found to proceed on the view that no surplus land was available in Assam for settlement of ‘outsiders’ (Shanker ed. 1977B :207-208). A historian from the north-east, Sujit Chaudhari, in one of his writings in a journal *Seminar* [(February-2002) – ‘*A god-sent opportunity?*’] quoted a certain Government circular which has supposedly reflected the attitude of the Assam Ministry to the reception of the East Pakistan refugees into Assam. The said government circular dated 4<sup>th</sup> May 1948 stated – “*In view of the emergency created by the influx of refugees into the province from East Pakistan territories and in order to preserve peace, tranquillity and social equilibrium in the towns and villages, the government reiterated its policy that settlement of land should in no circumstances be made with persons who are not indigenous to the province. The non-indigenous inhabitants of the province*

should include, for the purpose of land settlement during the present emergency, persons who are non-Assamese settlers in Assam though they already have lands and houses of their own and have made Assam their home to all intents and purposes” [(Revenue Deptt. No.195/47/188 dtd.4-5-48) cited in Chaudhuri 2002:64]. The state was equally creating difficulties in the way of settlement of refugee population on surplus land of tea gardens in Assam. In counter to the attitude of the state government, the Centre had assessed the availability of fallow cultivable land in Assam through a committee headed by Dorab Gandhi who reported that 18million acres of cultivable land could be used for the new settlers (ibid.2002). Coincidentally, this figure tallied with the Assam Government’s own assessment as given in its publication, *The Problem of Agricultural Development* (Government of Assam 1946 TableVI:8) and *Industrial Planning and Development of Assam* (Government of Assam1948B:6).These unused land figures seem to have been reported even by the Census of India, 1951 Vol.1: 22, wherein was stated that in Assam and adjoining areas, ‘the percentage of unused land is highest among all the sub-regions of India’ (Chaudhuri 2002:63). In spite of these statistics, the lands that were ultimately allotted to the displaced were not suitable for cultivation as they were largely found to be either *tillah* or low lands. Moreover, the Centre had instituted a Committee of Enquiry on the Rehabilitation of refugees under the Presidentship of the erstwhile Governor of Assam, Sri Prakasa. On the basis of the enquiry a report was duly submitted explaining the uninhabitable condition of the lands that were allotted to the refugees. They were in the nature of islands surrounded by water but with no facility of drinking water, lack of market place and dearth of cultivable land so as to be unable to reasonably accommodate the displaced ( Ajit Prasad Jain Papers, Sub.Fno.1 - Report of Sri Prakasa, Committee of Enquiry on the Rehabilitation of Refugees, 14<sup>th</sup> August1951:9). On survey and field-work, the lands in which the displaced were settled revealed its dilapidated condition. Since so many years of settlement, they that did not show any signs of development as yet and were located far away from the city.

But the displaced from East Pakistan were not exclusively peasants and could have sustained through other means besides cultivation. Hence plans were required to be rather formulated to build up an economically productive force. The displaced could have been equipped alternatively through other modes like setting up of small-scale industries. Therefore they should not

be considered a burden on the state and society. Real rehabilitation to the displaced lay in creating productive members of the community for the good of the country (Government of India1950C:1120).

The response of the government that was to a large extent influenced by the public opinion of the contemporary society was again mobilised through the public associations of the period. The *AsamJatiyaMahasabha*, the middle class organisation floated in 1926 in the Brahmaputra Valley, to espouse the cause of the Assamese middle class was found to be reasonably vocal against the settlement of the East Bengal refugees/ displaced and consequently protested against their rehabilitation (The Assam Tribune 11<sup>th</sup> August 1947).It also urged Shri S.P Mookherjee, President of the Hindu Mahasabha through a telegram not to support their rehabilitation in the province of Assam.<sup>6</sup> In furtherance to the issue, the organisation again in 1951 stated through a Memorandum to Sri Prakasa, President of the Assam Refugee Rehabilitation Enquiry Committee (*AsamJatiyaMahasabha* 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1951,annexed herein as Appendix-D), the need to look into the refugee problem without ignoring the welfare of Assam. The Memorandum to Sri Prakasa reflected the anxiety and apprehension of the Assamese intelligentsia against the displaced Bengali Hindu who were the m. Their rehabilitation and settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley was apprehended by the Assamese to lead to an annihilation of Assamese culture and identity and breed a white-collar job competition. This was a fear nurtured by the emerging Assamese middle class since the colonial period in their bid to nationality formation and fight for middle class sentiments. The perception of threat in the rehabilitation of the Bengali displaced rested on the penchant of the Bengali in the region since the colonial period of confining themselves within safe and segregated localities. Their trend of living afar from the local community, within specified pockets and the establishment of self- sufficient sites of settlements in segregated areas correspondingly emerged an apprehensive and resentful local force. Though they were initially looked upon in awe by the local community but gradually they found themselves to be cornered. Adaptation, considered the prime factor towards the process of rehabilitation, assimilation and integration was felt to be unlike to the Bengalis in such a situation remaining in coteries of their own wherever they go (Ajit Prasad Jain Papers, Sub.Fno.1 - Secret Personal Report of Sri Prakasa, Committee of Enquiry on the Rehabilitation of Refugees, 25<sup>th</sup> July1951:1). Parochialism of the Bengali refugee, their

unwillingness to settle outside the Bengal frontier with their high handedness and lack of mobility and enterprise were the prime factors that stood in the way of their assimilation and integration with the local community. In 1953, through his Budget Speech, the Finance and Rehabilitation Minister Motiram Bora expressed his anxiety that the relation between the refugees and local indigenous people were unpleasant.<sup>7</sup> Incidents at Rupaghat, Mujuraleka, Dhubri, Dungargoan near the Bhutan hills indicates to the increasing tension between the two sides (Government of Assam 1953:1019). Suggestions of establishing mixed colonies comprising of indigenous and displaced as a step towards assimilation came up.

Again the total money that was kept for relief and rehabilitation, the displaced received only a meagre share of it. This was perhaps because of the reason that much corruption was prevalent in the administration wherein the major share of these helpless people were eaten up by the intermediaries and officers by way of bribes and grafts (Government of Assam 1952B: 1182). The Ministry of Home Affairs by its Office Memorandum No.62/49- Appts, dated 5<sup>th</sup> March 1949, directed the state governments of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Orissa to fill up the vacancies in the Central Government offices, which were not filled by promotion or transfer by refugees from East Bengal. But unfortunately this direction was not implemented and the Ministry of Finance have been further requested to furnish to this Displaced Governments Servants Section to show the number of vacancies under different categories since the 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1949 to be updated and be filled (Government of India 1949).

The displaced from Pakistan belonged to a specific social category by virtue of their evicted position in contrast to non-displaced citizens of India who provided them with shelter as well as to all other non-Indian foreigners (not refugee) living in the country seemed to be an obvious reflection for one and all who might care to render rehabilitation-relief in any form (Pakrasi 1971:120). Under the circumstances, the Bengali displaced from East Bengal came to be considered a class apart in independent India. In variance to the trials and tribulations that they underwent as victims of partition and independence of the country, these Bengali Hindus became an unwanted lot in both East Bengal and India. Even in West Bengal identified as a homeland for the Bengali Hindus in post-independent India failed to shelter the East Bengal Hindus willingly. The identity of these displaced Bengali Hindus were submerged

in the shadow of being an '*udbastu*', '*sharanarathi*' as referred to by Hiranmoy Bandhyopadhyaya in her book '*Udbastu*' (Bandhopadhyay 1970). They came to be distinguished as the *batis* or the *bangalsto* to differentiate them from the *ghotis* of West Bengal. Besides West Bengal, the states of Tripura, Bihar and Orissa too were critical to the settlement of the displaced Bengalis from East Bengal/East Pakistan in these individual states. Their migration was throughout considered a strain on the incipient economy of the respective states in the immediate aftermath of independence. Similarly, in the Brahmaputra Valley too, the Bengali displaced was looked upon as a challenge to the economy of the state and a cause of social conflict. They were for linguistic similarities historically clubbed with the earlier flow of Bengali migrants in the state. Apprehending the Bengali demographic proliferation and social dominance, the emerging Assamese middle class had considered them a threat to local identity and culture. Therefore in the context, the later group of Bengali migrant's i.e the displaced Bengali Hindus were looked on with apathy and their rehabilitation consequently suffered from inhospitality and neglect. Ultimately they found themselves isolated and cornered in the socio-political system in post-colonial Assam.

### **Rehabilitation - Right or Charity and Social security?**

Displaced by definition are victims of human rights violation. It is the violation of human rights in the home state that causes refugees or the displaced to flee from their country of nationality. To live with human dignity has been the cherished desire of man all through. It is this losing of their basic and fundamental right to live with dignity that compels one to flee and is therefore displaced. Again, the claim of the displaced to his rights of settling and being rehabilitated in a civil society is legitimately posited within the state-refugee paradigm. Samir Kumar Das in his paper *Their Right to Migrate; Our Right to Home* (Das 2006:37) focuses and views civil society as the only guarantee or *sine qua non* of human rights. It is only a vibrant and functioning civil society that can protect an individual from the abuse and violation of rights. Theoretically perceived, the state of origin expels the refugees while the host state becomes responsible for extending minimum standard of treatment and rights (Mathur 1999:27). This brings into fore the question of social security and justice that encompass the notions of care and hospitality for the displaced. Simultaneously is required tolerance that includes kindness and responsibility. The human rights

of the displaced rests within the third generation of collective rights or 'rights of peoples' and the refugee law that protects them are enshrined in the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees and its subsequent 1967 Protocol. Though neither India nor any of the South Asian countries have acceded to these international instruments or has any membership to the UNHCR but special rights to these disadvantaged were provided under humanitarian consideration. States not party to the Refugee Convention or any international instrument concerning refugees are bound by customary international law to provide the minimum standard of treatment which should at least respect the fundamental human rights of the refugees. The entire international refugee protection regime is based on this hypothesis. And being a member of the international community, the Indian State is also expected to respect its international obligations (ibid.1999:53). The argument rests upon the contention of the right to share in the wealth and resources of the host society. The decision to migrate is always regarded as a desperate and painful decision. For the migrant they are seldom left with any alternative but to migrate. It is the last resort for them (Das 2006:51). Under the circumstances, it is the responsibility of the host people to share whatever resources they have with these people in recognition of the right to survival of the refugees.

Both the Government and the political leaders who had acquiesced to the Partition of 1947 had implicitly consented to taking the responsibility of their fellow beings from the other side of the border. Political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru had prior to independence and Partition explained of their responsibility towards these uprooted people, who were victims of the political decision of Partition with no fault of theirs (Amrit Bazar Patrika 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947). As a consequence, rehabilitation of the displaced was designated a national responsibility by the post-colonial Indian Government and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru explained in a public speech that this was not merely a humanitarian act on the part of the state for the welfare of the displaced alone, but a pragmatic one on which the future and welfare of India depended (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches* 1967:8-10). Nehru is supposed to have given the assurance that in case the minorities cannot live in Pakistan, they will be provided due rehabilitation in their arrival to India and considered to be the citizens of India. But what had been stated at the moment of division did not wholly take shape. Moreover, the government was under the impression that as because the displaced in eastern India

unlike that of the west came trickling in fits and start, they had both the option and the time to decide to come over to their 'place of choice' and therefore extending relief measures to these people would be doing them charity. The government also thought on relief and set-up relief camps at the border upon the understanding that the migration of the Partition-induced displaced was a temporary phase.

Rehabilitation with dignity whatsoever was not to be seen as an act of charity. They had struggled and sacrificed for independence from colonial bondage but were repaid as victims of Partition which consigned them to minority hood and therefore subordination in a Muslim majority state (Chatterjee PDF file accessed in [www.pstc.brown.edu](http://www.pstc.brown.edu) on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2004). But they came across resentment in the receiving countries. As where the concept of social security was concerned, the process of Rehabilitation that took place in post-partition was found to be exclusively official devoid of the theory of justice, care and warmth. Invariable to the state of their entry, the reciprocal duties of the concerned state and the notions of sharing and caring and the social and human security that emerges under the provisions of the new constitution, the displaced Bengali Hindus in the aftermath of the Partition of 1947 were entitled to enjoy their claim to fundamental rights in post-colonial India. The displaced felt under their right to life and living as enshrined in Article 21 of the Fundamental Rights of the Indian constitution entitles them correspondingly to rehabilitation benefits. By reason of the acquiescence of the political leaders to the decision of Partition, it was taken for granted by the displaced that as a natural corollary the leaders of post-independence should have been prepared to face the consequences of the verdict and thus recognise the rightful claim of the displaced for enjoyment of all rehabilitation measures.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The expression 'Cyril's Scalpel' has been borrowed from Ajit Bhattacharjee's article in [Outlook: Countdown](#) to Partition (Special issue on Partition commemorating the fiftieth year of independence) 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Mahatma Gandhi in his post-prayer speech on 21-7-1947, "My friends ask whether those who being

*mortally afraid or otherwise leave Pakistan will get shelter in the Indian Union. My opinion is emphatic on this point: such refugees should get proper shelter in the Indian Union and vice versa”* (Bengal Rehabilitation Organization 1950).

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister’s message to Convention of East Bengal Refugees held in August 1947 under the Chairmanship of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee

*We cannot fully enjoy freedom.....How can one forget the sufferings and sacrifices which they cheerfully endeared for freeing our motherland from foreign domination, their future welfare must engage the most careful and serious attention by the Government and the people of the Indian Union in the light of development that may take hereafter* (Misra 1980).

<sup>3</sup> See the representation of the PanduBastuharaSamiti, in S.P.Mookherjee Papers, Sub File No. 35.

<sup>4</sup> On this issue, see ‘Nehru to GopinathBordoloi,’ Chief Minister of Assam, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1948 in

SWJN Second Series 1986 Vol.6, page 118 and ‘Nehru to Bordoloi’, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1949 in SWJN

Second Series 1991 Vol.11, page 70-72. Also see *Select Correspondence of Sardar Patel 1945-50, Vol.II Doc.49*, Navjivan Trust, Bombay(Shanker 1977A).

<sup>5</sup> See note by Nehru entitled ‘Migration from East Bengal to Assam’, 21 July, 1948 in SWJN Second Series 1987 Vol.7 page 67-68.

<sup>6</sup> Copy of the telegram sent by AmbikagiriRaychaudhury, General Secretary, *AsamJatiyaMahasabha* to Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1950 in S.P.Mookherjee Papers, File No. 35.

*“Assam people eagerly awaiting your activities during your proposed tour. They feel you would better avail hospitalities of non-sectarian public of Assam instead parochial Bengali citizen and receive whatever representation you do in public instead in private... ..strive for a new settlement and not advocate rehabilitation of endlessly numerous Pakistani refugees*

*in any province much less Assam which is beyond her capacity to accommodate”*.

<sup>7</sup> Also see the views of K.Sammadar of Haibargaon, Nowgong, in his letter to S.P.Mookherjee, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1952, in S.P.Mookherjee Papers, Sub File No.165. Similar representations were found in S.P.Mookherjee Papers II and IV- F. No.164 (1950-52). Papers pertaining to Refugee problem and their letter and requests for help. Also could be found communications of a similar nature in the letters - Office of the Chairman Small Town Committee Kokrajhar (3<sup>rd</sup> Sept.1958) in RHH/122/58-‘Financial assistance to Kokrajhar town Committee’(1958B); Office of the Sapatgram, Small Town Committee (25<sup>th</sup> February, 1958) in RHH/07/58-Financial assistance to Sapatgram Small Town Committee(1958C) for development works in refugee concentrated areas and letter of the Office of the Gauhati Municipal Board dtd.30<sup>th</sup> July, 1958 in RHH/117/58(1958A). Representations were thus usually found from those areas having a sizeable number of displaced populations.

<sup>8</sup> See the paper, ‘Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50’ in SuvirKaul ed. *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2001

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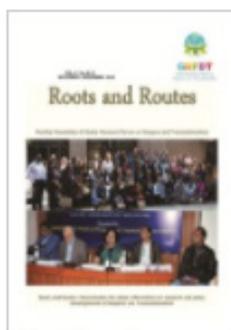
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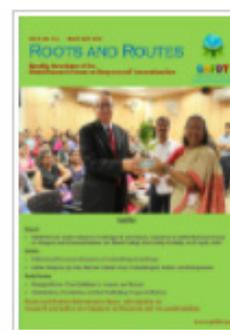
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