

**Citizens, Non-Citizens,  
and in the Camps Lives**

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The two research papers included here discuss the lives, experiences, memories, processes and practices of refugees located in various camps including one of the largest transit camps in West-Bengal, known as Cooper's Camp. The papers examine, in different ways, the practices of the state and analyse the production of identities and subjectivities of the refugees and the ways they are institutionalized and differentiated from other subjects. As one paper mentions, the category of *refugee* emerges as the battlefield where specific identities and subjectivities are contested and forged in effective skirmishes of everyday life. The two studies on Cooper's Camp can be labeled as micro-histories, but the strategy of recovering refugee experience in this fashion has been deliberately employed, not simply to restore subjectivity but also to recapture the agency of the refugee constructed through memory and other forms of self-representation. Refugee camps in India have always been the sites of contestation in the creation of the state and both the studies illustrate this in various ways. The two studies show quite effectively how the state produces its subjects, and more importantly, how the state creates the figure of 'citizen' and the 'non-citizen'.

# Living another Life: Un-Homed in the Camps

**Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury**

*So you no longer seem to recognise us  
We who have over thirty years, been trekking through  
Village after village.  
Leaving the land of our birth,  
Across the country, past rivers, canals, swamps and seas,  
Past hill and wide stretches of land till – till what?  
Our journey's end?  
Will it ever and or will it be one long ceaseless trek  
For all time to come?  
We come, the flotsam and jetsam of derelict humanity –  
With stark fear stamped on our eyes...  
Still we come....  
No longer have we any country we can call our own,  
No villages nor any name.  
We are no longer Bengalis or Hindus nor even men:  
You have given us a new name 'refugees' and stamped it on us as our hallmark.....*

Excerpts from the poem *We are the Valueless Price*<sup>1</sup>.

*Yes, I am a refugee. When I left my desh, I was only twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old. That was in 1948. And I came to this Cooper's Camp on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1950. From the very next day, the camp was officially opened to provide shelter to the East Bengali displaced people. I am from Barisal district of East Bengal. I can remember distinctly my village, even after so many years. It was Duttapara, name of our house was Duttapara Bado-bari. After leaving my desh, I was in Calcutta for two years and, frankly speaking, I came here at Ranaghat to get a job. Satish Sen, a Congress leader, inspired me a lot at that time. With two of my friends I reached here. When we arrived at Ranaghat, the railway station was so crowded that, we apprehended, at any moment an accident would happen. A large portion of the land, where the camp is located at present, belonged to Cooper saheb. He also started a missionary hospital near the railway station. There were many quarters adjacent to the hospital,*

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<sup>1</sup> The poem *We are the Valueless Price* is written by Jyotirmoyee Devi and translated by Saibal Kumar Gupta. It was first published in *Alekhyā* (a Bengali periodical), Baisakh-Asad (April-June), 1385 (1978).

*which were initially used as the make-shift camps by the shelter-seekers. After reaching here, we saw a huge preparation was going on – to build up huts, arranging tents for providing shelter to the displaced, to install tube-wells for the supply of drinking water to the hapless refugees. It was then decided that, initially the asylum-seekers would be provided with chira and gur. When the camp was started functioning it was not meant for rehabilitation of these displaced persons. So many people, from so many different places of East Bengal! But, we are all refugees! It was such a terrible situation that, it seemed, we all lost our own individual identity by losing our home, our desh, our para. While we crossed the border, we got the new identity - refugee...*

Prangobindo Saha,<sup>2</sup> a ninety-four year old man, who served as an Accounts Assistant in the Cooper's camp for many years, after saying this, closed his eyes and paused. After a while, he again started recollecting his past – the past of incurring the loss of identity – the past that perhaps gradually turned into his future.

Prangobindo Saha is not the only one. At present, like Prangobindo babu there are other 39 inmates, mostly the so-called lower caste Hindus, in the Cooper's Camp (with an area of 2.5 square miles)<sup>3</sup> in Nadia district, and 686 Permanent Liability members (PL) in the eight existing camps and homes in West Bengal (including the Cooper's Camp)<sup>4</sup>, to whom, the present only implies a fixed amount of irregular cash dole and rations from the administrative authorities. These people, despite their tragic experiences of displacement from their homeland, they still remember their *desh*<sup>5</sup> – the land of abundance, but a land of no return. They not only live with their past, they also live in their past. The refugees, who have been surviving in the camps for nearly six decades and have not yet been rehabilitated, thus, still remain the prisoners of the past. It seems that, their lives and times have frozen within the boundaries of the camp. This essay will focus on the genesis of these camps and the lives and the struggle for survival of these hapless, uprooted people from East Bengal in the camps.

The article will be divided into three main sections. In the first section, we shall deal with the genesis of the camps after the partition of 1947 in West Bengal. The women refugees and their struggle for existence in an alien milieu of the camps

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<sup>2</sup> Prangobindo Saha was interviewed on 25 April 2008 at Cooper's camp located at Ranaghat in Nadia district.

<sup>3</sup> See the report on *Problems of Refugee Camps and Homes in West Bengal*, Screening Committee, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Out of these 8 camps, 7 are located in Nadia district alone. Internal report of the Inmates of Eight camps and Homes, prepared by the Directorate of Refugee and Rehabilitation, Government of West Bengal on 31 January 2008.

<sup>5</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.

will be discussed in the second section, and finally, the third section will focus on the politics of agitation where the policies of relief and rehabilitation of the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal will be discussed along with the grievances of the camp-mates against those rehabilitation policies. In this essay, we shall rely upon a few narratives of the refugees, who are still surviving in the existing camps as the PL members (as per the definition of the Government of West Bengal). We shall also depend upon the official publications, especially of the Ministry of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of West Bengal, the Department of Rehabilitation, Government of India and the Lok Sabha Debates and West Bengal State Legislative Assembly Debates.

Moreover, we shall consider 1958 as a landmark. This is primarily for two reasons: first, the year 1958 was following the end of the first popularly-elected Congress 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 of the state by March 31, 1958, and henceforth not to recognize any more 'immigrant' as a 'displaced' beyond that date who could be in the need of relief and rehabilitation. We shall also restrict our discussion up to 1979, which perhaps again marked a new beginning of refugee politics in West Bengal. The once-friendly Left party in West Bengal – Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], after coming to power in coalition with other like-minded political parties in 1977, seemed to change its stand drastically with regard to the refugee colonization and thereby it embarked a new era of refugee movement in West Bengal. Keeping in mind that the question of rehabilitation of the refugees has always been a matter of political and economic controversies in this eastern state of India, we shall confine our discussion to the experiences of those displaced people, who found shelter before 1958 in the refugee camps set up in West Bengal.

Before we begin a more detailed discussion on the issue, let us clarify that, in this paper by 'refugee' we mean a person who was uprooted from his/her *desh*, and we shall not use the term 'refugee' as it appears in the United Nations (UN) Convention on Refugees of 1951 or the subsequent UN Protocol of 1967.<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning here that, 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

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<sup>6</sup> According to the 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*, Butterworths, Toronto, 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.

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.

### **Genesis of the Relief Camps**

The partition of the Indian subcontinent not only killed thousands of people, but also uprooted and displaced millions from their traditional homeland – their *desh*. In that schizophrenic moment of the partition of India, which has been described as the ‘theatricality of re-composition of the nation’ not only broke the bonds of codes and territories but a molar form that carried strong traces of molecular partitions, such as neighbourhood partition, village partition, city partition, community partition, family partition, gender partition and even partition of political parties and organisations.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, “the geography of partition is not that of a mountain amid plains, but of a thousand plateaus.”<sup>8</sup>

On the eve of and immediately after the creation of two separate states – India and Pakistan – on the basis of the so-called two-nation theory in 1947 communal tension and riots gripped the subcontinent. Impact of partition on both sides of Punjab and Bengal was severe than any other parts of India and Pakistan. For the Indian state of Punjab, the 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.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the contours of the problem emerged clearly, and the matter appeared to be 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

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<sup>7</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, “ Introduction: The infamous Event” in Stefano Bianchini, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Rada Ivekovic and Ranabir Samaddar, *Partitions: Reshaping States and Minds*, Frank Cass, USA, 2005, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Chaturvedi, “The Excess of Geopolitics: Partition of ‘British India’ in Stefano Bianchini, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Rada Ivekovic and Ranabir Samaddar, n. 12, pp, 125-160.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed analyses on partition induced violence in Punjab please see Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1998; Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition – Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001; Ian Talbot and Darshan Singh Talta (ed.), *Epicentre of Violence: Partition Voices and Memories from Amritsar*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2006; K.S.Duggal, *Abducted Not and other Stories of Partition Holocaust*, UBSPD, New Delhi, 2007; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2000; Ritu Menon (ed.), *No Woman’s Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India*, Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2004. These are only a few of the vast literature on the Partition of the West.

(1947-50), the Partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuing process.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the 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>11</sup>

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>12</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 Government of India officials 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. 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’.<sup>13</sup> One should not forget that, many people crossing over to West Bengal between 1958 and 1964 were excluded from the definition of ‘migrants’. Moreover, although many people came from East Pakistan to India with ‘migration certificates’<sup>14</sup>, they were treated like refugees and in many cases they were sent to the camps because they needed relief and rehabilitation for their survival.

The uprooted and displaced Hindus who were termed as refugees came phase by phase from East Pakistan to West Bengal. In this journey from their home to the alien land, the discourse of partition victim-hood of the East Bengali Hindus always reflected their acute sense of insecurity with regard to *dhon*, (wealth), *maan* (honour)

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<sup>10</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, (Kolkata: Stree), 2003: p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of Rehabilitation, 1965-66*, (New Delhi: Department of Rehabilitation, Government of India), 1967, p.107.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Manual of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation of the Government of West Bengal, 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 and those, who came between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971, are known as ‘new migrants’. See *Manual of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation*, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> In 1956 the government of India introduced ‘migration certificates’ to permit entry only to people ‘in certain special circumstances such as split families and girls coming into India for marriage’. Please see *96<sup>th</sup> Report of India Estimates Committee 1959-60*, Second Lok Sabha, Ministry of Rehabilitation (Eastern Zone), Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, 1960, p.4.

and *pran* (life).<sup>15</sup> The first batch of refugees arrived after the riots in Noakhali and Tippera in October 1946, which took place in the wake of violence, occurred in the month of August in Calcutta immediately after the call for Direct Action Day (16 August). These riots sowed deep apprehension among the Hindus about their future in the Muslim-majority province claiming statehood. As a result, the *bhadraloks* mostly belonging to the upper and upper middle strata like the landowning, merchant and professional classes made their exit from East Bengal first. 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 state.

In fact, a small section of these people was also able to sell their property in East Bengal or later exchanged property to acquire capital to reinvest the same in private industries. In any case, within a short period of time, they were integrated with the local population on the other side of the border. There was also a large educated middle class, who, though, did not have enough money with them but had the 'social capital'<sup>16</sup> for their survival to reconstruct their lives. Some of them got 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 this phase, the shelter-seekers from East Bengal trickled in till the end of 1949.

The next major influx took place following the massacre in several districts of East Bengal, particularly in the villages called Kalshira in the Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna district on December 20, 1949 and in Nachole in Rajshahi district on January 1950 and then violence spread up to Dacca, Mymensingh, Barisal, Sylhet, Chittagong, Santhahar of East Bengal in February 1950.<sup>17</sup> In the massacre of February 1950, the epicentre of violence was mainly the *Namasudra*-inhabited areas, where most of the people were very poor and mostly agricultural labourers. The threat of their *pran* forced them to leave their *desh*.

Later, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, signed in April 1950<sup>18</sup>, failed to provide the way for the return of these refugees to their homeland. Instead, 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

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<sup>15</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>16</sup> Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January 1995.

<sup>17</sup> *Jugantar*, February 28, 1950.

<sup>18</sup> According to the pact, the two governments agreed to extent to all nationals of both the countries, irrespective of religion, equal rights as citizen, as well as giving them equal opportunities, in the civil services and armed forces. They agreed to give facilities to those intending to migrate, and Minority Commissions were to be appointed in East and in West Bengal, chaired in each case by a minister of the provincial government. India and Pakistan also agreed to appoint ministers to their respective central governments, with special responsibilities for 'minority affairs'. Please see Saroj Chakraborty, *With B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers*, Rajat Chakraborty, Calcutta, 1982, p. 106.

people during this phase. Another round of Influx began after 1960-61, and reached a crescendo during 1964-65. Finally, the massive exodus took place during 1970-71, when the West Pakistani rulers took the route of genocide to silence the Bengalis in East Pakistan.

The Annual Report of the Department of Rehabilitation of the Government of India pointed out that, in the first phase of the refugee flow between 1946 and 1952, 2.52 million refugees arrived in West Bengal. The period between 1953 and 1956 were marked as crucial, when almost 553,430 refugees crossed the border. By December 1957 the refugee influx reached the highest point in the east (see Table 1). The number of the refugees crossing the international border went up to 316,000.<sup>19</sup> These figures hardly give one any idea of the pain, trauma and agony through which the displaced persons 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.

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

<sup>19</sup> *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, Home [Pub.] Department, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1956, p. 17.

Census report of 1951 indicated that, out of a total 2,099,000 refugees, 1,387,000 or two-thirds were found in these three districts. Of these, 527,000 came to 24 Parganas, 433,000 to Calcutta and 427,000 to Nadia districts.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the refugees from the northern part of East Bengal tried to settle themselves in the adjacent districts of the northern part of West Bengal. Consequently, four districts like West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Burdwan absorbed much of the remaining refugee population.<sup>21</sup>

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. But, the refugee situation in the East did not improve at all even in the late 1950s. Moreover, as a result of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, 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. At this juncture, 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>22</sup>

It made one thing quite clear that, the Government of India's policy toward rehabilitation of the Bengali Hindu refugees was not only inadequate, but also discriminatory in nature.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Census of India 1951*, Vol.VI, part 1 A, p. 305-306.

<sup>21</sup> For elaborate discussion see Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-67*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp.119-124.

<sup>22</sup> Saroj Chakraborty, same as note 23.

<sup>23</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

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>24</sup>

Against this backdrop, as the cross-border influx continued interminably during the second half of the 1940s and early 1950s, the helpless, uprooted people reached the reception and interception centres at the Sealdah station in Calcutta. From there they were subsequently sent to the transit camps and permanent relief camps. The host government decided not to send the refugees straight to the rehabilitation camps mainly due to the magnitude of influx. Moreover, many of these refugees were supposed to be sent to other parts of the country and instant arrangements could not be made possible for their travel. Therefore, the relief and transit camps were established in different parts of West Bengal to provide immediate help to these people.

In fact, different types of camps in West Bengal were set up to deal with an unprecedented refugee influx in the state. 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 were also P.L members comprising mostly women and children who had no male member of their family to look after them. Even, no male person was allowed to enter into the camp premises without the permission of the camp authority. Here lies the difference between the general P.L camps and the Women's camp. Bhadrakali, Bansberia women's camp in Hooghly district, Ranaghat Women's Home and Rupasree Pally in Nadia district, and Titagarh Women's Home in North 24 Parganas district were such women's camps. However, as time passed by, many of the inmates of these women's camps have been permanently rehabilitated along with their family members in and around the camp area and thereby it has now become an area for permanent resettlement.

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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. 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, Saraswati Press, Calcutta, 1980.

<sup>24</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Naya Udyog, Calcutta, 1999, pp. 280-90.

Secondly, in order to counteract the demoralizing effect of prolonged stay in 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 in North 24 Parganas and Sonarpur R5 scheme in South 24 Parganas are examples of such worksite camp. (See Table 2)

Finally, the PL camps are for those refugees who were considered unfit for any kind of gainful employment with which they could be rehabilitated. They were old, infirm, invalid and orphans. Unlike Women's camp, in these general P.L camps the male and female inmates could stay together. 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 North 24 Parganas district.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 2: Worksite Camps**

<u>Nature of Work</u>	<u>Mileage</u>	<u>Mandays</u>	<u>Earthworks (cft)</u>	<u>Wage Earned</u>
Road Construction	84	5222569	30193641	592083
Canal Cultivation	16	9046811	25269398	499708
Embankment Work	3	39021	2741895	55434
Development Work	-	178775	8561184	223767
<b>Total</b>		<b>1645047</b>	<b>66766118</b>	<b>1370987</b>

Source: *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, Home [Pub.] Department, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1956, p. 18.

Initially the Cooper's Camp was one of the major transit camps in Ranaghat in West Bengal where displaced people stayed for 10-15 days before their permanent resettlement.<sup>26</sup> Later on, the Cooper's Camp was converted into a permanent relief camp. On 30 November 1952, the population of these camps and homes was 34,000, including the population of the orphanages. The number soon increased to 50,425 by July 1956. In fact, the number of persons in PL category in West Bengal was on the higher side (See Table 3).

<sup>25</sup> For details, please see, Anil Singha, *Paschimbanger Udvastu Uponivesh*, (in Bengali) (Refugee Colonies in West Bengal), Calcutta, Book Club, 1995, 1995: 20-21.

<sup>26</sup> Samir Kumar Das, 'Refugee Crisis: Responses of the Government of West Bengal', In Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta Research Group, Calcutta, 2000, pp, 7-10.

**Table 3: Numbers of Refugees in the Government Camps of West Bengal, 1958**

Districts	No. of Camps and Homes	Population in Camps and Homes
Burdwan	30	43,127
Birbhum	17	17,400
Bankura	7	11,165
Midnapur	11	16,838
Hooghly	11	18,013
Howrah	7	7,779
24 Parganas	45	43,284
Calcutta	7	5,059
Nadia	7	53,160
Murshidabad	8	12,709
Malda	-	-
West Dinajpur	1	989
Jalpaiguri	-	-
Darjeeling	-	-
Cooch Behar	1	1,159
Purulia	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>240682</b>

Source: *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*(statement issued by the Government of West Bengal on 15 December 1958), cited in Pranati Choudhuri, "Refugees in West Bengal: A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlements within the Calcutta Metropolitan District", Occasional Paper, No.55, Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1983.

One thing should be mentioned here that, those who crossed over to West Bengal from East Pakistan from the late 1940s and early 1950s primarily belonged to the upper or middle classes did not prefer to go to the camps. In fact, it has become almost a world-wide phenomenon that, where there is a choice either to receive protection and assistance in camp, or to bypass the refugee camps and self-settle without support or with partial supports, majority of the refugees prefer self-settlement. The question may arise that, why does the majority of the world refugees choose self-settlement? Probably this is because they prefer to have no support or

partial support than to lose their freedom of movement and self-reliance.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the notion of freedom of movement and self-reliance played an important role in the case of the East Bengali upper caste refugees. Moreover, 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). So, those who took shelter in the camps were very poor and mainly agriculturalists and did not have other option but to opt for camp lives. 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.

### **Living another Life: Women Refugees in Relief Camps of West Bengal**

In most cases, the military barracks and tunnel-shaped huts made of iron constructed for the soldiers of the Allied Forces (during the World War II) were converted originally into makeshift 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 subhuman in nature. While narrating her experiences in the Coopers' Camp, Sarajubala Ghot (80), a resident of the Ranaghat Mahila Shibir, said:

*“Oh! What a situation...Even in the dormitories of those barracks, each of our 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. It is true that, we, as the refugees definitely got shelter far away from our homes and communal hatred, but drinking water! Health care! Oh! What a measurable condition!, Scarcity of water, lack of proper health care, and oh yes, irregular supply of ration made our lives unbearable. You know, in such a situation, many children died of*

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<sup>27</sup> L. Hovil, 'Self-settled Refugees in Uganda: an Alternative Approach to Displacement', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, VI. 20, No. 4, 2007, pp. 599-620.

*dysentery in our camp. The 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 palpal amount of money for the cremation of a body. Oh! There were also hyenas around their camp. Usually the hyenas appeared after sunset and took away children from the tents or huts of the overcrowded refugee camp. While memorising those days it appears like a nightmare to me...* ”<sup>28</sup>

Our conversation has made it clear that, the camp life was unsatisfactory most of the times, and even sometimes sub-human in nature. Ashalota Das (nearly 80 years of age) of Bansberia Mahila Sadan or Bansberia Women’s Home, located on the bank of river Hooghly at Hooghly district, has specified about the scarcity of the proper maternity units in the camps at that time.<sup>29</sup> As a result in many cases the pregnant women had to deliver their babies almost under the open sky.

It would be worth-mentioning in this context that, after visiting the camps of West Bengal, the leading social workers, including Bina Das, Sudha Sen, Sheila Davar, Ashoka Gupta, Amar Kumari Varma, accompanied by Suniti Pakrashi, Deputy Director of Women’s Rehabilitation in West Bengal submitted a report about the measurable conditions of the camps to the government of India in 1955. The report revealed that, the “lack of privacy and of kitchen space is notorious. Scanty water supply with hand pumps and congested rooms with leaking roofs have led to a number of strikes in PL camps. All the camps that we have visited here in West Bengal for PL women and children lack workroom, crèche rooms, playground, separate kitchen, common prayer room even after seven years. No home or a PL women’s camp, however long it may have been established, has been provided with any facilities for education at nursery or pre-basic stage... In PL camps and homes for the aged and the infirm no such regular work centre was ever sanctioned to enable them to learn and earn something. Even when some work centres or training centres were sanctioned, it was for a short period only and no wages were paid for the goods produced by them after the training was completed. The plea given for this is that they are fed and clothed at government expense. Women are therefore reluctant to

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<sup>28</sup> Sarajubala Devi, a resident of Ranaghat Women’s Home, adjacent to Coopers’ Camp interviewed on 13 December 2001. In this context, one can see A Report entitled *East is East: West is West* prepared by Asoka Gupta, Amar Kumari Varma, Sudha Sen, Bina Das and Sheila Davar cited in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Stree, Kolkata, 2003, p. 235-252). The report said that, “Cash dole for food in the refugee camps is not paid uniform rates for an adult and a child. The scale of doles here is Rs. 12 for an adult and Rs. 8 for a child below 8, and upto a maximum of Rs. 60, whatever may be the number in the family”.

<sup>29</sup> Ashalota Das was interviewed on March 5 2008 in bansberia Mohila sadan located on the bank of river Hooghly at Hooghly district. It is on the way to Tribeni from Bandel. The total allotted area for this P.L. Camp is not too big in comparison to the Coopers’ Camp, Dhubulia camp and the Ranaghat Mahila Shibir. Like Ranaghat and Bhadrakali, the inmates of this home comprise only women. Out of total 45 inmates living in the camp, some camp-dwellers are physically as well as mentally disabled.

come and work at the work centres or training centres. Allowance for clothes at Rs 2 per capita is never given to the camp inmates in cash. Sarees, dhotis and garments are supplied by the department twice during the year, but the result of such bulk purchase is that the garments seldom fit the person to whom it is given. No charpoys or *razais* are provided as is done for West Punjab refugees. In the damp Bengal climate the bedding provided is very inadequate... Women refugees taking a course of training in teaching or nursing in a recognised institution or hospital are not given any stipend but are only allowed to attend the vocational training centres specially set up for refugees. Except in Titagar and Gariahat work centres (which are for men) the grants for women under these heads in West Bengal are very meagre.”<sup>30</sup>

Maya Saha (78 years of age), a resident of Dhubulia refugee camp, which was one of the biggest camps situated near Krisnanagar, the district head quarter of Nadia in West Bengal, has expressed almost the same view about the condition of the camps. In her words,

*Many of us from our village Jalisha of Barisal left our desh together. It was because of the riot. Though our family was not directly affected by the riot however, my father and other elderly relatives told the time has come to leave our place. Just imagine... a poor Muslim proja (subject) demanded to marry a rich Hindu girl! At the other, we got information that they started stealing harvest, cows, and boats and so on. We decided to leave our place. Leaving our land, our home, everything we were on the streets! With all men! The riot changed our identity. I was indeed a bride of a well-established family! My father-in-law had some land. We used to survive on agriculture. After losing my husband I came back to my baaper bari (father's place). The riot snatched everything from us. Alas! Now I am a refugee – a poor, old dependent of government's help for my survival...when we first crossed the border we registered our names as refugee. We were sent to the Cooper's camp and from Cooper's we came here in Dhubulia. Oh! What a crowded place it was. There was absolutely no privacy for the women. You know, in our desh we, the womenfolk of the society were ignorant and unaware of the outside world. We used to stay in our houses. All on a sudden, the riot placed us on the crowded streets. Growing up in the traditional Hindu families, as young girls, we never had the privilege to socialise with any male from outside our own families. Becoming a refugee we had to adjust ourselves with that changed situation.*

The displacement of women refugees from their *desh*, their ‘foundational home’ changed their perspectives toward lives. The partition converted the women of yesterday into the uprooted refugees of today. It left a deep scar on their whole psyche. Before the turbulence, the female members of their families used to live in a private space, the *andarmahals* (inside the house) of their respective houses, behind

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<sup>30</sup> Ashoka Gupta, an eminent Gandhian social worker was interviewed on 29 August 2006 at Kolkata. In this connection see the report *East is East: West is West*, n. 34.

the veils. To most of my female respondents in the Cooper's, Dhubulia or Chamta camps, in spite of living in male-dominated households, they were apparently secure from outside interventions. But when the country was partitioned and the riots broke out in Bengal, males and females alike were on the streets. Suddenly all hell broke loose. History brought them out of their *andarmahals*. When the patriarchy themselves were at risk, these women perceived themselves as insecure. Newer insecurities and uncertainties engulfed their lives when some of them got detached from the male members of their family. The self-proclaimed guardians were no more there to play the role of the protector. The traditional values imposed by the patriarchal society started to become irrelevant. Patriarchal dominance became meaningless, at least for the time being, due to the forces unleashed by the partition (that was primarily an outcome of an almost all-male politics) and beyond the powers of the patriarchy. Therefore, when these women began to reconstruct their lives in an unknown territory on the other side of the border especially in the camps, the boundaries between public and private space had already become blurred for them.<sup>31</sup>

The communal riots and pogroms ruptured the lives of these women in many ways. Some of them as women faced abduction, molestation or rape, and even murder on many occasions. On a few occasions, these displaced women were forced to marry Muslim men and convert to Islam. However, most of these displaced women prefer to remain silent about the physical violence if they had to face any.

This 'un-homing' tore apart the traditional family structure prevalent in the East Bengal villages. Everyone had to come on the street. The refugees had to renegotiate with various new choices. The women refugees were no exception of it. To women, the reconstruction of lives in the alien land after displacement means reorganization of space as well as the alteration of the emotional affiliations with the home. As nation, communities reconstruct themselves, there is bound to be a change in the way women are perceived, signified and deployed to serve new purposes and agendas. During the post partition phase, the new agenda was the reconstruction of the new home and homeland. To Bimala Das (75 years of age)<sup>32</sup>, one of my respondents in Dhubulia camp has indicated that,

*It was a sheer economic necessity that brought us out of our homes in those turbulent years. We had to feed our children and family. As no woman was allowed to go and work in the adjoining city or village even if she was willing we were engaged in bidi or paper-bag making secretly. We were afraid of our doles getting cut.*

Like Bimala Das, there were thousands of women, whose role inside and outside the home changed to accommodate these new responsibilities in post-partitioned West Bengal. Under the circumstances, the agent-victim binary tends to be intensified. In general, the refugee women are doubly victimized-as refugee on the one hand and as women on the other. The women refugees represent epitome of marginalization. In

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<sup>31</sup> Rachel Weber, 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*, Stree, Kolkata. 2003. p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> Bimala Das was interviewed on March 25 2007 at Dhubulia.

the journey of her searching a new home in the alien land her identity and her individuality are collapsed into the homogenous category of victims. Many a time she is viewed as devoid of agency, unable and incapable of representing herself. However, for the sake of their families, when Bimala Das and many other women went out for earning money the concept of stereotypical essentialising of women as 'victims' that denies their agency faced a major challenge.

The notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life even under the most extreme form of coercion.<sup>33</sup> The droves of women joined the wage labour force in the 1950s, women who never worked outside the home before and who in East Pakistan had never intended to. As a result, they became teachers, office workers, tutors, tailors and small shop managers. The refugee women paved the way for the generations of Bengali working women and activists. As the refugee women rapidly became more literate, and as many of them joined the service sectors, the working *bhadromohila* was a new phenomenon in urban West Bengal. However, in the camps located at the rural and semi-rural areas, women camp-dwellers were mostly from lower caste communities and the literacy level was very low. As a result, a large section of those women started working as the domestic helps and also as unskilled labours. Consequently, they tended to have very little control over the wages they earned. In many cases despite the growing contribution to the family's domestic economy, their control over their lives was by no means securely established.

It is true that, for some of refugees, perhaps it was an escape from violence in more than one sense. But, for the women campmates, the economic uncertainty associated with a life almost beginning from the scratch, spelt disaster, as they faced different kinds of atrocities – atrocities that usually the women only face. Some cases happened in the camps, where women were forced to work as sex workers. Their unfamiliarity with the world outside also made their life quite vulnerable in the camps.<sup>34</sup>

### **Politics of Agitation: Policies of Rehabilitation of the Campmates in the Post-Partition West Bengal**

It is quite clear that, the government had no carefully thought-out plan for the rehabilitation of the poor camp refugees in West Bengal in the initial stage. The *bona fide* 'registered' refugees were entitled to relief but not to rehabilitation. Even such relief was given on ever more stringent terms. In 1948, the Government of West Bengal decided to withdraw relief to the able-bodied males and their dependants, who had been at the camps for more than seven days. In fact, through these measures the government intended to shut down the camps as early as possible. In 1950, when

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<sup>33</sup> Urvashi Butalia, "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 1993, pp. (ws) 12-24.

<sup>34</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Women After Partition: Remembering the Lost World in a Life without Future" in Navnita Chadha Behera (ed.), *Gender, Conflict and Migration*, Sage, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 155-174.

the major influx took place, the policy of shutting down the camps had to be postponed.<sup>35</sup> 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>36</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>37</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>38</sup>

However, in many cases there were tremendous irregularities to grant loan to the refugees for purchase of land 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 and a large section of them belonged to *Namasudra* community.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, a lack of access to the cultivable land for a longer period of time naturally made them annoyed. The scarcity of cultivable land coupled with the poor living conditions in the camps, including an irregular supply of food and cash doles gradually increased the grievances of the camp-dwellers. The incidents of passive and active resistance emerged in many refugee camps. To Prangobindo babu, who was involved in the refugee movement in the camps:

*"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 organized in the Cooper's 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>40</sup>

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 realized 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

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<sup>35</sup> 96<sup>th</sup> Report of India Estimates Committee 1959-60, Second Lok Sabha, Ministry of Rehabilitation (Eastern Zone), Lok Sabha Secretariate, New Delhi, 1960, pp. 4-15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Prafulla Chakrabarty, n.29, p. 162.

<sup>38</sup> For detailed analysis of the rural and urban schemes of rehabilitation, please see *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal* note 32; Report of the Committee of ministers for the Rehabilitation of Displaced persons in West Bengal, Manager, Government of India Press, Calcutta, 1954.

<sup>39</sup> Interview of Manimohan Mandal, who belongs to the Namasudra community, the present Superintendent of Cooper's Camp on 18 April 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Based on an interview of Prangobindo Das, 13 December 2006

pick some of the displaced persons who could not be rehabilitated in the economy in West Bengal, and send them to the other parts of the country.<sup>41</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>42</sup> Against this backdrop, the Government of India decided to treat the East Pakistani refugee problem “absolutely on a national level”.<sup>43</sup> It is interesting to note one of the statements made by 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 and Nicobar Islands across the Bay of Bengal.<sup>44</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, would be sent to Dandakaranya. After the submission of the rehabilitation scheme to the National Development Council by the high-level committee constituted for the supervision of the rehabilitation work outside West Bengal, Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was set up. Accordingly, it was directed to accept the responsibilities of the rehabilitation of the camp-dwellers of West Bengal.

By the end of 1959, 830 families were forced to move to Dandakaranya and by the time the first phase of the Dandakaranya scheme ended in 1961,<sup>45</sup> the news of the struggle of these helpless displaced persons in search of alternative livelihood in an unfamiliar environment spread like wildfire. The refugees, the original inhabitants of the Indo-Gangetic plains and mostly cultivators became reluctant to go to the dry, 'alien land'. In view of this growing reluctance, in no time, the Government stopped their doles temporarily.

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<sup>41</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, 15 July 1957, p. 3376.

<sup>42</sup> See *Lok Sabha Debates*, 31 March 1956, p. 3874.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3888, for comments of Sucheta Kripalani.

<sup>44</sup> For detailed discussions on Dandakaranya please see Saibal Kumar Gupta, *Kichu Smriti, Kichu Kotha*, (in Bengali), M. C. Sarkar and Sons, Calcutta, 1994; *Dandakaranya: A Survey of Rehabilitation*, Saibal Kumar Gupta Papers, (ed.) Alok Kumar Ghosh, Bibhasa, Calcutta, 1999; Alok Kumar Ghosh, "Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation", in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta Research Group, Calcutta, 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 Pradip Kumar Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta Research Group, Calcutta, 2000, pp. 131-139.

<sup>45</sup> *Report of the Ministry of Rehabilitation*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1961, p. 70.

To Anadi Mondal<sup>46</sup>, a PL member of the Chamta Camp of Nadia, and one of my respondents:

*When the phase of Dandakaranya came, the government tried to persuade us to go to that arid area. We are from an area of 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 persuasion, but that was almost after five years. Meanwhile, our family was shifted from the Cooper's to the Chamta Camp.*

## **The Mask of Politics**

Gradually, the resentment of the camp-dwellers in West Bengal encouraged them to raise their voice. The camp-dwellers of Bettiah in Bihar launched a peaceful *satyagraha* movement in May 1958 for the fulfillment of their demands for better living conditions in the camp. This, in turn, encouraged 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>47</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 organizations of the *jabar dakhil colonies*<sup>48</sup> (squatters' colonies) would join their movement, and would make it stronger. They were proved wrong soon. The squatters' colonies stood apart with their own problems. Moreover, when the government took the decision to recognize 133 squatters' colonies in the beginning of 1958, the camp-dwellers got frustrated and felt somewhat left out.

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<sup>46</sup> Anadi Mandal was interviewed on 15 March 2002 at Chamta camp located near Krishnanagar city, Nadia.

<sup>47</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarty, n. 29, p. 186.

<sup>48</sup> The squatters' colonies, an important part of the life and landscape of West Bengal, definitely a significant part of Calcutta, mushroomed in early part of the 50s. 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 dakhil*. 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. See Anil Singha, n. 30; 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.

Under the circumstances, the refugees from the squatters' colonies became the participants of the discourse of relief and rehabilitation movement while the camp-dwellers were mostly regarded as the recipient of that discourse. The role of the United Central Refugee Council was very crucial at this stage.<sup>49</sup> Originally, the *Bastuhara Parishad* (Refugee Council), which was formed in the year of 1950 to look after the refugee well-being, was transformed into UCRC after the inclusion of Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad, Dakshin Kolikata Shahartali Bastuhara Samiti, Uttor Kolikata Bastuhara Samiti and all the committees of the refugee camps and colonies into their movement. One representative each from the Communist party of India (CPI), Forward Bloc (FB), Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB), Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), Revolutionary Socialist Party of India (R.C.P.I.), Democratic Vanguard, Bolshevik Party, Republican Party and Hindu Mahasabha constituted UCRC. But, the activities of the UCRC remained mainly confined to the squatters' colonies in the initial stage. In the words of Gauranga Sarkar,<sup>50</sup> a lawyer:

*To many of us, who belong to the lower caste community, the UCRC did nothing for the down-trodden castes in the refugee camps at this stage. In fact, initially, the leadership of the UCRC was not wholeheartedly accepted by the camp-dwellers.*

Apart from the CPI, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP)-led organization *Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan* (SBBS), (All Bengal Refugee Conference), and the organization called *Bastuhara Kalyan Parishod* (Refugee Welfare Council), led by the 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, the rallies and demonstrations in the Coopers' and Dhubulia camps started replacing *satyagraha* as an weapon of the refugee movement. Under the banner of the UCRC, the Left parties, particularly the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M), opposing the rehabilitation policies of the Bengali refugees in Dandakarnya also proposed for their settlement in the Sundarban area in West Bengal. This was, in fact, the party's stand till 1977. The alternative proposal indicated that though there was a plan in 1957 to reclaim 11,000 acres of land in the Herobhangaarea in Sundarban for the refugees, nothing had since been done. It also insisted upon the development of about 100,000 acres of land in the Mechhogheri in 24 Parganas for distribution among the refugees. It was stated that, the "cultivable wasteland" in the Sundarbans as delineated in 1944-45 could no longer be treated as such, and that between 40,000 and 50,000 acres of the land could be developed from it for the refugees.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Tushar Sinha, *Maranjayee Sangrame Bashtuhara* (in Bengali), Dasgupta, Calcutta, 1999.

<sup>50</sup> Gauranga Sarkar was interviewed on 12 March 2008 at Bally, Howrah. When he crossed the border with his family he was a small boy. His family took shelter in the Cooper's camp. He grew up in the camp. His family got rehabilitated at Bally in Howrah district. While his family shifted from Cooper's to Bally he became a lawyer.

<sup>51</sup> See UCRC, *An Alternative Proposal: Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees in West Bengal*, Memorandum submitted to Dr. B. C. Roy, Chief Minister on, 11 August 1958.

These proposals submitted by the UCRC however, practically yielded nothing, as neither the central nor the state government did anything substantial about this land. However, as a result of the movement led by the UCRC, the refugees, who already migrated to Dandakaranya, were now interested to leave that place for the Sundarbans. Those still in the camps of West Bengal, as in the Mana camp, the largest one at that time, refused to move to Dandakaranya. As a result, it was not possible to shift the camp-dwellers of Mana in substantial number at least for the time being. In course of time, the ‘politicization’ and ‘unionization’ of the refugee movement inspired these uprooted, helpless people to become a part of the larger movement against the Union and State Governments.

The situation became worse, when many refugees from Mana camp tried to migrate to the Sundarbans. In the mid-1970s, the Mana camp-dwellers started to move *en masse* to Marich Chak under the Goshaba thana in the Sundarbans to occupy the coastal land facing an island covering about 125 square miles – a largely uninhabited area, on which perhaps about 16,000 families could be settled.<sup>52</sup> After hearing about the success of the Mana camp-dwellers, the refugees in the Malkangiri camp started to trickle into Hasnabad and other parts of 24 Parganas in the early 1978. Meanwhile, political situation in West Bengal had undergone a sea change as CPI (M) with the help of other Left parties (forming the Left Front) came to power for the first time (in 1977). This political victory of the ‘friendly’ Left Front government perhaps inspired these hapless camp dwellers more to move in to their land of choice.

But, the reality turned out to be different altogether. The CPM, after coming to power, changed its stand drastically with regard to the refugee colonization. It now began discouraging the refugees from coming back from Dandakaranya and settling down in the Sundarban area. By April 1978, about 10,000 refugees moved from Dandakaranya into Marichjhapi (near Kumirmari) in the 24 Parganas. With the widespread police action adopted in early 1979, the refugees in Marchjhapi were denied emergency medicines and food supplies to force them to return to Dandakaranya. Subsequently, most were forced back to Dandakaranya, and 239 died in the process.<sup>53</sup> Marichjhapi’ incident undoubtedly increased the resentment among the campmates both in Dandakaranya and other parts of West Bengal. In fact, this volte-face by the CPI(M) changed the nature of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal.

### **Past as Present and Past as Future**

With all these burdens of history the helpless campmates live in the ‘partitioned times’.<sup>54</sup> Partition lives on in the lives and times of these old, more or less above eighty years of age on average, permanent liability members, who are regarded as

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<sup>52</sup> *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, June 23, 1975.

<sup>53</sup> *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, February 13-15, 1979, June 2, 1979.

<sup>54</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, “The Last Hurrah that Continues”, *Transeuropeennes*, 19-22, Winter 200-200, p.31 cited in *Sanjay Chaturvedi*, n.13, p.153.

'unfit' for rehabilitation outside the camps. Partition had made their homeland hostile and they started imagining that peace and security were on the other side of the border. Most of them got disillusioned crossing the border, taking refuge in the camps. As the present has very little to offer them, the past seems to envelop their entire existence.

To some of them, it is even better to live the rest of their lives with memories of the past rather than de-freezing it. They live with their memories – the memories of happier days in their *desh* and unbearable agony of losing their friends and relatives during communal tensions and riots. Sometimes, the memories of happier times, memories of abundance can be somewhat imaginary. It is possible that some of these people actually never saw abundance. Similarly, sometimes without even witnessing violence with their own eyes, they tend to live with the fear of communal holocaust.

The episodes and characters of their past remain present to their minds, mostly because, they shape their identities. Following Paul Ricoeur, we could say that, after all, we are both the readers and writers of the past; that words of the past from our narrative identity, in the sense that they tell us who we are. It is by telling and memorising events of the past that we become and remain a historical community.<sup>55</sup> In other words, we can say that, memory indeed “is the engine and chassis of all narrations”. In fact, memories are objects that tumble out unexpectedly from the mind, linking the present with the past.

Narratives are always related to some sense of the self and are told from someone's own perspective “to take control of the frightening diversity and formlessness of the world”.<sup>56</sup> Through the narrative, the self finds a home, or would perhaps, to use Sudipta Kaviraj's words, “describe the process better if we say that around a particular home they try to paint a picture of some kind of an ordered, intelligible, humane and habitable world”.<sup>57</sup> Here the self tells the story to an audience – in this case the author – and thereby creates a kind of relationship with the listener.<sup>58</sup> It may be said that, “the historical self configures memories differently from the way the ahistorical self does”.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, although the memories of these refugees may be subjective in nature, these could act as a rich archive of the experience of displacement.

Most of these uprooted people did not have any idea at the time of their departure that they would never be able to return to their *desh*. They expected to be back in their ancestral place in the near future. In fact, it took several years for them to realize that they could never return to their own land, to their *desh*. This failure to

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<sup>55</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006 (paperback edition).

<sup>56</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Imaginary Institution of India', *Subaltern Studies VII*, OUP, New Delhi, 1993, p 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p 33.

<sup>59</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*, OUP, New Delhi, 2003, pp 117-18.

reconcile with the permanent loss of homeland has left a permanent scar on the psyche of the victims, who were either personally victimized or witness to the catastrophe from a close proximity. Although the 'past' of these people remains in many ways, their *desh* is nowhere in sight. Their *desh* was some place else and now it is a place of no return.

*Under history, memory and forgetting.  
Under memory and forgetting, life.  
But writing a life is another story.  
Incompletion.*

Paul Ricoeur<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Ricoeur, n. 6, p.502.

# On the Margins of Citizenship: Cooper's Camp, Nadia

Ishita Dey

## Introduction

Partition historiography has been the subject of debate in Indian academia for various reasons. Four strands of writing have emerged in the historiography on "partition" 1) study of the event as a continuing process 2) documenting voices of the displaced 3) refugee care and 4) refugee experience. All these studies have been illuminating in terms of the changes Indian nation state witnessed, experienced and continues to experience even after sixty years of independence. It is important to note here that the politics of inclusion and exclusion run parallel in the political decisions and historiography of "partition" in the Indian subcontinent. The first traces of partition historiography were marked with voices and experiences at the Western front. The writings on refugees from Eastern Pakistan according to Schendel and Rahman (2003) have taken three trajectories. They argue:

"First of all, they reveal an almost exclusive interest in refugees to the state of West Bengal. Within that state, the focus is strongly on metropolitan Calcutta and on refugee camps. Most studies are concerned with the relationship between refugees and the state, both in terms of state policies toward the newcomers and in terms of the effects that refugees had on politics in Calcutta and the rest of West Bengal." A second strand in these writings brings out the voices and identities of a particular group of refugees to West Bengal, the Bengali bhadrolok (the educated upper and middle class), with their often traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal. Concentrating on refugees within these specific parameters, scholars have presented us with a partial picture of post-Partition population movements".

(Schendel and Rahman 2003:555)

While the above three strands stand true, it is important to note that the micro-histories of partition are a way to negotiate with the present and past that has been created by the partitioning of the subcontinent. The partition of the subcontinent "signifies the division of the territory, independence and the birth of new states, alongside distressing personal memories and potent collective imaginings of the "other" (Khan 2007: 9). The politics of post – partition are located in the policies and experiences of exclusion/ inclusion of the people who were forced to cross borders.

“Once displaced, always displaced”. This is the popular imagination and often contains the reality of most refugee experiences. This essay focuses on one such unique refugee experience of the Indian Subcontinent. Though this might be seen as another micro-history of the experience of partition and bearing little relevance to the wider nation; still we cannot ignore the fact that micro-histories restore subjectivity, agency often “constructed through memory, gender and ideas of self and span the continent.” (ibid: 10). Through the lens of the transition of one of the largest transit camps “Cooper’s camp” in Nadia District this study will reveal “ the processes and practices by which specific images, meanings, and identities of the refugee have been historically produced, differentiated from other subjectivities, institutionalized, and deployed as effective resources of and for practices of statecraft. The name of the refugee emerges as an open field of activity or, as Foucault (1984) suggests, as a battlefield where relevant identities and subjects are forged into effective forces of everyday affairs. The activities organized and the institutions established around the name of the refugee paradoxically help secure or affirm a specific version of sovereign state, its *raison d’être*, and its technologies of governance” (Soguk 1999: 49).

In other words, the “refugee camps” are the sites of contestation in the creation of the state. The refugee issue, on one hand, is a political question and on the other, a human rights issue but unfortunately the statecraft fails to address the duality and chooses to opt for “temporary” redressal mechanisms so that refugees are forced to return. While “right to return” is certainly a political right that the refugees enjoy, in most cases certainly refugees from East Pakistan were forced to re build their lives as the existing turmoil in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh uprooted them from their roots.

### **Statecraft, Refugee Experience and Cooper’s Camp**

The refugee experience is about being in transit – temporally, culturally, spatially. In this study, through the transition of Cooper’s camp, one of the “transit camps” after partition in Nadia District of West Bengal to Cooper’s Camp notified area we will see how the refugee events in the process of statecraft initiated a linear process of citizenship steeped in hierarchies of power relations. The refugee experience in West Bengal introduced a paradigmatic shift in the political power of West Bengal; a new dimension in West Bengal politics as the Left gained its support from the refugee movements. The historiography of refugee movements has been documented by Prafulla Chakraborty (1990), Tushar Singha(1999), Anil Sinha(1995) and many others. Refugee movements as we know from these accounts were organized and United Central Refugee Council is one of the major organizations which continue to organize the refugees till date.

To understand the statecraft and the transition from camp sites to colonies/ notified area/ panchayat a brief background to the refugee influx since 1948 is essential to understand the “refugee” flow from East Bengal. Cooper’s Camp started functioning on 11 March 1950. Like many other refugee camps, it was one of the military bases in the bordering Nadia District. It was one of the largest “transit”

camps. It functioned like any other regimented colony with a permanent railway station and railway connection to unload the refugees who were seen as a menace by the administration and hence to be regimented in these camps to be rehabilitated later.

Section I of the essay explores the population flows to Cooper's Camp. The mapping of borders, surveillance of human movements is crucial to the formation of nation –state and "citizen". The narrative of Gouranga Das<sup>1</sup>, one of the members of the first families to arrive in Cooper's Camp will reveal how the state through the modern rituals of "inclusion and exclusion" managed to create the figure of the 'citizen' and 'non-citizen'. The statecraft adopted legislative measures like Displaced Persons (Legal Proceedings Act) 1949, and the Administration of Evacuee Property Act, 1950. "A 'refugee' was defined as a person as 'one who had entered India (who left or was compelled to leave his home in East Pakistan on or after 15 October 1947) on account of civil disturbances or fear of such disturbances or on account of setting up of the two dominions of India and Pakistan"<sup>2</sup> (Oberoi 2006:68). In this context, it is important to note that the citizenship of partition refugees was a major concern as evident in the Constituent Assembly Debates of 12 August 1949 on Article 5 and Article 6. The definition of "citizenship" as propounded by Article 6 of the constitution stated that if a person has migrated to India before 19 July 1948 would be considered a citizen of the state and added that if a person migrated to India after 19 July 1948 would be required to reside in India for six months and then register with a government official prior to attaining Indian citizenship. It is against this backdrop we need to read the narrative of Gouranga Das who were issued border slips and had to depend on them for entry to camps and minimum "six months of camp-life" in a way ensured basic citizenship rights for many people like him who were to forced to flee from East Pakistan to West Bengal and other neighbouring states. There was strong opposition from two representatives in the Constituent Assembly Debates who were against this kind of securitization of borders.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Gouranga Das on 1 August 2008 and 10 August 2008.

<sup>2</sup> This definition is drawn from GOI, Annual Report of the Department of Rehabilitation , New Delhi: Department of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, 1965-6;p7 as quoted in Oberoi 2006:68

<sup>3</sup> Sardar Bhopinder Singh, (representative of the East Punjab: Sikh) argues that the definition of 'citizenship' is skewed "as a weak sort of secularism has crept in and an unfair partiality has been shown to those who least deserve it". He further adds, "... I do not understand why the 19 July 1948 has been prescribed for the purpose of the citizenship. These unfortunate refugees would not have foreseen the date...it will be cruel to shut our borders to those who are victimized after the 19 July 1948 ... our demand is that any person who because of communal riots in Pakistan has come over to India and stays here at the commencement of this Constitution, should automatically be considered as a citizen of India and should be on no account be made to go to a registering authority and plead before him and establish a question of six months domicile to claim rights of citizenship.

Shri Rohini Kumar Choudhuri in the same session argues for the people who migrated to Assam because they found it impossible to live there. According to Mr Choudhuri, "... it may be argued in a limited way that every one who has come from East Bengal was not really actuated by fear or disturbance or actually living in a place where disturbance had taken

identification documents as we will see create systems of regimentation which produce a linear notion of citizenship that is disciplined through securitization and militarization of “borders” and movement of people across borders. Indian state since its inception has created ways to securitise and militarise its borders to prevent population movement post partition.

The copying mechanisms adopted by the nascent nation-states towards the displaced and in this case the East Pakistan refugees and West Pakistan refugees have been discussed in the existing partition historiography. Despite varied accounts of partition both on the eastern and western front there are certain humanitarian questions that we need to ponder upon. How are to locate this mass movement of people from one corner to the other? Is the movement similar to mass exodus of Jews during the days of the Third Reich? Is this “another example of “coerced migration” – to use the category of Charles Tilly (1990) which “entails obligatory departure, forced severing of most or all ties at the origin”? (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2007:1). All “coerced migrations” have their own region -specific reasons and these reasons create unique “refugee experiences”. These unique refugee experiences create various expectations of rights/ care. It is against this background we need to situate the refugee movement and their understanding of “rights” in Cooper’s Camp. Are these “rights” momentary? How are issues of refugee “care” different from state responsibility towards citizens? According to Nevzat Soguk (1999), the “ meaning of the words like *territory, sovereignty, country, homeland, democracy, citizen, refugee and state* are constantly negotiated, differentiated, and hierarchised to affirm the state- centric imagination of the world (Soguk 1999: 35)”. Refugees are a problem to the state. One of the ways of managing this problem is the “temporal” nature of “relief/ resettlement/ rehabilitation”. These issues are raised in Section II and besides the struggle in Cooper’s Camp we also draw upon narratives of Bimala Das and Kanaka Das from Women’s camp to examine what underlies “refugee care” and creates categories of “us/ them”. The refugee struggle in the then Cooper’s Camp and the present dilemmas faced by Bimala and Kanaka Das as inmates of permanent liability Ranaghat Women’s Camp is a parallel unending struggle between statecraft, citizenship rights steeped in the prejudices produced by the development discourse of the Indian nation state.

Partition refugees are a problem to the state. One of the ways of managing this problem is the “temporal” nature of “relief/ resettlement/ rehabilitation”. The final section of the essay will deal with the measures Government adopted to shut down the camps; the rehabilitation packages and the schemes applicable to the people of Cooper’s. The resistance against resettlement outside Bengal was as strong as the demand to recognize Cooper’s as an Industrial Township. Much of the struggle was based on this demand which also led to their struggle for an independent municipality; under notified area. The only remnants of the dream of “industrialization” lies in the shades of Rehabilitation Industries Corporation (which

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place... condition of fear, of disturbance should not at all be insisted in the case of a person coming from Pakistan over to West Bengal or Assam or any other place in India” (Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol IX, 1949 30 July -18 Sept 1949.

housed ceramic factory); re-opening of the paper mill and some new developmental work which would provide work opportunities for all ( See Map 2).

## I

### Population Flows – Coopers in Perspective

The migration of Hindus from East Bengal began with the communal violence that broke in Noakhali and Tipperah in October 1946. According to the West Bengal Government Relief and Rehabilitation Directorate Report 1957, “refugee flow” was seen as a constant feature on the eastern side of the border.

*“ Unlike in the Western Sector, i.e., in the Punjab-West Pakistan region, where the migration of population was practically complete in the course of a few months, the movement of displaced persons in the eastern sector has not ceased, although more than ten years have elapsed since it began.”<sup>4</sup>*

The average influx of refugees into West Bengal reportedly was 20,000 persons per month.

**Table 1: Refugee Flows to West Bengal (1952-1957)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>
Number of refugees up to the end of 1952	2517504
Fresh Arrivals in	
1953	60647
1954	103850
1955	211573
1956	246840
1957 ( upto 30 September 1957)	7993
Total	3148407

*(Source: Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced persons in West Bengal Report 1957)*

These figures do not take into account the 40000 persons who found their way into West Bengal on forced migration certificates, or the very considerable movement into other neighbouring states. In 1950-51 members of the minority community numbering 7lakhs had left West Bengal but only 5 lakhs have returned. Initially when the influx started there was an impression that the movement from East Pakistan was a passing phase; and the migrants would return as soon as normal conditions prevail;

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<sup>4</sup> See Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced persons in West Bengal (Report 1957), West Bengal Government Relief and Rehabilitation Directorate for further details

initial focus was on “relief”. It was only in the earlier part of 1949 that it was agreed upon that migration was going to be a permanent feature and that migrants were not returning to East Pakistan. In 1956, Migration Certificate was introduced.

Nadia is one of the bordering districts that witnessed huge refugee influx post partition. In 1956, there were 8 camps in Nadia district with a population of 52, 068 people. If we compare and contrast the population of camps in Nadia with other camps in West Bengal we will see average population per camp was 7,500 (approx.) compared to other camps which ranged from 1000 to 1500 (approx).

**Table 2: District wise Distribution of Camps and the Population**

<b>District</b>	<b>No. of camps</b>	<b>Population</b>
Nadia	7	62797
24- Parganas	53	49,417
Burdwan	31	46646
Hooghly	18	23,323
Howrah	8	9636
Bankura	7	12,653
Birbhum	17	21,984
Murshidabad	11	14844
Midnapore	13	18,386
West Dinajpore	1	1,056
Cooch Behar	1	1,425
Calcutta	7	6144
<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>2,68040</b>

*(Source: Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced persons in West Bengal Report 1957)*

The influx of refugees from East Pakistan was constant during the following years, mostly marked by communal disturbances. The significant years are: 1947,1948,1950, 1960,1962,1964,1970 where as in the Western Region, influx of refugees was over by 1949<sup>5</sup>. According to the official estimates of the Government of West Bengal in 1953, 25 lakhs have been forcibly displaced. In 1953-61 there was no major influx but the figure swelled to 31-32 lakhs up to April 1958 and later in 1962 around 55000 persons migrated after killing of minorities in Pabna and Rajsahi. Approximately 6 lakh people crossed border between 1964-March1971 and following the disturbances after creation of Bangladesh there was a massive exodus of about 75 lakhs (R.R. Committee’s Report Government of West Bengal, 1981). It was reported by the Minister of Supply and Rehabilitation, Shri Ramniwas Mirdha in

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<sup>5</sup> For details please refer to 11th Report on Maintenance of inmates of Homes and Infirmaries for displaced persons from East Pakistan In West Bengal, Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work In West Bengal, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation New Delhi -11, 1973

a Lok Sabha debate in 1976 that 52.31 lakh persons migrated from East Bengal to India from 1948-1971.<sup>6</sup>

Gouranga Das, a resident of Cooper's Camp Notified Area was one of the first 22 families to arrive in Cooper's Camp when it opened as a transit camp in 11 March 1950. His account gives us an understanding the human displacement that rocked the eastern border after partition.

"My family was forced to migrate to West Bengal in 1949. I was eighteen years old. In 1948 Communist Party of India (undivided) was banned. I belong to Siālguni village of the Barishal District. We first took a boat from our village to Barishal and then we boarded a steamer and there were 2000-3000 families who migrated with us. We are issued a border slip at Benapole border.

The air of Benapole was filled with dirt and death. But at every step we felt that we will go back. Shree Guru Sangha had set up a camp near the border and various places for refugee. There were various welfare organizations who were organizing relief camps. From Bongaon we reached Sealdah station and stayed there for nearly fifteen days. Almost lakhs of people were stranded there. We were served free food (rice, dal and vegetable curry) in make shift *langarkhana* (adjacent to platform No. 8) by Marwari Relief Society. We thought it's a temporary phase. Elder family members believed that we will return to our "desh"/ "homeland".

There were communal outbreaks at various points of time but the worst of the riots took place in late 1948. Every year we used to celebrate Durga Puja and we had huge brass cooking vessels to cook food during festivals. When the riots broke, we used these brass-cooking vessels filled with water for defense purposes. We adopted various tactics to save ourselves from the onslaught of the rioters. When the rioters attacked we often splashed water all over the house to save our lives. When the rioters attacked our house and burned down our puja mandap; we managed to run away. We were not attacked by anybody. We left our house in the night.

Initially we stayed at a Jabardakhal Muslim patty in Liluah for one and a half month. Two of my sisters died after suffering from chicken pox. We crossed the Benapole border, reached Bongaon and stayed there for three days. After staying in Sealdah station and then we stayed at a Jabardakhal Muslim patty in Liluah for one and a half month before we shifted to Garia and stayed in a rented house for Rs 10 per month. I started working in a teashop. I worked there as a helping hand till 7-8 months. I used to prepare the batter for fuluri (a local snack made of gram flour and sliced onion) which used to be served with tea. "Fuluri" he mentions is a favourite snack of *edeshi* (people from West Bengal are referred as *edeshi*, *ghati*) people. I had also stayed at Cossipore Camp near a canal may be for three or four days. The camp was housed in a Food Corporation India Building".

From his narrative we can deduce some common refugee experiences and their transit points. People came with the hope that this is a temporary phase and once things settle down they are going to return. The bordering Nadia District of West

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<sup>6</sup> Shri Ramniwas Mirdha in reponse to Shri Somnath Chatterji in a session in Lok Sabha dated 29 March 1964 stated that 52.31 persons or 10.46 lakh families have migrated between 1948-1971.

Bengal mainly, Benapole and Darshana were the entry points. What is also evident that before the refugees shifted to Government camps they stayed primarily at Sealdah station. There are several accounts relating to the refugee situation in Sealdah station. In one of the newspaper reports in Amrita Bazaar Patrika quoted in Prafulla K. Chakrabarty's work, the station is described as dumping ground of people from the eastern border.

As soon as they arrive, they are given inoculation against cholera and such other diseases. Then an officer of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department assigns them a shelter camp. An area of 39/ 39 square feet has been designated for the refugees to use before they are transferred to refugee camps. The report mentions that a group of five to six thousand men, women and children had access to three taps for drinking water. Apart from drinking water, there were two lavatories for women and about 12 lavatories for men.

So what we see here is that the "refugee" is uprooted from his state and is forced to live life in make shift arrangements under most inhuman circumstances. It is at this critical juncture we are left to ponder whether or not "Right to life" is an individual question or a political question? Political responses to the mass displacement has always tried to "negotiate" with the "refugee" who is a stateless, and immediate efforts to classify, regiment this stateless figure by the newly adopted state one hand is embedded in the notion of "care" and on the other is trying to make space for the refugee through statecraft. The earlier one is regimented the better.

One of the basic ways to discipline and monitor the refugee movement is identification documents. In the case of eastern side of Bengal, refugees were issued border slips, migration certificates. Apart from these identification documents; the government announced that "refugees", residents of East Bengal who have managed to come to West Bengal between 1 June 1947 and 25 June 1948 on account of civil disturbances or fear of such disturbances or the partition of India was entitled to relief and rehabilitation. A second order published in December 1948 declared that refugees would not be registered after 15 January 1949 and on 22 November 1948; the State Government clearly declared that the state would not support any family with able bodied male immigrant beyond a week of their arrival at camps ( Chatterji in Kaul (Ed) : 77-78). The refugee influx from East Bengal was a constant feature and it continued till the formation of Bangladesh. The refugee influx from East Pakistan from the very beginning was seen as a temporal problem thus solutions laid in curtailing their rights ; post partition refugees were still better off compared to those who came in later as the camps had stopped functioning and even the state initiated steps to stop refugee influx in 1970s. This is evident in the Lok Sabha debate (19 August 1970) where Shri Surendra Pal Singh, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of External affairs pointed out: -

"... In reply to one of our verbal protests against the increased exodus of minorities from East Pakistan, Pakistan had inter alia alleged that we are not exercising sufficient vigilance on the border. The charge of laxity on our part was denied but at the same time it was emphasized by us that the primary responsibility for stopping

the migration lay with Pakistan; we could not be expected to take an inhuman attitude towards human beings in distress”.

“Government had already taken up this issue strongly with Pakistan and have reminded them of their solemn obligation under the Nehru – Liaquat Pact of 1950 and the Tashkent declaration of 1966 and have urged them to provide security of life, property and honour to their minorities and thus stop the exodus.” ( Lok Sabha debate; 19 August 1970)

It was one of the ways in which the nascent Indian state distanced and incorporated this moving population in its territorial ambit. “State” according to Donald Carter (1994) is a continuing project envisioned through official documents. From the cartographer’s maps to presentation of columns and graphs in daily reports, the state must create and re-create a vision, or visions of its own existence. Soguk(1999) extends this argument slightly further by arguing that the “institution of the identity certificates, “documenting” refugees “ as distinct from , say , citizens, must be seen as a practice of statecraft , one among the an array of practices that craft the identity of the state.

The state refugee discourse classified the refugees into two categories on the basis of which their fate was decided. Migrants were classified into two categories. People who migrated before April 1958 were known as old migrants and the new migrants were those who migrated between January 1964 and March 1971. During the intervening period of five years and nine months about 52000 people crossed over to West Bengal. This figure, is however, based on Police records of only those who crossed border through the check-posts. There is no official record of those who crossed the 1200 mile border at countless unmanned points. Persons in authority who are in the know of things have estimated that not less than 2.5lakhs of persons migrated to West Bengal during these years; particularly after the widespread minority killings in Rajshahi and Pabna districts of East Bengal in 1962. Whatever, be the actual number of the migrants, the fact remains that quite a large number of refugees migrated during this period have been deprived of relief and rehabilitation benefits, to which are entitled those who preceded and followed them. The State Government was of the opinion that there should be no discrimination between one refugee and another on the ground of the date of migration<sup>7</sup>.

The ideals of the nation state India upheld towards displaced people during violence that erupted post partition in East Pakistan which forced thousands to migrate for a better and secure future exists at the level of rehabilitation schemes and measures laid down by the West Bengal Government. The Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal’s missionary zeal is reflected in the forward to the latest Administrative report<sup>8</sup> of the Department where the Minister of State in Charge Binay Krishna Biswas writes,

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<sup>7</sup> For details please refer, A Master Plan for Economic Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal, Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Dept. July 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Administrative Report 2004-2007; Govt. of West Bengal, Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department

“We in this department and directorate have always stood by the displaced persons in their struggle and will continue to play our role as far as is practicable to ameliorate the sufferings of displaced persons coming to our state from the erstwhile East Pakistan on or before the 25.03.1971 and our motto is we will continue in this nature”

The state discourse on refugee issues remained confined to managing “population flows”. One of the classic features Foucault argues of “techniques of power” is the emergence of population as an economic and political problem. Population is seen as the wealth, manpower or labour capacity. Foucault calls this technology “bio politics”, where there was increasing state intervention in the lives of the individual. The state refugee discourse was also centred on how to negotiate with the rising population with each day after 1950 riots in Barishaal and other districts in East Pakistan. The population movement was seen as a temporary phase both by the people themselves and by the nascent Indian state. One of the ways to cope with refugee influx was to provide shelter, food and other basic amenities. Keeping this mind certain camps in Nadia district came up which were used as military base during world war and also because of availability of vacant land as the state probably had no idea how they are going to cope with huge numbers. So were the refugees were being seen as daily increase in “numbers”, an aberrance to the building of the modern nation state? Not necessarily so, as the Government laid down various initiatives for the displaced. One of the prime initiatives was building up separate places for the refugees- campsites. Some of the well-known transit camps in Nadia district are Cooper’s camp, Dhubulia, Chandmari, Rupashree Pally, Teharpur and others.

On 11 March 1950 Cooper’s Camp was opened for the refugees. It was one of the largest transit camps in West Bengal. Gouranga Das’s family was of the 22 families who arrived in Coopers in 1950. Cooper’s Camp was divided into several blocks and huts for administrative purposes. Each resident was registered in the relief office and was registered in the “Ranaghat transit centre records” according to his Ration Card No, Date of admission and Name and family details. After this classification, the displaced was allocated a Hut which had to be shared and Block number.

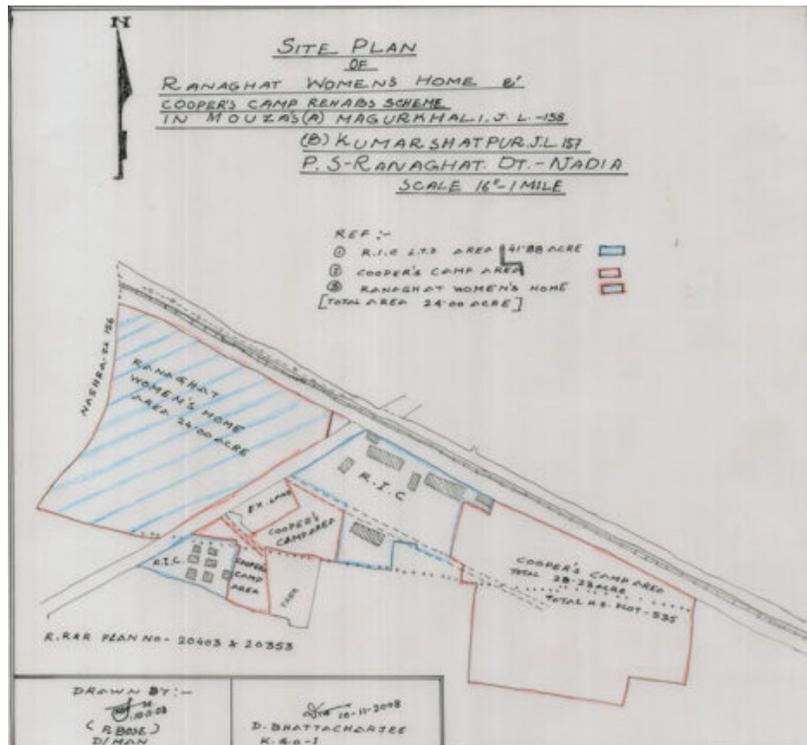
Gouranga Das recalls, “We had read in the newspaper about Cooper’s Camp. I was among the first twenty-two refugee families to reach the camp. The camp started functioning on 11 March 1950. There were some tents, shops along the railway line and langarkhana. We were served rice, dal, wheat, clothes and financial assistance of Re 1. By 1951, one lakh people poured in refugee camp”.

## II

### Cooper's Camp – Refugee Experiences of Care/ Rights – Dilemma of Citizenship

One of the ways of addressing refugee issues for the state is to create avenues of rehabilitation, which lies at the cross roads of right to life and protection. To cope with the mass refugee influx from East Pakistan, the Government response was threefold: “relief, rehabilitation and general measures” (Das, Samir in Samaddar 2000: 123). One of the relief measures was to enumerate and classify the refugees in terms of their social and economic background. The Government set up three types of camps: a) Relief and transit camps b) permanent liability camps and c) colony camps with the objective of getting them rehabilitated. Most of these camps were strategically set up in and around the border districts of West Bengal. The Government's rehabilitation policies were targeted to the rural and urban population.

**Map 1: Site Plan of Ranaghat Women's Home and Cooper's Camp Rehabilitation Scheme**



(Source: Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal)

Rural policies were three fold: type scheme, Union Board scheme, Barujibi scheme and Horticulturists scheme. Each of these schemes addressed special needs and provisions of the people in the form of special grants/ loans and land allotment (ibid: 126). One of the remarkable points of intervention and legal measures that the state adopted was the West Bengal Land Development Act 1948, which upheld 'the settlements of migrants to the state on account of circumstances beyond their control' as one of its main provisions. Similarly the West Bengal Act XVI of 1951, a provision was created to mitigate the ongoing conflict between landowners and the migrants. According to this provision, if a person continuously remained in unauthorized occupation of land or premises for three months, no criminal proceedings could be drawn against him (ibid: 144-145). These provisions and measures created a new era of "state" discourse of rights and care; of the Indian state in particular.

The refugee movement in Cooper's Camp as Gouranga Das recalls began as protest against bad quality of food grains that used to be served. Often stale wheat, rice and dal were served. Alorani Dutta died due to lack of medical help. Dijen Dutta organized the movement with the support 70000-80,000 people in Coopers Camp, 25000 in Rupashree pally, 30000 from women's camp.

The first martyr of refugee movement of 1950 was Paresh Das, resident of Godown No 7. From 1950-52 refugee movement subsided after his killing. People were scared. On 18 Oct, 1952, Jatin Saha and Ratish Mullick spearheaded the refugee movement. Jatin Saha opened up a tea shop and in his tea shop the communist newspaper "Swadhinata" was available for public reading. The tea shop was the base that Jatin Saha used to initiate a communist movement in Coopers Camp. Jatin Saha also distributed leaflets in the night among the refugee households. He lived in House No 144.

In 1952, we planned our communist struggle in House No 174 , Block- G currently Ward No. 11. We had twenty one party members. We initiated the refugee movement in the Cooper's Camp. One of the main demands of the refugee movement was to recognize Cooper's as industrial colony and the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, B.C. Ray did recognize Cooper's under the urban scheme. Other demands were to improve the quality and increase the quantity of food grain "doles". One of the mistakes of the refugee movement I feel was our decision regarding rehabilitation in Dandakaranya and Nainital. People who settled in Nainital are better off. Their land is of much worth than ours. Our slogan was "*Lathi khabo, guli kahbo kintu Banglar Baire Jabo Naa*". We never wanted to be rehabilitated outside West Bengal. We could never think of being settled anywhere else. After 1954 when passports were introduced, there was huge influx of refugee population. In 1971 with the formation of Bangladesh, Central Government offered relief to the refugees".

The camp offered a basic medical facility in the form of Cooper's general hospital and it functioned till 1977. According to Tushar Sinha (1999), despite being one of the largest transit camps, which once functioned as a military base had the basic infrastructural facilities of housing people. The lighting facility of the camp was limited to 18 petromax and 1000 hurricane. For every 750 people there were 40 tubewells. The camp was full of open latrines and open drainage system which was

hazardous and was responsible for the decline in health among camp residents. From 21 March 1950 the camp was supported by the central Government. By this time 126 people died after suffering from cholera. On 3 April, 1950, J P Narayan visited the camp. Tushar Sinha (1999) refers to various newspaper reports on incidents in Cooper's Camp.

“On 3 September 1951, Statesman reported that a fox had taken away a child from his mother's lap in Cooper's Camp and his body remnants were found near a tree. It was reported that due to various wild animals the residents of the Cooper's camp felt unsafe.

On 14 February 1952, Weekly magazine “Matamat” reported that 955 chicken pox affected people were secluded in a separate enclosed camp to avoid the spread of virus among the other residents”.

These circumstances led to a very active refugee movement within cooper's camp which initially began with protesting against bad quality of food grains specially rice, dal and wheat flour which was often stale. The refugee movement within Cooper's was organized by the people who were devoted Communist party activist even when the party was banned in 1948. Gouranga Das proudly informs that he used to work as a messenger to communicate to other workers about meetings. Another cooper's camp resident informed even in late 1970s the communist party activity was secret in nature and orientation.

In Tushar Sinha's account he reflects on the refugee struggle in 1956. On 6 July 1956, Central Government Minister Mr. Arunchandra Guha visited the camp and the camp residents were prevented from presenting their deputation before him. There was police lathi charge and in protest of that there was a public demonstration organized by Nadia District chapter of Bastuhara Parishaad<sup>9</sup>. Police firing was a frequent feature in Cooper's Camp. On 16 July 1956, police organized a combing operation in Cooper's and arrested 44 protesters of which 7 were women. Various noted left refugee activists were arrested. On 11 August, 1956 under the leadership of Amritendu Mukhopadhyay, a protest meeting was organized to release 44 activists which was attended by 5000 people. From 1957, a separate demand was placed before the Government- to recognize and carry out reform activities to convert Coopers into an industrial township. This meeting was declared as illegal by the police. By early 60's there was a change in the demands of the refugee movement in itself and one of the prime reasons was the winding up process of various camps (Sinha 1999).

The West Bengal government Relief and Rehabilitation Directorate initiated a study on the relief and rehabilitation of displaced persons in West Bengal and the report was published in 1957. According to this report, the findings suggested that there were certain camps like coopers which have a large number of refugees and “an attempt is being made to convert them into townships”. Various rehabilitation alternatives and schemes were laid down. The Government decided to shut down the

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<sup>9</sup> Nikhilbanga Bastuhara Parishaad was one of the first refugee organizations instituted in 1948 (Chakraborty 1990)

transit camps by 1951. After the disbursal to rehabilitation centres in 1949, there was a sudden wave of migration in 1950-51 which swelled the number to 360769. At this time there was a decision to close down all the camps by March 1951 as a result of which camp families were dispersed to rehabilitation sites and the camp population came down to 80000 by the end of 1951. After 1954 when passports were introduced, there was huge influx of refugee population.

According to official estimates by Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, by December 1962 there were 20 homes and infirmaries in West Bengal with a population of 29000 inmates as against 54000 inmates in 27 homes and infirmaries in 1957. With the decision to wind up the Ministry of Rehabilitation by 1962 the work of homes and Infirmaries was finally transferred to the Ministry of Education in 1962<sup>10</sup>. Department of Social Welfare looked after the work of Permanent Liability Homes. With the decision to wind up the transit camps and parallel rehabilitation initiatives the Report (ibid) by the Ministry of labour states that there were five permanent liability homes ( See Table 3) and four women's home.

**Table 3: District Wise Distribution of Homes/Infirmaries in West Bengal as on June 1972**

Sl. No	Name of the Institution/ District	No of Inmates	Date of Functioning
<b>A</b>	P.L. Homes		
1.	Coopers PL Home ( Nadia)	3404	Originally these institutions were
2	Dhubulia PL Home	6223	Transit Camps but they were
3	Chandmari PL Home I and II	2215	Converted to PL Homes/
4	Rupashreepalli PL Home	667	Infirmaries in 1960
5	Dudkundi PL Home( Midnapore)	797	
<b>B</b>	Women's Home		
1	Rupashreepalli Women's Home No I	748	1951
2	Rupashreepalli Women's Home No II	375	1951
3	Champta Women's Home	764	1955
4.	Ranaghat Women's Home	691	1950

(Source: *ibid*)

One of the major concerns was rehabilitation and winding up of existing camps. After the rehabilitation of rehabilitable and border-line rehabilitable families the

<sup>10</sup> For details please refer 11th Report on Maintenance of inmates of Homes and Infirmaries for Displaced persons from East Pakistan in West Bengal, Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work In West Bengal , Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation New Delhi, 1973

committee reported that there would be about 5000 families consisting of 10000 heads left in the homes and infirmaries of the state.

Thus two kinds of official refugee categories were created. First and foremost those families with able bodied men who had to be cared for a week and the state took on the role of the “able bodied men” in case of the second category – “permanent liability” as the state “saw itself as standing in for the male bread winner in relation to these unfortunates and therefore entitled to assert all the moral authority over them that a male bread winner enjoys over his dependants” (Chatterji in Kaul (eds) 2001: 89).

### **Principle of Rights/ Care and State - Ranaghat Women’s Home**

Studies have also pondered on the prevalent sense among the people that despite these “contending notions of right and charity, there is a fundamental agreement between all sections of the actors in that contentious scenario, namely, we/they are part of the nation, the nation must accept us/them”(Samaddar 2000: 27). To understand how the “refugee” is posited at the margins of citizenship, we need to understand the conflicts between the two founding principles of modern society, the belief in the universal human rights and the sovereignty of the nation states (Bose 2000). According to Pradip Bose (2000), the international and national legal regimes address this inherent conflict. Thus, what is evident is that the legal conception of the refugee is closely associated with the state, state sovereignty and membership. This in a way also reinstates that the way “statecraft” defines and maintains the “the modern rituals of inclusion and exclusion” through their policies towards “refugee issues” produce, project, and privilege the hierarchy of the citizen/nation/state. How are these hierarchies created and produced? Are these hierarchies about us/ them? How are these hierarchies translated at the level of policy making?

According to the Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced persons in West Bengal (Report 1957), permanent liability camps are defined on the following lines.

Amongst the refugee families that are admitted to camps, there are those whose members are either infirm or aged or otherwise incapacitated or consist of women who have no able bodied men to look after them. These constitute what is known as “Permanent Liability” of Government. Total no of persons in this category in September 1957 was 54066.

After sixty years of independence, the permanent liability camps have been functioning on the state assistance, the central government has ceased to support after the mass rehabilitation/ resettlement of East Pakistan refugees in Dandakaranya, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The report also suggested that the following categories of refugees will eligible for admission into P.L. Homes and Infirmaries:

Old: men above 60 years and women above 50 years with no able bodied member

Infirm: those who have been suffering from a permanent disability

Unattached women: those who have no adult able bodied son

Orphans: unattached boys upto age of 16 years and girls till they are married or gainfully employed.

Dependents of above first three categories

### Dependents of TB patients

This very categorization reveals a paternalistic top-down approach towards groups with certain vulnerabilities. This was a replica of the colonial master-slave relationship where “the state’s relation to this dross of humankind was that of surrogate *pater familias* or benevolent despot. Because the refugees had placed themselves in its care, government could decide – indeed it had a duty to decide – what was best for them... In this same role, the state also accepted (albeit without much enthusiasm) responsibility for single unattached women, the elderly, the infirm, and their dependents. These categories of refugees were, it acknowledged, ‘more or less a permanent burden on the government because they had no able bodied men to support them’ (Chatterji in Kaul (eds) 2001: 89). The state at this juncture played the role of a “patriarch” and fountainhead of charity almost simultaneously and it continues to do so as the residents of the permanent liability homes continue to negotiate with the state regarding the delay in doles, increase in cash “dole”.

The location of the “women’s camp” of Ranaghat is interesting and as one of the Government officials of the Cooper’s Camp Permanent Liability Home puts it “When I first visited Women’s Camp, I could not believe such a place existed in India”<sup>11</sup>. As Mr. Monimohan Mondal<sup>12</sup> shared his experience of working in the PL office as it is popularly called, amidst filling up forms for all those who came to the Post Office next door, he said that any understanding of “camp” situation and camp life needs a visit to “Women’s Camp”. He pointed out that “Anatha” camp; as it is popularly known in the area carries the stigma of victimhood.

The official of the Cooper’s Camp Permanent Liability Home introduced me to my informant and guide. Bimala Das<sup>13</sup> (name changed here) has been a spokesperson for the women here and has led innumerable protest movements when the camp residents received “doles” with prolonged gap. As the government official recounted his first encounter with the residents of the “Women’s Camp” I was taken by surprise. When he was transferred to Permanent Liability home of Cooper’s Camp in 1993, a higher official on supervision was gheraod by the residents of the women’s camp because it had been months that they did not receive their monthly cash dole of Rs. 41.60. Manimohan Mondal, assured them oblivious of the consequences that they will receive their cash dole in two days. Following day he collected money from his colleagues and distributed it among the people; Government money followed in later. As he recollected this incident, Bimala Das said that after this incident we realized we have found somebody from the “state” who did not treat the distribution of dole within the ambit of “refugee care”. “He went beyond that. He treated us like any other “citizens”.

What is entailed in the term “refugee care”? Is it the sense of being uprooted and being at the mercy of the host state that creates the notion of “care” which otherwise should be seen as state responsibility? Even after such a long time why did Bimala feel the need to distinguish between “refugee” and “citizen”. Is it because of

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<sup>11</sup> See Map 1 for the location of Women’s Camp

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the author on 28 February 2008 and 3 April 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the author on 28 February 2008.

her locale? The camp as a site of enclosed space has given her social security. As she recalled her childhood days, she remembered how she with her camp inmates ran to the gate on the western side of the camp as soon as she heard the siren at 6 O'clock. The guard opened the gates of the camp. Bimala recounted that the guard before letting them off took a head count and similarly on their way back around 10 O'clock similar process followed. She said as a child she hated to be under such strict surveillance. Still things were better then. She showed me the eight pillars that stood still at four corners unguarded but acting as the borderline. One of the critiques of refugee studies has been the demographic count and shifting patterns of growth. In this context, the importance of the role of the "subject" in the refugee care discourse needs to be addressed because it is "the subject who moves, who makes the movement" (Samaddar in Bose (ed) 2000: 201).

In this context, I want to draw attention to how "subject" has been addressed in the state discourse of "care" with respect to the existing permanent liability camps. Does the "subject" figure in the official records? The subject is reduced to a systematic categorization in the official records since the days of census. The system of classification is an integral component of colonial project which has its traces even today as the dusty, yellow pages of the official records of the Permanent Liability Camps tell. These records have a tale to tell through the defined categories of "Ration Card Number", "Date of Admission", "Name", "Family details" and "dry dole" and "cash dole". The commodification of the "citizen" subject in the case of the recipients of the dole from the state government is a step beyond Risley's census. The "state" through the quantification of right to care creates "subjects" who unlike the Government official in this case fail to address the special needs of women.

When Bimala Das introduced me to Kanaka Das, another resident of the women's camp she was getting ready to cook her lunch. She took a cup of rice infected with insects and stated that this is the condition. Her journey from Titagarh camp to Women's Camp with her mother has been similar like Bimala. She tells me "*aamra dustbiner phela jinish*". In other words our situation is like garbage, people want to do way with. We are the garbage of the state that had once lent a patient ear to our problems. To which Bimala adds, how she and other camp dwellers protested against the quality and length of the saree that they had received few years back. She showed me the white cotton cloth with green border of 4.5m and lamented whether I will ever wear such a saree to go to the town or not. Women in the permanent liability camps are entitled to receive cloth/ saree during three occasions; 15 August, 23 January and Kali Puja.

The claim making processes of the Cooper's Camp PL home and Women's camp through petitions to substitute the coarse material with a better reflect the way the women are trying to articulate their "rights" which are usually seen as "care" rather "charity" by the state. These women are constantly challenging the paternalistic attitude of the statist discourse as they manage to cross every hurdle to draw special attention to the special needs of women. Both Bimala and Kanaka gives me a vivid account of their visits to the relief office in Ranaghat, followed by their brief meeting with the official at the Relief and Resettlement office in Kolkata which resulted in distribution of new sarees with an increase in breadth. These protest

movements show that within their limitations, women have tried to find avenues of claim making processes, asserting that the “state” responsibility towards their “Rights” of “care”.

In this context, it is important to take a brief overview of the current situation of the dole distributed by Coopers Camp Permanent Liability Home and Women’s Camp. According to the Official Records of Ranaghat Transit centre, around 40 people in the Coopers PL receive dole. Out of 40 people, twenty-eight are women and twelve men. The age group and the number of recipients of doles are given below.

**Table 4: Age Group and Number of Dole Recipients in Cooper’s PL Home**

Age Group in Years	Number of Recipients
10-20	2
21-30	7
31-40	6
41-50	2
51-60	9
61-70	20
71-80	3
81-90	1
Total	40

*Source: Register of the Ranaghat Transit Centre, 13.09.2002.*

In the case of women’s camp, 23 members received dole from the State Government. All the expenses are borne by the state. All these members are entitled to receive “dry dole” which constitutes of: 3kg of rice for 14 days, 4kg of wheat for 14 days and 800gms of dal/ for 14 days. Monthly “cash dole” of Rs 400, clothing for three occasions 15 August, 23 January and Kalipuja/ Diwali and blanket in every alternate year are allocated to the recipients. One of the safeguards by the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department in late 90s was the transfer of administrative control of Dhubulia Homes& Infirmary and Cooper’s P.L. Home to the District Magistrate, Nadia and Sub Divisional Officer Ranaghat. (Administrative Report (1998-99), of RR & R Department, Government of West Bengal)

The housing and sanitation condition of the women’s camp is far from satisfactory which opens up the question of social security and citizenship. The dichotomy of “right/ care” gets further complicated when it comes to the housing and sanitation condition of the camp residents; specially women. The camp structure of a thatched roof and walls to make it an enclosed space has rusted with time. Though there is a separate space for kitchen, there exists no public lavatory which is a matter of extreme concern. All the tube wells from the panchayat are functional. Almost half of the camp residents have no access to electricity. The housing conditions of the

camp residents deserve special attention; specially the need for better sanitation and hygiene conditions. As Bimala reiterates, “we had everything. It’s true that we grew amidst risk but it is equally true that the government did try to recreate a “home” in the camp structure” as she shows me the space where as children they got together to perform during festivals. This leaves us with another question what went wrong and also points to the fact that the “refugee” care is about monitoring, classifying populations rather than about rights.

Post independence, the nation building project initiated various programmes and measures to ensure equal rights of men and women. The Indian state in its remarkable attempt declared that the widows of 1947 became responsibility of the state and measures were taken so to set up homes across the country and train them to make them economically self sufficient. It is against this backdrop of nation building and democratic state formation that we need to understand the growing years of Bimala and Kanaka.

Bimala and Kanaka went to school and occasionally for singing classes in the camp. The Indian Government created various provisions for recruitment in developmental projects so that through employment, people could rehabilitate themselves. Another way of rehabilitation was to create separate colonies and one of the worst case and process of rehabilitation was the Dandakaranya settlement in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. It is against this backdrop that we need to understand the ongoing task of rehabilitation. A person who opts for rehabilitation today is allotted land and a one-time security allowance of Rs 10,000 for single member. For the two-member family or more, a person who opts for rehabilitation receives allotment of land and an allowance of Rs 14000.

### **Many Perceptions of “Citizenship” Rights and “us/ them”**

On our way back to the PL Home, Bimala promised me to show me the gate she used while going to school. She was brimming with excitement as she narrated to me about her school days. When we reached the gate she asked me to be careful with my belongings warning that in the recent years there has been infiltration of Bangladeshis and with local aid they have forcibly occupied (jabar dakhil kore boshchhe) certain areas. Dare they venture into our camps!!! She muttered to herself.

Bimala’s father died when she was one year old. He used to work in Kolkata. Following his death, Bimala’s mother decided to return to her “desh”/home in Barishal District of the then East Pakistan. In 1950, when the riots broke, her mother like many others migrated to West Bengal. They initially settled in Titagarh and then came to Women’s Camp around early 50s. She clearly announces that she is not a Bangladeshi.

To Bimala, “Bangladeshi” occupies the same popular perception that we heard in the public discourse; when there was a huge refugee influx. Though there are differences between the categories of “infiltration” and “migration” and one is fully aware of these, what is entailed in this kind of vehement protest is a notion of “nationality” based on “territoriality” and an “imagined nation” of Indian

subcontinent of East Bengal and West Bengal. This is why she cannot identify herself with the “Bangladeshi” and she cannot relate why “they” should attempt to share voting rights and other citizenship rights that “victims of a violent history” earned after a long struggle.

This instance further reiterates what Hoffman has argued that citizenship is a momentum concept. Momentum concepts are those that are infinitely progressive and egalitarian. Struggle for citizenship can be developed even by those who seek only limited steps forward and are oblivious of a more wide-ranging agenda. Citizenship involves a process that is evolutionary and revolutionary. It is an ongoing struggle with no stopping point as the narratives of Bimala and Kanaka tells us many experiences of citizens from the margins.

### III

#### **From Transit Camp to Ex Camp Site- Refugee Movement in Coopers’ in Perspective**

The next phase of Refugee movement within Cooper’s Camp needs to be situated in the context of economic rehabilitation and resettlement initiatives of the Indian State. In this section, we will draw upon reports of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation Reports, New Delhi and West Bengal Relief and Rehabilitation directorate, West Bengal’s reports and documents to understand the transition of Cooper’s Camp from transit camp to ex- camp site. In 1961, the Government notified the refugees in all relief camps either to move to Dandakaranya for rehabilitation or to leave camps on receiving 6 months cash doles. In September 1961, about 10000 families were left in campsites. The Government had already planned to close the camps. Not only the camp benefits such as doles, medical and educational facilities were withdrawn but even tubewells for drinking water were also withdrawn by the Indian nation-state. This marked another phase in the refugee discourse and statecraft. The emphasis of refugee discourse changed from refugee care to economic rehabilitation as the perfect solution to the refugee problem. The Committee of Review of Rehabilitation work in West Bengal appointed by Government of India in R. R Committee’s Report Government of West Bengal (1981) revealed that 45,000 displaced persons are living at 74 ex-camp sites. Around this time in Cooper’s Camp there were 1068 families awaiting rehabilitation of which 387 were ex-camp site families.

In 1967, the Government of India constituted a high power committee named “the Committee of Review of rehabilitation work in West Bengal”. This committee was asked to evaluate the working and results of rehabilitation measures undertaken in West Bengal under the residuary assessment of 1961-62 for the benefit of the old migrants, to suggest necessary improvement in and reorientation of the existing schemes, and to assess the nature of the problems created by the new migrants and to

suggest measures for their solution<sup>14</sup>. Following this, R.R. Committee's Report Government of West Bengal, 1981 was particularly responsible for some of the changes and revisions in refugee care. According to the committee report, there were 59,99,475 displaced in West Bengal of which in Nadia district the population was 15,00,750.

Some of the crucial questions that were raised in this report were (i) how many of them require assistances for resettlement (ii) how many of them have already received these assistance and economic self sufficiency obtained under such assistances (iii) how many are to be helped in their resettlement and in which manner. The report referred to the review and assessment undertaken in 1967, by the United Front Government of West Bengal in view of the enormity of human sufferings and the rise of the social discontent on the one hand and the under-estimation of the problem by the previous Government of India and the Government of West Bengal as well which was expressed by their consideration of the problem as merely a programme for proper rehabilitation of refugees. Following a review and assessment the Government of West Bengal drew up a budget for rehabilitation of refugees.

The components of their programme were as follows:

a) Land acquisition for settlement of displaced persons	7.26 crores (Rs)
b) House building loan	42.05 crores
c) Village and Small industries for economic rehabilitation @ Rs 4000 per family	116.00 crores
d) Fund for development of colonies	14.00 crores
e) Economic rehab of partially rehabilitated families	56.92 crores

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Total	235.23 crores
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Along with Administrative expenses the total programme was estimated to cost Rs 250.00 crores at 1967 prices.

Another notable initiative was the assessment of the "residual" problems of rehabilitation in West Bengal by a working group under the Chairmanship of Shri V.Vohra, Secretary, Govt of India, Department of Rehabilitation in 1975.

The report put forward the following suggestions in 1976.

- i) Revival of development of refugee colonies in West Bengal which was stopped by an order of the Government of India in 1974.
- ii) Treatment of new migrant families on the same footing as in respect of old migrant families in the matter of relief and rehabilitation. To put it in financial terms the recommendations of the Working group could be broadly divided into two main categories: a) on-going schemes for example acquisition of land, housing loans,

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<sup>14</sup> Drawing upon the recommendations of this high power committee, "A Master Plan for Economic Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal" under Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department was brought into place on July 1973.

educational facilities, industrial training and medical facilities with a capital outlay of 6 crores and b) development of refugee colonies, remission of type loans etc. This report specifically addresses the question of economic rehabilitation of displaced persons. The report findings suggest that 70 % of the population lives below the below poverty line.

Since 1956, there was a growing concern among the displaced population for the available economic livelihoods and resources in Cooper's Camp. The then Chief Minister of West Bengal Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray in a written statement had promised to develop Coopers into an industrial township<sup>15</sup>. This promise was a ray of hope for most of the families who stopped receiving financial assistance or doles from Government after 1961. The camp residents lived with the hope that they will receive proper economic rehabilitation under the Rehabilitation Industries Corporation scheme. Rehabilitation Industries Corporation had sanctioned a scheme during 1964 for the setting up of a ceramic factory at Ranaghat in West Bengal at an estimated cost of Rs 2,92,640 (Rajya Sabha Debates; 20 November 1964)<sup>16</sup>. The ceramic factory has been non-operational for a long time.

Industrialisation was seen as the only path to development for most of the refugee camp inmates. In this context, it is important to remind us that the Nehruvian vision of industrial development was evident in the growth and expansion of industries along the Hooghly industrial belt post independence. Government of India initially engaged the refugees in various manual jobs in developmental work initiatives such as Damodar Valley Corporation and others. The Government also recognized that small and cottage industries could be one of the ways of rehabilitation initiatives for the refugees and hence, Rehabilitation Industries Corporation. Cooper's Camp was witness to such an initiative which failed miserably.

Most of the refugee demands for economic rights and livelihood revolved around the notion of "industrial development". Though the Government was attempting to rehabilitate the refugees, the skewed and ad hoc planning was responsible for the limitations of such plans. Hence, the growing unrest among Cooper's Camp refugees who were waiting almost 25-26 years for economic rehabilitation. Communist Party of India Activist Ashok Chakraborty observed 10 days hunger strike in 10 June 1978 and again in 19 October 1981 to appeal for

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<sup>15</sup> According to a CPI party pamphlet 'Amaran Anashan', 1981 issued by Ranaghat chapter Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray had assured that Cooper's would be converted to an industrial township.

<sup>16</sup> Mr. Mahavir Tyagi in response to Shri B.N. Bhargava's question about the details of the small and large scale industries for the displaced mentioned that due to "limited availability of land for resettlement of migrants, a considerable proportion of the new migrants will have to rehabilitate themselves through openings in small trades and employment in industries. During the year 1964 no townships have been set up solely for the rehabilitation of new migrants in industries...various other schemes for the rehabilitation in industries of the migrants from East Pakistan are under consideration"(508-510).

economic rehabilitation and securitisation of livelihood<sup>17</sup>. The hunger strike was called to declare Coopers Camp as a notified area and to appeal to the government for industrial development as most of the persons had no source of income after the Government ceased to support any refugee apart from those in Permanent Liability camps. There was also an appeal to recognize the marketplace and to renovate the Cooper's Hospital. The Cooper's hospital the protesters claimed was suffering from adequate doctors, nurse and medicine and thus the people from Coopers had to travel some miles to reach the general hospital. The demands of the Communist Party of India according to party pamphlet were: -

1. Government should restart the scheme of doles for the 385 families who refused to rehabilitate in Dandakaranya and encourage small cottage industry, which will help in economic rehabilitation. Increase in loan assistance for the rehabilitable families from Rs 10000-Rs 15000 and single unit family should receive Rs 10000. Coopers Rupashreepally Women's Camp residents should be rehabilitated after proper planning.
2. The government should immediately live up to its promise of declaring Kirtinagar Colony, Coopers Urban (RIC), Colony, Rupashree, Women's Camp and Coopers should be given the recognition of Cooper's Camp notified Area. The Government should also initiate a spinning mill in RIC industrial area, it should take steps to re-open the ceramic industry as it will meet the demands of increasing unemployment figures among the youth and old in camps.
3. The cooper's camp hospital should be renovated. It should introduce specialized departments. 100 beds should be introduced in the hospital. A new Secondary Girls School should be established and the Coopers Junior School should be upgraded to Senior Secondary School and appeal to establish 5-6 primary schools in RIC colony, Rupashree Colony and Coopers<sup>18</sup>.

In 1981, there were 1068 families are yet to be rehabilitated; 387 are ex-camp site families. The report also mentions that the delay in rehabilitation has created serious complications here. The state Government reportedly made all the efforts to rehabilitate the families but to no effect. Refugees here have demanded small trade loan in addition to their house building loan and land for homestead. Though the Government of India sanctioned house-building loan of Rs 2000/- per family as recommended by Committee of Review but the refugees refused to accept that<sup>19</sup>. The committee recommended that the ex-camp site families should be rehabilitated at the existing site where enough land is available for purpose and each

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<sup>17</sup> The two hunger strikes were widely publicized through CPI party pamphlets issued by Party office in Coopers Camp, 1981 and letters to The Sub Divisional Health Officer regarding the two hunger strikers on 10 June 1978 and 19 October 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Translated from CPI Leaflet "Amaran Anashan" issued by Ranaghat Office, Cooper's Camp CPI party records, 1981 with Gouranga Das.

<sup>19</sup> See R. R. Committee's Report, 1981, pp 20

family should receive a house-building loan of Rs 9728/- for building their house as the prices of building materials have increased.<sup>20</sup>

According to Gouranga Das, “Cooper’s Camp never saw the light of industrial development. In the name of RIC, land was traded between the central and state Government and leased out to private players. This did not survive for along time”. The struggle from Cooper’s Camp to Cooper’s camp Notified area was marked with violence, killing, Panchayat vote boycott. Finally after several years of vote boycott under the Nagarik Committee, which was comprised of all party leadership Cooper’s camp was declared as a Coopers camp Notified Area in 1997. Coopers Camp Notified Area has a separate municipality and people who dreamt of an “industrial township” are yet to see any industries in Coopers even after its fight for autonomy.

The main emphasis on economic rehabilitation in Cooper’s currently is issue of Free Hold Title Deed; under which the land allotted to a family cannot be sold for ten years and under certain circumstances like marriage of a girl child, diseases like cancer, AIDS and any unforeseen nature of financial hardship the family has to seek permission from RR& R directorate to sell the land. The status report on refugee rehabilitation in Ranaghat subdivision till 25.2.2008 reveals:-

Total land involved	3280.3 acres
Total no. of deeds (large) to be distributed	16001+(8)
Total no. of deeds already distributed as on 31.03.06	14,205+(8)
Target Fixed for 2007-2008	200
Number of deeds already for registration	100

*(Source: Sub divisional Office Records of Ranaghat Subdivision)*

### **Table 5: Colony Wise Report, Ranaghat Subdivision**

#### **1. Cooper’s Urban III (G.S. Urban)**

Total target	157
Deed issued upto 31.12.2007 -	140
Area involved	28.23 acres
Total pending	17

#### **2. Cooper’s Urban ( G. S. Urban)**

Total target	1863
Deed issued	1647
Area	231 acres
Revised target	235

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*; pp 21

### 3. Cooper's Agricultural Scheme

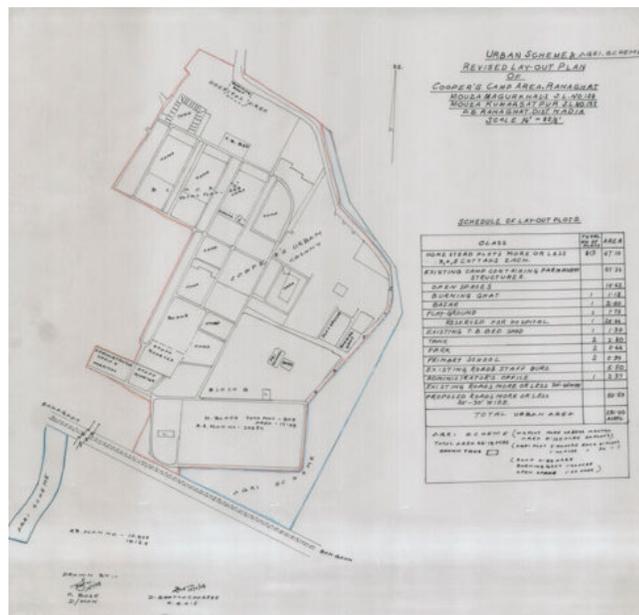
Total target	20
Deed Issued	11

(Source: Sub divisional Office Records of Ranaghat Subdivision 2008)

Coopers Camp Notified Area Municipality was formed in 1997. For administrative purposes it has been divided into 12 wards. According to 2001 census, there are 17,555 people of which 51% males and 49% females live in Coopers. Almost 70-75% of the camp residents belong to the scheduled castes. According to census data of 2001, 13,533 people belong to Scheduled Castes and 18 people to Scheduled Tribes. There is a higher secondary school in Cooper's camp and there are several primary schools in a number of Wards. The primary school in Ward No 6 houses is one of the largest primary schools. Most of the boys stay away from the school to lend a helping hand in teashops.

While the Cooper's Camp waits for its dream industry, which the residents feel, will be able to provide direct and indirect employment the Permanent Liability Home of Coopers and many others will be winded up according to the Administrative Report 2004-2007. "There are 8 camps and homes run by the RR & R department. It was decided vide an order no3747-H&M/5H-17790, dated 5.10.1990 that all Rehabilitable group families living in the Camps will be given rehabilitation and those Permanent Liability group families will be shifted to three camps to be given permanent camp status".

**Map 2: Urban Scheme and Agricultural Scheme of Cooper's Camp Area**



(Source: Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal)

It has been further decided that six camps, namely P.L. camps at Dhubulia and Cooper's (Ranaghat) and Women's homes at Champta, Ranaghat, Titagarh and Bhadrakali will be closed down and three camps namely, Habra Composite Home, Bansberia Women's Home and Chandmari P.L. Camp will be retained. According to the Administrative Report 2004-2007, there are currently two schemes for rehabilitation of camp inmates: -

- a. Rehabilitation without land with financial assistance of Rs 10,000/- in lump.
- b. Rehabilitation with land either elsewhere or in-situ at Home area with the following rehabilitation assistance:
  - i. House-building grant @ Rs 9000/- per family
  - ii. Small trade loan @Rs 5000/- multi-unit family and @Rs 1000/-per single unit family
  - iii. Maintenance grant of Rs 135/- per head

### **Camp Sites at the Cross Road of Development and Statecraft**

These measures demonstrate the changing attitude of the Indian state towards the refugees. The refugee experience of economic development and economic rehabilitation at Cooper's Camp of West Bengal is an illustration of the state responsibility towards refugees- who were seen as a problem. The constant emphasis to wind up homes and camps across the state speak about the fact that "refugee problem" is a thing of the past whereas the rehabilitation schemes merely encouraged a shelter and self-employment. In places such as Cooper's where most of the people are unemployed and women have taken to bidi making and men in adhoc jobs like carpentry it remains a far-fetched dream of Coopers to transform into an "industrial township". On the other hand, both Bimala and Kanaka told that they have heard and are aware that one day they might be forced to give up the land of the camp site for developmental purposes. They are very clear that they will give up land and make way for development when their basic demands are fulfilled which includes increases in cash and dry doles. There has been constant pressure from top officials to acquire land but Bimala tells firmly that they need to know how the land will be utilized, and their share in the project. Recently the local administration with the aid of the central government has proposed to set up a school in the vacant area of Women's Camp. The residents have agreed under the clause that the abled will be provided a job. Bimala pointed out they are scared how long they would be able to hold on to their "home" and land. She is determined to fight for her rights. In any case she argues, if the school project comes through she would demand that the local residents of the camps are part of the day to day decision making process. She repeatedly tells me that she is not afraid of state administration. There is a constant emphasis to wind up the Coopers and Rupashreepally camp. The Screening Committee Report 1989 on the problems of the refugee camps and homes in West Bengal insisted that the rehabilitable families in both these PL Camps should be rehabilitated insitu or at Ranaghat G.S. Scheme; while the PL inmates could be shifted to Chandmari PL Hme. The report mentioned that the local MLA is not in favour of winding up of the

camp as the camp inmates resisted any proposition of rehabilitation elsewhere though the condition of hutments here was worst of the lot.

According to Hoffman (2004) citizenship requires security not only in terms of protection but the state should also provide what Tickner (1995: 192) calls a people-centred notion of security in terms of securitization of livelihood. The transition of the nation state to the market state has been marked with securitization of GDP rather than addressing livelihood questions. Drawing from Tickner, Hoffman argues that “security” as a concept should transcend state boundaries so that people feel at home in their locality, their nation and in the world at large (Hoffman 2004: 72).

Securitisation of livelihood in areas such as Cooper’s camp is essential where most of the female workforce is engaged with rolling bidi (local tobacco sheets). The women get paid Rs 30-35 for rolling 1000 tobacco. This is a comparatively painful task when one gets old as Kanaka Das points out because you need good eyesight to see the thread... (“*bidi bhandte gele chokher darker hoy... suto dekha jayna...*). Local residents of the Coopers Camp reported that women could hardly manage to make 500 bidis after doing their household chores; earning Rs 17 per day.

This shows that the nation state has been clearly divisive in its transition to market state and has invested in areas whose economic gains cannot be shared by everybody. The divisive politics that the state plays out creates factions of unrest and legitimizes the basis on which state could use force/ coercion to curb them.

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