

Post-Partition Migration of the East Bengal's Refugees and their Settlement, Rehabilitation and Role in the Socio-Economic and Cultural Scenario in and Around Siliguri Since 1947

Parimal Bapari

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Ananda Chandra College, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal

The partition of British India and the emergence of the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947 is not only marked the end the foreign rule and given birth two independent nations but also given birth to some tragic and acute problems like migration and refugee rehabilitation problems and others. After the Partition of India in 1947, due to continuous the religion based turmoil and attack on the Hindus in Eastern Pakistan, large number of the Hindus were forced to leave the birth place of their forefather and migrated to India and settled as 'Refugees' in different parts of India, especially in the Border Districts of West Bengal. All the migrants, on one hand were forced to flee from their birth places leaving all their belongings to save lives and on the other hand, they had to face different types of socio-cultural humiliation and economic suffering in the new land as Refugee or Displaced persons. Like other places, large number of refugees from East Bengal started settling in and around Siliguri after the Partition in 1947 and it accelerated population growth of Siliguri and it's around and made it the fasted growing city in India. The Refugee Relief & Rehabilitation Department, which had been established to look into the affairs of refugees, actively interfered and tried to provide all kind facilities to minimize the hindrances of the refugees. It is fact from the report of the RR&R Department largest part of present Siliguri was established / formed under direct /indirect supervision of the Dept and the Refugees playing very important role in developing the socio-cultural and economic scenario of Siliguri. In the present paper I would like to high light settlement and rehabilitation of these East Bengal Migrant Refugees in and around Siliguri since 1947 and their role in the socio- cultural and economic development and transformation.

Refugees and thereafter

According to 1951 UN Convention, "A refugee is a person owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". Govt. of India at early stage defined the refugees as 'Displaced persons' in the following words "A displaced person in 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". West Bengal Government has defined the term 'Refugee' in the context of immigration from Bangladesh as 'families which were displaced from erstwhile East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) and settled in West Bengal prior to 25th March 1971' The Government of India declared the 25th March 1971 as the last date of legal immigration and who immigrated after that particular date would be considered as illegal immigration. Those meeting the afore-mentioned criteria are eligible for rehabilitation from the government¹. However it is fact that large number of the East Bengal refugees migrated/ migrating here after that particular date and obtained/ obtaining 'Refugee' designation and Rehabilitation benefits. With the power of government orders², the elected representatives including MPs, MLAs, Municipal Councilors, and Sabhapatis of Panchayat Samities are providing 'No Objection Certificate' for the purpose of regularization/ recognition of refugees/ immigrants. Thus, the Process of Migration / immigration is still continuing³ and some incidents like Hazratbal Shrine episode of 1964 in J&K, Bangladesh war of Independence of 1971 and Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, after 1947 accelerated the process.

East Bengal Refugees in India

The partition of British is linked to the largest recorded population dislocation in history⁴. However it is very hard to account the actual numbers of the refugees in India as well as in East Bengal's refugees in Eastern India and other parts of India. Nilanjana Chatterjee⁵ in an article recorded an estimated figure of migration of East Bengal refugees from 1946-1970 as 5,283,000. The Census of 1971 records the number of refugees in the state at nearly 60 lakhs as reported to the planning commission in 1974 by west Bengal Govt. According to RR Committee Report, the number was assessed at 80 lakhs in 1981⁶. Aswini Kumar Nanda⁷ has documented the population flows from Bangladesh to India over 1981 and 2001. He reports that as of 2001, there were 31–37 lakhs Bangladeshis in India, 97% of whom have infiltrated to the West Bengal and Northeast regions in 1981-2001. It is reported that an average of 200,000 persons slip annually into West Bengal State alone'. It is also fact that most of these migrants were different Hindu castes. Thus, large number (About 80+40=120 lakhs) of East Bengal refugees' influx in India especially in west Bengal throughout the period and merged with the vast population of India. However, the figure seems to be a fraction of the larger figure. Because, large number of the migrants, especially those, who migrated after 1971 AD always try to hide their identity and show their migration before 1971.

East Bengal Refugees in and Around Siliguri:

In the beginning of 20th century, Siliguri was a small town with little administrative and commercial activities and was a base town in between plains and Hills. The emergence of Siliguri has been started in the beginning of the 4th decade of the present century. After the partition in 1947 and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, Siliguri became one of the fastest growing cities in India and became a famous refugee centre⁸. In the years 1951, 1961, 1981, 1991 and 2011, the Populations of the Siliguri were about 32480, 65000, 154000, 216950 and 701489 respectively⁹. Annual growth rates are 10% (100%-51-61), 6.8% (136%-61-81), 4% (40%-81-91) and 11.1% (223%-91-11) respectively. The geographical area of Siliguri also expanded from 15.45 squares Km to 41.90 square Km (2.71 times)¹⁰, mainly due to the addition of 17 wards from Jalpaiguri district in 1994¹¹. The data clearly indicate that in 60 years population of Siliguri increased about 21.5 times where all India rate only 3.5 times. This growth is not only for internal population growth only but also due to the external influx of refugees and others. Moreover, due to the geographical location, the partition of India and closeness to several international boundaries, Siliguri had become an indispensable transit point, commercial place and strategically important area, for which large number of people settling here for their livelihood. From 1941 onwards the demography of Siliguri and its adjoining areas changed rapidly due to the different causes including influx of large number refugees from East Bengal, and other places¹². As Siliguri is very close to the East Bengal border and having several scopes of livelihood, so large numbers of refugees, mainly from East Bengal poured here and helped Siliguri to become an important city of the region. Thus, immigrant refugees, mostly Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan became a quantitatively important segment of population of the district, most of who settled in the plains of Siliguri sub-division¹³ It is written that "The refugee influx has helped Siliguri town to grow in many ways"¹⁴ and became one of the most important refugee centre in India. In this connection the Refugee Reliefs and Rehabilitation Department, took active part to face the refugee influx problems, to minimize the tragedies of the refugees and their rehabilitation in and around Siliguri. The department works in two ways:

1. West Bengal Refugee Reliefs and Rehabilitation Department, took actively established, recognized and regularized large number of different categories of refugee colonies in and around Siliguri like other parts of west Bengal. There are three types refugee colonies in and around Siliguri with very few exceptional.

a) Government Sponsored or GS and Extended GS Colony¹⁵(Rural and Urban)

This is the most important type of colonies established under direct sponsorship of Government. The RR&R department of Government disbursed / distributed homestead plots/ Agricultural plots on Government's land or Government's acquired land among the refugees. The Department took full responsibility for the development of the colonies in regard of sanitary arrangements, roads constructions and others and also provided all kind of facilities and funds for the livelihood of the concerned refugees. There are four Urban

and one rural GS (Government sponsored) colonies in and around Siliguri, within Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Districts. The Dabgram – I&II Urban GS colonies of Darjeeling District and Saktigar (original and extension) Urban GS colony of Jalpaiguri District are within Siliguri Municipal Corporation (Henceforth SMC). Matigara Urban and Choupukhuria Rural GS (near Bagdogra) colonies are other two GS colonies of Darjeeling District. Acquisition land of the Dabgram - I &II GS Colonies had been made in the 1949 with a target to disburse 1114 plots among the refugees and that of the Matigara (213plots) and Saktigar (both original and extended) in about 1953 immediately after that. Acquisition of land for Choupukhuria Rural GS colony had been made in about 1957. Thus, Dabgram - I &II and Saktigar (both original and extended) GS colonies were the earliest refugee colonies under Siliguri MC, which presently comprise the areas like Saktigar, Dabgram, Collegepara (part) and Hakimpara (part). Matigara GS colony is situated behind the Matigara P.S. and presently known as Sarojini colony. All these colonies have become prime areas of SMC with land mark Government offices, schools clubs markets etc.

b) 607 Group Colonies¹⁶: (vide G.O. No 26/(6)/83-RR(vol.-I), New Delhi, dated 27th Feb, 1987)

The colonies, which were established on and from 1-1-1951 upto 25-3-1971 by the refugees themselves on vacant Vested and other Department's lands, included in this Group. These colonies sometimes called 'Jabardhakkhal' (Forcefully occupied) colony, as most of the colonies were established forcefully by the refugees themselves in the succeeding periods. Later, Government only recognized and regularized the colonies by providing Gift deeds and some other facilities. In this connection it should be mentioned here that the refugee leaders (leftists) themselves took active part for the establishment of the colonies and its development, recognition and regularization. There are 27 colonies of 607 Group, in and around Siliguri SMC, of which 17 are in Darjeeling District and 10 are in Jalpaiguri District. The following colonies are in Darjeeling District: 1. Subhash Nagar Colony, 2. Das Colony, 3. Adarsh Nagar, 4. Adarsh Pally, 5. Prantik Colony, 6. BBD Colony, 7. Deshbandu Colony, 8. Debasish Colony, 9. Mahakal Pally, 10. Durgadas Colony, 11. Sramik Colony, 12. Natunpara, 13. Dabgram Unnyan Colony-I, 14. Dabgram Unnyan Colony-II, 15. Jyotinagar Colony, 16. Bhaghajatin Colony, 17. Pati Colony. The following colonies are in Jalpaiguri District: 1. Bhaktinagar Quarters Colony, 2. Harekrishna Colony, 3. Sarat Pally, 4. Bankim Nagar Colony, 5. Shitala Para, 6. Thakurnagar Colony, 7. Naukaghat Colony, 8. Surjasen Colony, 9. Shantinagar Colony and 10. Niranjana Nagar Colony. Most of the above mentioned colonies are within Siliguri MC with very few exceptions.

c) 998 Group Colonies¹⁷: (vide G.O. No 2724/ (30)-Rehab/7L-14/96, dt 20-12-96).

The colonies of the group are also established by the refugees themselves on vacant Vested and other Departmental lands like group 607 but recognized by the Government under a separate group and GO. There are about 38 recognized colonies of 998 Group, in and around Siliguri SMC, of which 27 are in Darjeeling District and 11 are in Jalpaiguri District. The few Big colonies of this group in around Siliguri SMC in Darjeeling district are Prankrishna Colony, Harijan Colony, Matangini Colony I, Matangini Colony II, Sarbahara Colony, Chittaranjan Colony, Promod Nagar Colony, Sukanta Nagar Colony, Hawker Market etc and in Jalpaiguri district are Sukanta Pally (jal), Amtala, Ashighar, Bhakti Nagar, Naba gram, Paresh Nagar, Nayapara, Chayan para etc. There are many Refugee colonies of the 607 and 998 groups in and around Matigara, Shivmandir, Bagdogra, Fullbari, Ambari-Falakata and other places of nearby Siliguri within Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Districts. Most of these colonies of Siliguri and its around of the 607 and 998 groups were mainly forcefully established on the lands of N. F. Railways, D.I. Funds and others and for which the colonies could not improved their position due to legal obligation and remained in 'slums like' position.

2. The Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department not only established GS colonies and recognized and regularized the colonies of the 607 and 998 groups as we mentioned earlier but within limited power it also actively tried for the community and socio-economic development of the refugees of Siliguri and its nearby. The department donated lands to establish schools, colleges, markets, roads and made sanitary arrangements for the new settler Refugees. In this connection it may be noted here that the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department made financial donations to the Siliguri College and the Siliguri Commerce

College to construct buildings. Land was granted to Siliguri Girls' Higher Secondary School for its building as these institutions were needed to meet the ever-increasing demand for girl's education of the new settlers. The wide roads and standard plots pattern of the GS colonies in Siliguri and other places bear the sign of active role of the Department. The state government also advanced more than Rs.1, 50,000 to the Siliguri Municipality to construct roads, make sanitary arrangements and arrange water supply in the refugee concentrations within the municipal limits. In addition, the Refugee Rehabilitation Department constructed a market on a 3-acre plot of land at an expense of more than Rs. 10, lacs for the benefit and livelihood of about 800 refugee traders and named it 'Bidhan Market'¹⁸ Now it is the largest market in Siliguri.

The refugees of Siliguri and its surrounding came and settled here comparatively late in their migration. The first wave of the refugee migration in and around Siliguri started immediately after partition and received rehabilitation here in between 1947-1960 under only five GS Colonies. They were comparatively educated and affluent people, and played vital role for the formation and development of the socio-economic and cultural pattern. Most of the refugee colonies of the 607 and 998 groups established after 1960 and succeeding great waves of refugee migrations in 1965, 1971. Besides, a large portion of the refugees migrated and settled here even after 1971 and 1992 and in illegal way, the process is still continuing. Another very important point should be mentioned here that some East Bengal refugees migrated here indirectly. They migrated to India and settled other places including Govt Camps. In Succeeding periods, considering political and socio-economic situation they again migrated to Siliguri and it adjacent for better livelihood. For, instance, a sizable number of East Bengal refugees continuously migrating here from Assam after 'Bangali Kheda' movement in 1960's onward and some of migrated and settled here from the Refugee camps in South Bengal and even from Dandakaranya and other Refugee camps of India. Thus it is fact that the refugees migrated and settled in and around Siliguri directly and indirectly from East Bengal (Bangladesh) and other parts of India in different phases in the post partition period.

The Refugees and their Role in Socio-Cultural and Economic Arena:

All the refugee colonies of Siliguri and its surrounding formed the larger part of greater Siliguri and they have been playing important role in socio-economic and cultural scenario of the region. The refugees brought with them socio-cultural tradition of East Bengal (Now Bangladesh), which greatly influenced the socio-cultural pattern of Siliguri and it's around in the succeeding periods. They established large numbers of clubs, social organizations, temples (like Kali, Durga, Loknath, Sani and others) as their cultural heritage of their roots. The Refugee colonies with their own contributed funds, established different types of 'organize schools' for the educations of their children and approached to the Government for recognition. In this way large number of schools (primary & secondary) and socio-cultural organizations came into existence and which took active in the molding of the socio-cultural pattern of Siliguri and it's around. Thus, the Refugees and the colonies became an integrated part of Siliguri and its surroundings and molded the physical and strong socio-cultural segments Among all these, the GS colonies and some colonies of the 607 and 998 groups emerged as socio-economic strong areas of Siliguri by kept behind their miserable colony character of past. About 90% of the total population of these colonies are economically, socially and educationally sound and may be termed as 'Upper Middle class' or 'Middle class'. However, most of the colonies of 607 and 998 groups under SMC could not change their miserable colony character and socio-economically, culturally and hygienically they bear 'lower middle class' and slum characters. It is fact from the study that most of the colonies of 607 and 998 groups listed in the SMC records of 2010 as 'slum'. Thus, even today large section of the refugees have been living in 'slum like' colonies in miserable condition and became the sources of men power in the works like rickshaw puller, daily wagers, carpenters, masons, roadside traders and housemaid (women). The adjoining colonies of the SMC in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts bear mixed character in their socio-economic and cultural patterns. It is also fact that the refugees of the 607 and 998 groups were comparatively less educated poor people and have nothing with them and Government also did not care them. So they have to settle themselves here for their livelihood.

Another important feature of the migrants' East Bengal refugees is its caste character. Large section of the refugees of the 607 and 998 groups were of Namasudra, Mahisya, Rajbanshis and others SC communalities.

As all these communities were against the Congress and took active part with the Muslim League in Eastern Bengal and stayed there under the leadership of Jogendra Mandal after partition, So the Congress party was less interest about this late comer refugees for their so Called 'betrayal'. In this situation some leftist wings guided them to obtain their rights and privileges, for which the refugees of Siliguri and around became an integrated part Leftist politics under banner of United Central Refugee Council (UCRC). The Leftist political Parties took up the Refugees and their rehabilitation problems as their political agenda, for which most of the East Bengal refugee migrants more or less kept their connection with the Leftist Politics till 2000, after which they shifting their political affiliation.

Thus, the refugees who migrated settled and obtained rehabilitation / recognition in around Siliguri in different succeeding waves after the partition, played very important role for the socio-cultural and economic life of the region. However, most of the East Bengal refugee colonies in around SMC lost their 'Colony Character' and emerged as a unified part of the SMC and local area in their habitations and administrations. In the same way, most of the East Bengal Migrant Refugees are also losing their 'Refugee Characters' and merging with all India pattern. Some Creamy portion of the refugees, considering the term 'Refugee' as derogative and some time even denied their refugee identity. However economically weak and newer section (who came after 25-3-1971) upholding the term to obtain Government facilities and even for the citizenship of India. It can be mentioned here that the SD-RRO, Siliguri, and DM-RRO, Jalpaiguri opined that large number of refugee colonies including some slums, waiting for recognition and gift deeds even today²⁰.

Notes and References

1. West Bengal Government Official website.
2. G.O - 264-Rehab, Dated 1988 & 602-Rehab. Dated 20-02-90 as well as 264-Rehab. Dated 35-01-91,
3. It is very hard to prove but it is open secret. Large numbers of refugees are migrating even today.
4. Nilanjana Chatterjee, "Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence", Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina.
5. *ibid*.
6. *ibid*.
7. Aswini Kumar Nanda, "Immigration from Bangladesh to India based on census data", in the journal '*Asia Pacific Migration Journal*', Vol. 14- 2005, pp. 487-499. In the article he documented population flows from Bangladesh to India over 1981 and 2001.
8. Sailen Debnath, *The Doars in Historical Transition*" N.L.Publishers, Siliguri, 2010.
9. Census reports, Siliguri Municipal Corporation Report (Henceforth SMCR) and Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority (Henceforth SJDA) Reports.
10. SMCR and SJDA Report.
11. SMCR and SJDA Report.
12. Sailen Debnath, *op.cit* and *West Bengal Districts Gazetteer, Darjeeling*, 1980.
13. *ibid*
14. *ibid*
15. West Bengal Refugee Relief & Rehabilitation Department Manual and Office records
16. *ibid*.
17. *ibid*
18. *West Bengal District Gazetteer, Darjeeling*, 1980.
19. Personal interview and RR Official Reports, SDO (RR) Siliguri (15.11.2013) and DM-(RR) Jalpaiguri (18.11.2013).