

CHAPTER- 5

THE BANGLADESH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCE AS THE REFUGEE INFLUX IN THE EAST

Genesis of Crisis: On 25 March, 1969, Ayub Khan resigned and handed over the Government to General Yahya Khan who imposed martial law for the second time in Pakistan. After assuming power, Yahya Khan declared that he would transfer the power of Government to the elected representatives of the people and achieve this end, he announced General Elections. These elections to the National Assembly were to be held on 5 October, 1970, but they were postponed to December 1970 due to a cyclone hitting East Pakistan.¹ After the elections, the two largest parties that emerged victorious were the Awami League in East Pakistan and the Pakistan Peoples Party in West Pakistan. In the East, the Awami League secured 167 out of 169 seats and in the West, the Pakistan People Party won approximately 88 out of 144 seats in the National Assembly.² On 13 February, 1971 Yahya Khan announced that the National Assembly would meet in Dacca on 3 March, 1971. On 1 March, 1971, the Government postponed the session with no fresh dates announced. On 6 March, 1971, Yahya Khan announced in a radio broadcast that the National Assembly would meet on 25 March, 1971. Mujibur Rahman, the leader of Awami League, declared that fundamental

¹ Bangladesh Documents, Vol-I, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 1-3.

² Ibid., p. 130.

demand for provincial autonomy non-negotiable, pressed for withdrawal of martial law before convening the National Assembly and transfer of power to the elected representative of the people forthwith, through a Presidential proclamation. On 25 March, 1971, the President, who had gone to Dacca along with prominent west Pakistani leaders for negotiations, couldn't reach to a compromise and flew back to West Pakistan.³ Yahya Khan in his radio broadcast to the Nation 26 March, 1971, outlawed the Awami League, banned all political parties throughout Pakistan and called Mujib and his partymen traitor of the Nation. He ordered Pakistan Armed Forces to do their duty and fully restore the authority of the Government in East Pakistan. Thus a reign of terror and repression was unleashed.⁴ The marauding forces of Yahya Khan let loose on Bangladesh had left the Dhaka University in a state devastation. The Rajshai University also shared the same fate at the hands of the west Pakistani forces.⁵ After two days of deaths and destruction as many as 1,00,000 people were feared killed.⁶ The Parliament of India adopted a resolution and expressed their solidarity with the freedom fighters of Bangladesh.⁷

³ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

⁴ "Text of Yahya's Broadcast, on March 26, 1971", Ibid. pp.276-277.

⁵ Naayan Choudhury, 'Massacre of Intellectuals', Ananda Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, April 10, 1971, Bangladesh War of Independence Documents, Vol. XIV, Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh, June 1984, p. 663.

⁶ 'Dhaka, Khulna Bombed, A lakh feared killed. Freedom fighters on mass action', Ananda Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, March 28, 1971, Bangladesh War of Independence Documents, Vol. XIV, op.cit., p. 653.

⁷ 'Statement of the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the Lok Sabha moving a resolution on East Bengal, New Delhi, March 31, 1971', India-Bangladesh Relation Documents-1971-2000, Vol.V, A.S. Bhasin (ed.), Geetika Publishers, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 2835-2836.

Flow of Refugees: As a result of the atrocities committed by the Pakistan military forces, refugees started pouring into the bordering Indian States of West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya towards the end of March 1971. The Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi on her statement in the Parliament said, ‘on the 15 and 16 May, I visited Assam, Tripura and West Bengal to share the sufferings of the refugees, to convey them the sympathy and support of this House and the people of the India and to see for myself the arrangements which are being made for their care. I am sorry it was not possible to visit other camps this time. Every available building, including schools and training institutions, have been requisitioned, thousands of tents have been pitched and temporary shelters are being constructed as quick as possible in the 335 camps which have been established so far. In spite of our best efforts, we have not been able to provide shelter to all those who have come across and many are still in the open. The district authorities are under severe strain. Before they can cope up with those who are already here, 60,000 more are coming across every day.’⁸

In this situation it is little wonder that the Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi became concerned when 9.89 million refugees entered Indian from 15 March, 1971 to 15 December, 1971. In a little less than nine months 825 refugee camps had been established and these camps eventually provided accommodation for 6.8 million refugees. The remaining refugees

⁸ ‘Statement of the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the Lok Sabha on situation in East Bengal, New Delhi, May 24, 1971’, *ibid.*, p. 2837.

approximately 3 million were able to find shelter with friends and relatives rather than being confined to camp life.⁹ Table 5.1 presents the distribution of refugees State-wise. Though the influx of refugees was heavy till the month of June, the influx continued in the subsequent months also.¹⁰ Table 5.2 gives the month-wise trend of influx of refugees.

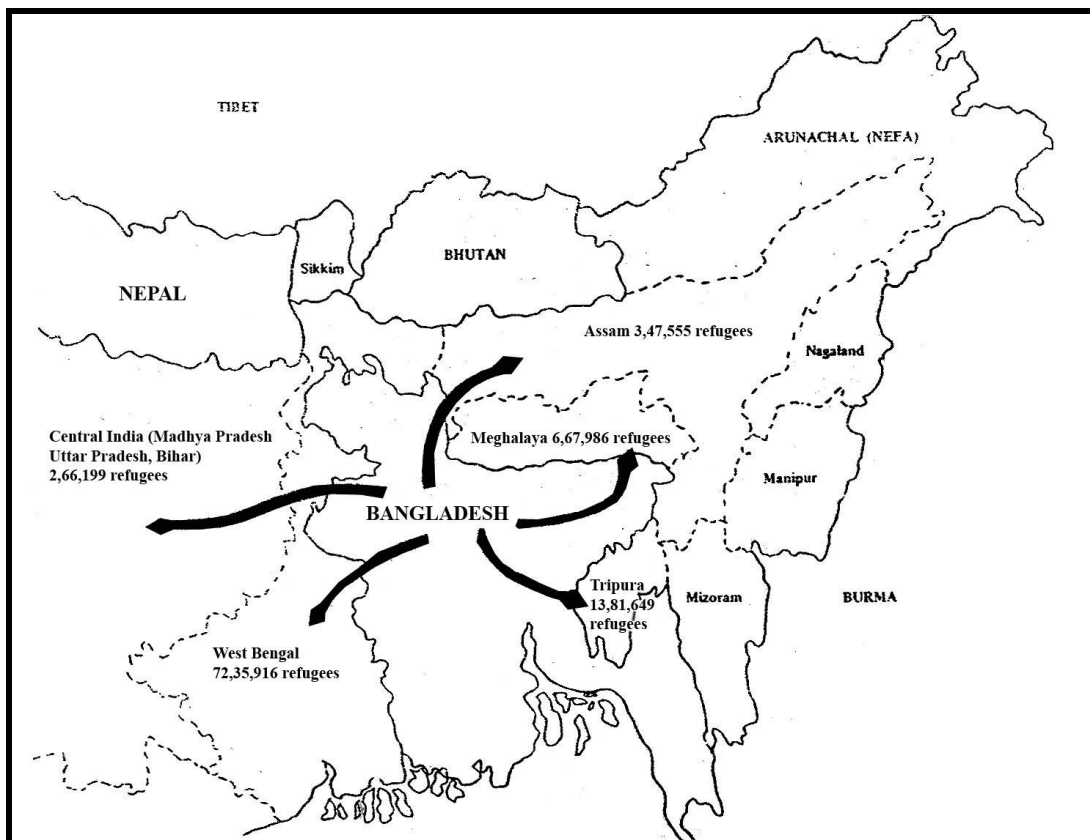


Fig. 5.1: Distribution of Refugees in Various States in India upto 15 December, 1971

⁹ Bangladesh Documents, Vol.II, op.cit., p.81.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.82.

Table 5.1
Distribution of Refugees in Various States in India
upto December 15, 1971

State	No. of Camps	No. of Refugees in Camps	No. of Refuges on their Own	Total
West Bengal	492	48,49,786	23,86,130	72,35,916
Tripura	276	8,34,098	5,47,551	13,81,649
Meghalaya	17	5,91,520	76,466	6,67,986
Assam	28	2,55,642	91,913	3,47,555
Bihar	8	36,732		36,732
Madhya Pradesh	3	2,19,298		2,19,298
Uttar Pradesh	1	10,169		10,169
Total	825	67,97,245	31,02,060	98,99,305

Source: Bangladesh Documents, vol.-II, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 1971, p. 81.

Table 5.2
Trends of Influx

Month (for the year 1971)	Daily Average (in thousands)	Monthly Average (in thousands)
April (10 th to 30 th)	57	1,221
May	102	3,158
June	68	2,056
July	26	797
August	34	1,055
September	27	804
October	14	425
November	8	217
Backlog		166
Total		9,899

Source: Bangladesh Documents, vol.-II, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 1971, p. 82.

The first wave of refugees from Bangladesh were the leading cadres of Awami League, along with intellectual community, students and the members of the East Bengal Regiment and East Pakistan Rifles fleeing from the pursuing Pakistani army. This refugee influx coincided with the period when the Pakistan Army was attempting to liquidate the Awami League cadres and the leading professionals in the cities and towns. This period lasted up to the third week of April.¹¹ From the later half of April the character of refugee influx into India began to change. It was overwhelmingly Hindu in composition and it became clear that Pakistan Army was deliberately resorting to expulsion of the Hindu population as part of its policy. The justification for the annihilation of Hindus was interpreted by Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan, the Military Governor of East Pakistan in a radio broadcast on 18 April, 1971 said – ‘The Muslims of East Pakistan, who had played a leading part in the creation of Pakistan, are determined to keep it alive. However, the voice of the vast majority had been suppressed through coercion, threats to life and property by a vocal violent and aggressive minority, which forced the Awami League to adopt the destructive course.’¹²

The leading journalists of West Pakistan blamed the secessionist sentiments of the Awami League on the joint electorate system which,

¹¹ ‘Genocide in Bangladesh: Some Eye-witness Accounts’ Bangladesh, Documents, Vol.V, op.cit., pp. 353-359.

¹² ‘Genocide: An Account by Anthony Mascarenhas, Former Assistant Editor, Morning News, Karachi’, Bangladesh Documents, Vol.I, op.cit., p. 361.

according to them, constituted a betrayal of the original two-nation theory.¹³

The Bengali Muslim was not sufficiently Islamic because they were influenced to a large extent by the Hindu Bengal culture. The Pakistani authorities might also have been persuaded by the events of the earlier years when communal disturbances in East Bengal and consequent influx of Hindu refugees were always followed by communal violence in India. If they had succeeded in triggering off such communal violence in Indian then their three-fold purpose would have been achieved. First, the entire East Bengal happenings would have been subsumed in a bigger communal holocaust. If there had been an eastward flow of Urdu-speaking Muslim refugees from Bihar consequent on such communal violence, Pakistan would have welcomed them and succeeded in adding to the countervailing Muslim population loyal to the Pakistani ideology in Bangladesh. Secondly, to get rid East Bengal of all Hindus, which would have meant a drop of 12 percent or so of the total population of East Bengal, thus would have been relatively reduced the imbalance between the East and West Wing of Pakistan. Precise figure on the religious background of the refugee composition was 69.71 lakhs Hindus, 5.41 lakhs Muslims and 0.44 lakhs others which was estimated that somewhere between 80 to 90 percent of the 1971 refugees were Hindus.¹⁴

Thirdly, such violent communal disturbances in India would have

¹³ 'Choudhury Rehmat Elahi, Secretary General of the Jamaat-i-Islami, Dawn, May 28, 1971'. 'Z.A. Suleri in Pakistan Times quoted by Peter Hazelhurst in Times (London) July 12, 1971', Mohd. Ayoob & K Subrahmanyam, *The Liberation War*, S. Chand & Co. Publishers, New Delhi, 1972, p. 173.

¹⁴ Bangladesh Documents, Vol.I, op.cit., p. 446.

preoccupied the Indian Government and security forces and it would have prevented their extending significant support to the Bangladesh freedom struggle. In the words of Simon Dring, a western correspondent who covered the Bangladesh crisis there is no doubt that the army crackdown on East Bengal in 1971 was carried out ‘in the name of God and a United Pakistan.’¹⁵

East Pakistan had a population of 75 million in 1971. About 10 million of them came to India as refugees. In order to understand the magnitude, gravity and complexities of the refugee influx, it may be worthwhile to examine the situation state-wise, with some of the districts in particular.

West Bengal: The influx of refugees was mostly in the border districts of Nadia, 24-Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar. The situation in the first week of June indicated that the influx of refugees had been in such numbers that the administration was finding it difficult to cope with the situation. ‘Out of 40 lakh refugees in West Bengal, about 19 lakh could somehow get shelter – five lakh in temporary shelters in schools and rest in the open. The monsoon rains had also started. After registration, the refugees got rations for four days.’¹⁶

L.V. Saptharishi the then sub-divisional officer at Bashirhat under 24-Parganas stated that ‘about 3.5 lakh refugees stayed in Bashirhat and about three lakh refugees transited through Basirhat and moved to Barasat, Calcutta,

¹⁵ ‘Report by Simon Dring of Daily Telegraph, London in Washington Post, March 30, 1971’, Bangladesh Documents, Vol.I, op.cit., p. 348.

¹⁶ ‘Centre indifferent in discharging its responsibilities’, Kalantar, Calcutta, June 6, 1971, Bangladesh War of Independence Documents, Vol.XIV, op.cit., p. 788.

and other areas. Most of the refugees from the urban areas preferred to move towards Calcutta whereas others from the rural areas settled down in the Basirhat area. The refugees were from the adjoining district of Khulna in Bangladesh and some refugees came from the Kusthia district and other areas. The majority of the refugees were Hindus, though about 25 to 30 percent of the refugees were Muslims. In total about 21 camps were established. Initially the refugees had settled down wherever they could find vacant space and in the way some of the refugees settled down in private land in the villages. Hence, the administration had to intervene in such cases and compensation was paid to the landowners. Later these refugees were shifted to the government-run camps. Some of the larger camps with a refugee population exceeding 20,000 were established at Hasnabad, Bhaduria, and Swaroop Nagar. In the initial months the conditions in the camps were chaotic and early rains enhanced further difficulties for refugees. But from the beginning of September 1971 the camps' were systematized. UNICEF, Care, Oxfam and the Red Cross extended help to the refugees. The Marwari relief society, the Bharat Sevashram and other local NGO's also extended help to the refugees. Mother Teresa established a camp hospital with the help of Oxfam, which was later converted into a permanent hospital and dedicated to the local population.¹⁷

¹⁷ L.V. Saptharishi, an IAS officer of the 1969 batch, West Bengal cadre, was then posted as the Sub-divisional Officer, Basirhat in the 24-Parganas district of West Bengal. Interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article 'The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east', pp. 23-24.

The refugees moved from place to place seeking proper shelter. ‘Calcutta to Taki, Taki to Hasnabad, Hasnabad to Basirhat, Basirhat to Barasat, Barasat to Dumdum, Dumdum to Salt Lake – the refugees were moving from one camp to another and getting refused. The Marwari relief society in Basirhat was running 10 relief camps in which there were over 2.8 lakh refugees. On the request of the State Government they had to shoulder the responsibility at another 38,000 refugees.’¹⁸

J.V.R. Prasad Rao, the then additional district magistrate of Nadia, stated that ‘the district of Nadia had a population of about 20 lakh and the influx of refugees had been about 12 lakh. The most important aspect of this influx was that the majority of the refugees came within a period of 10 to 15 days. Thus the influx was very sudden and intense. In the initial stages the majority of the refugees were Hindus, but later the refugees included both Hindus and Muslims. Most of the refugees came from the neighbouring district of Kushtia. Some refugees also came from Faridpur. The refugees came through the entry points of Darshana Gede Chapra, and Karimpur. Most of the refugees came on foot and hundreds of refugees died on their way due to exhaustion. Many refugees were suffering from acute diarrhoea and other

¹⁸ ‘In hunger, fatigue, refugee almost dead’, Ananda Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, June 8, 1971, Bangladesh War of Independence Documents, Vol.XIV, op.cit., p. 797.

health problems and had to be admitted to the district hospital. About 800 refugees died there.’¹⁹

Due to the sudden influx of refugees into the district no arrangement could be made initially. Refugees stayed in the open fields. Bharat Sevashram, a social organization, did very good work in caring for the refugees. The administration procured hogla grass from the neighbouring district of Howrah for the construction of shelters. Some of the large camps with more than 50,000 refugees were established in Kalyani, the Bahadurpur forest area north of Krishnanagar, the district headquarters and at Chapra on the Karimpur road. A special camp had to be established for about 500 unattached women who had been sexually abused by Pakistani troops.²⁰

S.S. Chattopadhyay, the then additional district magistrate of Murshidabad stated that ‘5 to 6 lakh refugees came into the district. The refugees mostly entered through Jalangi, Lalgola and Raninagar. They were mostly from the adjoining districts of Rajshahi and Kushtia. The river Padma separates the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal from Rajshahi and Kushtia in Bangladesh. The refugees could cross the river in the summer months in small boats. About a lakh refugees also came to the district from Calcutta by train. These refugees could not be accommodated in camps in Calcutta and the other areas of 24-Parganas and were sent to Murshidabad in

¹⁹ J.V.R. Prasad Rao, an IAS officer of the 1967 batch of the West Bengal cadre, was then posted as the Additional District Magistrate of Nadia district of West Bengal. Interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article ‘The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east’, p. 26.

²⁰ Idem.

special trains. Some refugee camps with more than 20,000 refugees were set up at Banjetia and Lalbagh areas. Among the refugees were the Deputy Commissioner of Jessore and the Sub-divisional officer of Natore of Bangladesh. They were accommodated in the government guesthouses. There had been about a thousand deaths, mostly of children, in the camps.’²¹

P.K. Banerji, the then Additional Deputy Commissioner of Cooch Behar stated, ‘against the total population of 7 lakh in Cooch Behar district, the total influx of the refugees was about 7.5 lakh. Most of the refugees were Muslims, there were some tribals also. The refugees mostly came from Rangpur district of Bangladesh. The refugees entered the district through Gitaldaha, Sitalkuchi, Haldibari, Mekhliganj and Sitai areas. The influx of a number of refugees posed a serious problem for the administration, considering the remoteness of the district. Most of the relief assistance to the refugees had been provided by the district administration. The Lutheran World Service had a center in the district that provided some assistance in the initial phases. Most of the refugees stayed in camps. A few large camps had been established in the interior of the district and the refugees were moved from the border areas.’²²

²¹ S.S. Chatopadhyay, an IAS officer of the 1966 batch of the West Bengal cadre, was then posted as the Additional District-Magistrate, in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article ‘The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east’, pp. 27-28.

²² P.K. Banerji, an IAS officer of the 1966 batch of the West Bengal cadre, was then posted as the Additional Deputy Commissioner in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. He was awarded the Padma Shri award for his meritorious service in handling the influx of refugees in 1971. Interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article. ‘The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east’, p. 29.

Tripura: ‘In 1971 the total population of Tripura was 15.56 lakh. The number of refugees from East Pakistan was 13.42 lakh. The number of refugees further increased and created a deep impact upon the public life and economy of Tripura.’²³ Due to influx of refugees the population almost doubled in the towns of Agartala, Dharmanagar, Uaipur, Belonia, and Kailasahar. In the border areas, despite hundreds of camps being set up, the pressure on towns increased considerably. Thousands of refugees were entering Tripura through Sankhu, Dharmatala, Belonia, Agartala, Kailasahar, Kasba, and Sonamura. The Chief Minister of Tripura on 25 April, 1971 said, ‘about 60,000 refugees have been registered. Of them 40,000 were staying with relatives. Most of the refugees had come from Comilla, Chittagong, Srihatta and Noakhali districts of Bangladesh. Everyday thousands were entering Tripura through the border.’²⁴

In the first week of April camps were not established. The refugees were accommodated in schools and colleges as these were closed. Most of the people of the society dedicated themselves in organizing relief. Some collected money, others clothes, others looked after the places where the refugees were staying. The Chief Minister called a meeting of the Cabinet in the first week of April to tackle the refugee problem and request the Central Government to treat the influx of the refugees as a national crisis.²⁵ By 17

²³ Habib Harun, ‘Freedom struggle: Dateline Agartala’, Jatiya Sahitya prakashani, Dacca, 1992, p. 27.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁵ Idem.

April, 1971, 19 camps were established to accommodate the refugees.²⁶ By July 1971, 57 lakh refugees had entered India, most of whom were in West Bengal, then Tripura, followed by Assam and Meghalaya. In all, 36 camps were established and 6,92,154 refugees stayed in the camps, whereas the remaining refugees made their own arrangements or stayed with relatives. Refugees who were sent out of the state numbered 25,440 and Rs. 7.2 crore had been spent on refugee relief. The estimated expenditure was assessed at Rs. 45 crore and 350 doctors and health workers had been engaged by the State Government.²⁷

In November the strength of the refugees in the camps in Tripura numbered 8,34,098 and 5,47,151 stayed with relatives and friends. Thus against the total population of 15,56,822, the number of refugees stood at 13,81,249.’ As a result, there was a shortage of food stuff and other consumer goods due to the pressure of refugees. There was also an increase in the prices of general items. Curfew used to be imposed in Agartala at night.²⁸

Assam: K. Sreedhar Rao, the then Deputy Commissioner of Cachar district of Assam stated that ‘the influx of refugees into Assam had been mostly in the districts of Cachar and Dhubri. It was decided to accommodate the refugees in schools as no other place was readily available. The number of refugees were swelling and they could not have been left out in the open as the rains had

²⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

already started. No tents were available in the district. Each school was designated as a camp. The supply of food grains, edible oil, salt, and fuel etc., was arranged. Most schools had water supply facilities and rudimentary sanitation. Where required wells were bored and sanitation provided. Karimganj was overflowing with refugees and the new arrivals had to be brought to Silchar. The students of the district were kept on a forced holiday and examinations could not be held. It was most undesirable to keep the schools occupied indefinitely. Plans were made to build camps with substantial capacity. Fortunately bamboo (a construction material) was available in plenty and it was decided to use it to build planned colonies, selecting suitable sites near water sources. Within a month, the process of shifting the refugees from the schools started. The Government was particular that the refugees be kept segregated and not be allowed to mix with the local population. They were to return to their homeland at the earliest opportunity and the possibility of their taking shelter on a permanent basis among relatives had to be avoided.’²⁹

Though there was a fair sprinkling of Muslims who had come away, the majority of the refugees were Hindus, as the Pakistani Army inflicted upon them cruel treatment. The Hindu leaders were not prepared to believe that the refugees would go back and some did not want them to go back. The Muslim leaders on the other hand were not sympathetic towards the refugees

²⁹ K. Sreedhar Rao, an IAS officer of 1964 batch of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre, now retired, was then posted as the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, Assam, ‘Whether Governance: Reflections of an Assam Civilian: South Asian Foundation’, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 100-101.

and their presence in the district was viewed with distaste. The Union Minister for Industries, Moinul Haq Choudhary, who was from Cachar district itself, visited the camps quite frequently and so did the Chief Minister Mahendra Mohan Choudhary. The Union Minister of State for Relief and Rehabilitation too visited the refugee camps. The Assam Governor, B.K. Nehru and the Cabinet Secretary T. Swaminathan also came, as well as the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who came to Cachar district twice.³⁰

M.P. Bezbaruah, Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district of Assam stated that, 'about 1.5 lakh refugees came to the district. All the refugees were from the neighbouring district of Rangpur and entered through the Mankacher area. Mankacher had a population of about 10,000. In the initial phases about 5,000 refugees and later about 10,000, came everyday, which created heavy congestion in the border areas. It was decided to shift the refugees to the interior of the district. Initially the refugees were accommodated in schools, but after the construction of camps the refugees were shifted out of the schools. The biggest camp with 50,000 refugees was set up at Chapor. The Dhubri town had a population of about 30,000. The camp at Chapor was almost like setting up a new township. The other big camps with about 15,000 refugees had been set up at Lakhipur and Goalpara.'³¹

³⁰ Ibid.,p. 102.

³¹ M.P. Bezbaruah, an IAS officer of the 1964 batch of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre, was then posted as the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, Assam, interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article 'The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east', published and page No. 30.

As the number of the refugees were exploding day by day. They started impinging on the supplies of essential commodities. Hence, resentment grew among the local population. Also, there was a general price rise of all commodities. Many times food supplies had not been reached on time as a result a lot of problems had to be faced by the refugees in the camps. The condition of the refugees were so bad that they would not report a death fearing that their rations would be proportionately reduced. They would even collect sarees and dhotis from dead persons and sell these to earn a little money.³²

Meghalaya: Prior to 1972, when Meghalaya became a full-fledged state, it was functioning as an autonomous region. In Meghalaya, the influx of refugees had taken place mainly in the districts of Shillong and Tura.

The then Deputy Commissioner of Shillong, J.K. Bagchi stated that ‘initially in the month of March and beginning of April 1971, the influx of refugees from East Pakistan was about 5,000 refugees everyday. At the end of May 1971 it reached a peak of 25,000 refugees per day. The influx of refugees outnumbered the local population of Shillong district. As against the total population of about five lakh, the total number of refugees was about 5.6 lakh. The refugees came mostly from Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Initially there was resentment among the local Khasi population as they feared that the refugees would never go back. It was difficult to get land to establish camps

³² Idem.

as in Meghalaya all land belonged to the villages. After the negotiations with village committees the local people agreed to extend all help to the refugees.³³

He further added that the largest concentration of two lakh refugees was in the refugee camps in the Balat area. At both the Dawki and Cherra areas there were more than one lakh refugees. In all there were about 18 camps in the Shillong district. Cholera broke out in the camps resulting in about 20 deaths, mostly of children. The cholera vaccine had been procured from Calcutta. But there was serious water problems in the camps as the natural water-sources in the hills started drying up by the month of October.³⁴

K.K. Sinha, the then Deputy Commissioner of Tura, said, ‘about six lakh refugees had entered the Garo Hills district. Camps were set up at 16 to 17 places. The large camps were set up at Rogra, Mahadeo, Baghmara, Menang, Shibbari, Dalu, Ampati, Phulbari, and Tikrikila. Hindus were in preponderance, but Muslims and Christians had also taken refuge in substantive numbers. By and large the local population extended cooperation. To start with, housing, feeding security, health care, clothing, sanitation and supply of drinking water were major problems, aggravated by a chronic

³³ J.K. Bagchi, an IAS officer of the 1963 batch of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre, now retired, was then posted as the Deputy Commissioner of Shillong in Meghalaya. He was awarded the Padma Shri for his meritorious service in handling the influx of refugees in 1971. Interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article “The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east”, pp. 30-31.

³⁴ Idem.

shortage of staff and transportation of the required supplies to the camps through roads which came under regular fire from the enemy side.’³⁵

The Role of the Government of India in the admission of refugees:

Regarding the admission of the refugees, the Government of India followed an open door policy. The Ministry of Home Affairs issued instruction to all border states of West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya Government’s to screen the refugees properly and register them under Section 3 of the Foreigners Act, 1946. The refugees were given residence permits for a period of three months initially. On 27 March, 1971, the Government of India took a decision that refugees from the East Pakistan should be provided with relief, viz., shelter, food, medical aid etc., on humanitarian grounds. In a word, the entire expenditure on refugee relief would be met by the Central Government.³⁶

Much of the credit for the refugee accommodation and repatriation should go to the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who made two crucial decisions almost as soon as the refugees started coming. First, in reply to the discussion on situation arising out of arrival of refugees from East Pakistan, Mrs. Indira Gandhi made it clear that –‘they are not refugees, they are victims of war who had sought refuge from the military terror across the border.

³⁵ K.K. Sinha, an IAS officer of the 1963 batch of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre, now retired, was then posted as the Deputy Commissioner of Tura in Meghalaya (then a part of Assam). He was awarded Padma Shri for his meritorious service in handling the influx of refugees in 1971. Interviewed by K.C. Saha who quoted in his article ‘The genocide of 1971 and the refugee influx in the east’, p. 31.

³⁶ Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72, p. 2.

Relief could not be perpetual or permanent and conditions must be created to stop any further influx of refugees and to ensure their early return under credible guarantees for their future safety and well being.³⁷ Secondly, for organizing the gigantic programme of providing relief to such a phenomenal number of refugees from the East Pakistan, the Government of India had to establish a Special Branch Secretariat in Calcutta under a senior officer of the rank of Additional Secretary. This Secretariat was intended to be the executive outposts of the Central Rehabilitation Department and had been given necessary financial and other requisite powers for undertaking and executing on the spot decisions with regard to relief measures, setting up of camps, providing food and other supplies, including medical facilities and for organizing coordination with different State Government's as well as other voluntary agencies concerned. Also, at Delhi, a department had been established with a central coordination committee for providing liaison, advice and assistance in implementation of the Government's policies as well as of international agencies.³⁸ No relief assistance from the Government was admissible to those who were staying with relatives and friends. The State Governments were authorized to construct temporary shelters at a cost not

³⁷ 'Statement of the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the Lok Sabha on situation in East Bengal, New Delhi, May 24, 197', A.S. Bhasin (ed.), *India-Bangladesh Relations – 1971-2000*, Vol.V, op.cit., pp. 2837-2839.

³⁸ 'Statement by G.S. Kahlon, Rehabilitation Secretary, Government of India, in the 22nd Session of the Executive Committee of UNHCR held in Geneva, October 5, 1971', *Bangladesh Documents*, Vol.II, op.cit., pp. 92-93.

exceeding Rs.5 per square foot. The floor area allowed to each family was 100 square feet.³⁹

Disposal of Refugees: In order to ease the heavy pressure of refugees in the border areas in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya, the Government of India decided a proportion of the refugees should be dispersed to other states and for this purpose 19 giant centrally administered camps had started functioning in these border States and other States. 5,69,361 refugees were dispersed to these camps. Of these, 16 were completed by August 1971. Table 5.3 elaborates the details of the dispersal of refugees to the Central Camps.

Table 5.3
Dispersal of Refugees to Central Camps

S. No.	State/ Location of Camps	Population (Persons)
<u>WEST BENGAL</u>		
1.	Cooper's Camp (Nadia)	14,000
2.	Dhublia (Nadia)	10,516
3.	Salboni (Midnapore)	67,185
4.	Brindabanpur (Midnapore)	35,864
5.	Gamarbani (Bankura)	52,722
6.	Charra (Purulia)	30,840
	Total	<u>2,11,127</u>

³⁹ Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72, pp. 4-5.

S. No.	State/ Location of Camps	Population (Persons)
<u>TRIPURA</u>		
7.	Ambassa	10,000
8.	Dharamnagar	40,000
9.	Manu	23,398
	Total	<u>73,398</u>
<u>ASSAM</u>		
10.	Changsery (staging camp)	2,621
11.	Sorbhog	5,010
12.	Bahalpur	19,523
	Total	<u>27,154</u>
<u>BIHAR</u>		
13.	Panchanpur (Gaya)	28,091
<u>MADHYA PRADESH</u>		
14.	Mana (Raipur)	1,64,152
15.	Chakrabhatta & Mulmulbhatta (Bilaspur)	55,146
	Total	<u>2,19,298</u>
<u>UTTAR PRADESH</u>		
16.	Iradatganj	10,293
Grand Total		5,69,361

Source: Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72.

Relief assistance extended by the Government of India, the UN Member Nations, the UN Agencies and the Voluntary Organization: As regards the expenditure on providing relief facilities to the refugees from Bangladesh the Government of India had made a budget provision of Rs.260 crore (US\$360 million), i.e. Rs.60 crore in 1971-72 Budget and Rs.200 crore in the supplementary grants for all this relief work upto the end of December 1971. This includes expected amount of Rs.50 crore (US\$ 69 million) of foreign aid.

However, the Government of India estimated the expenditure for 8 million refugees for six months (as on 30.8.71) @ Rs.3/- per day per person would be Rs.432 crore (US\$ 576 million).⁴⁰ As the influx of refugees from East Pakistan continued further the total requirement for about 10 million refugees for 10 months worked out to about US\$ 1,100 million. The foreign assistance made available was US\$ 234 million, which worked out to about 21 per cent.⁴¹ According to the information received upto 25 February, 1972, Rs. 104.31 crores had been advanced 'on account' to the State Governments for meeting expenditure on relief items and on construction of Central Camps.⁴² Table 5.4 shows the details of the funds released to the State Governments.

Table 5.4
Funds Released to the State Governments

Name of State	For expenditure on relief items (Grants-in-aid)	For construction of Central camps (Central Expenditure) (Rs in Lakhs)	Total
West Bengal	7057.00	105.00	7162.50
Assam	580.00	75.00	655.00
Meghalaya	1000.00		1000.00
Tripura	1450.00	10.00	1460.00
Bihar	14.45	36.00	50.45
Uttar Pradesh		13.40	13.40
Rajasthan		25.00	25.00
Madhya Pradesh		65.00	65.00
Total	10101.45	329.90	10431.35/ 104.31 Crores

Source: Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72, p.3.

⁴⁰ 'Statement by Shri G.S. Kahlon, Rehabilitation Secretary, Government of India, in the 22nd Session of the Executive Committee of UNHCR held in Geneva, October 5, 1971', Bangladesh Documents, Vol.II, op.cit., p. 93.

⁴¹ 'Statement by the Indian delegate, Samar Sen, on UNHCR's Report in the third Committee of the U.N. General Assembly on November 18, 1971', Bangladesh Documents, Vol.II, op.cit., pp. 102-103.

⁴² Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72, p. 3.

As regard the total expenditure for the Bangladesh refugees, the Minister R K Khadilkar said that for the current financial year till the end of March, the budget provision of this purpose amounted to Rs.360 crore out of which upto the end of December 1971 already Rs.240 crore have been spent. He said that the total pledged foreign aid so far amounts to about Rs.200 crores, which was continuing to flow into India and would be duly received by our Government as long as it came. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also issued a further appeal to the Member Nations for rendering assistance in this behalf and it was expected that as a result more of this assistance would still be coming to India. Since this enormous refugee problem was in fact the responsibility of the international community, the Minister hoped that the remaining burden of about Rs.160 crore would also be duly borne by the international community. Out of the total pledged aid of Rs.200 crore, so far India has received about 33 ½ cores in cash and 81.23 crores in kind. The Minister mentioned that 68 Members of the United Nations had set their contributions to India through UNHCR and otherwise, through the international voluntary agencies.⁴³ Table 5.5 shows details of relief aid from foreign counties upto 24 February, 1972.

⁴³ 'Briefing by the Indian Minister of Labour and Rehabilitation R.K. Khadilkar to the members of the consultative committee for the Minister of Labour and Rehabilitation on February 21, 1972', India-Bangladesh Relations Documents – 1971-2000, Vol.V op.cit., p. 2386.

Table 5.5

The Offers of Assistance Received from Foreign Governments, U.N. Agencies and Voluntary Organizations as per Information Received by Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation upto 24.03.1972

	(Million \$)
I) Offers Received from Foreign Governments	
i) Through UN Focal Point	\$192,935,136
ii) Direct to the Government of India	\$41,778,283
Total	\$234,713,419
II) Offers Received from UN Agencies	\$4,352,280
III) Offers Received from Voluntary Organizations	
i) Through UN Focal Point	\$5,451,140
ii) Direct to Voluntary Organizations	\$1,997,962
Total	\$2,543,076
Grand Total: I, II and III	\$26,449,546/ Rs. 19,837 Crore

Source: Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72, p.114.

Assistance to the Refugees: With a view to determine regular supply of essential commodities to the refugees in the camp and check the trend in hike of prices, arrangements were made to supply rice, wheat, pulses, edible oils, sugar, salt and match boxes through the Food Corporation of India (FCI). For this purpose, a sum of Rs. 8 crores was advanced to the Food Corporation of India in April, 1971 for purchasing adequate quantities of foodgrains and other essential commodities and for stocking them in their godowns in the border areas.⁴⁴ The FCI opened new depots at Dhubri, Karimganj, Shillong, Kokrajhar, Tura and Goalpara in Assam. The FCI depots of the Government

⁴⁴ Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-1972, p. 3.

of Tripura also made available for stocking essential items of Dharamnagar, Udaipur and Agartala. Floods in the Eastern States during August and September 1971 led to serious hindrance in rail and road traffic resulting in supply of essential food stocks to North Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura got serious disruption. However, supplies of essential items like medicines, other essential food items and food grains were maintained by airlifting and adequate quantity of buffer stock for three months in Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya and North Bengal.⁴⁵ According to an estimate prepared, feeding 6 million refugees for a period of 6 months required 5,80,000 tonnes of rice.⁴⁶ The monetary ceiling fixed for supply of foodstuff, etc. to refugees was Re.1 per head per day for adults, 60 paise for every child between the age of one to eight years and 20 paise for every child below the age of one year. Within this monetary ceiling, the scale of rations was as follows:

Item	Adults (In grams)	Children (In grams)
Rice	300	150
Wheat	100	50
Pulses	100	50
Edible Oil	25	12
Sugar	25	15

For refugee children under the age of a year, milk powder and baby food were issued out of donations made by international voluntary organizations.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 8-10.

⁴⁶ Lok Sabha Debate, July 22, 1971, pp. 47-48.

After computing the cost of rationed articles, the balance amount of the prescribed monetary ceiling was disbursed in cash, which was not to exceed 33 paise and 20 paise per head per day in respect of adults and children respectively for the purchase of vegetables, salt, spices, fuel, hair oil and washing soap. The scale of monetary ceiling for clothing was also decided, Rs.14 for adults and Rs.10 for children respectively. Supply of woolen and cotton blankets to the refugees staying in camps at the rate of 1 blanket per adult subject to a maximum of 3 blankets per family was arranged. Utensils and mats were also supplied to refugees in deserving cases.⁴⁷

Medical relief and health care: Instructions were issued to the Central Government medical store depots at Calcutta and Guwahati to store adequate quantities of anti-Cholera vaccines, rehydration fluids, bleaching powder, anti-malaria drugs, antibiotics etc. To facilitate supply four sub-medical store depots were set up at Agartala, Karimganj, Tura and Dhubri. To meet the shortage of doctors and paramedical personnel, 500 medical and paramedical staff were sent from the Central Medical Service. The Railway Medical Service as also from some of the State, public sector undertakings and voluntary organizations. Two regular epidemiological units were set up to help investigate epidemics.⁴⁸ The Rehabilitation Secretary stated, 'the State Governments were allowed to employ medical and paramedical personnel from among the refugees on daily wages. In all, about 800 doctors, 2,100

⁴⁷ Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-1972, pp. 10-12.

⁴⁸ Idem.

paramedical staff and 72 medical students were engaged in refugee medical relief programmes. These were 700 medical units functioning in the camps. Fifty referral hospitals (existing and new) served the refugees. Nearly 4,000 additional beds were established in the hospitals. A 100-bedded mobile hospital was functioning at Basirhat in West Bengal. All available WHO/UNICEF vehicles meant for normal health programme work were diverted for refugee relief work.⁴⁹ Labour cases were admitted to hospitals attached to camps or to the nearest hospitals available. Adequate medical and public health facilities had also been organized from the very beginning to cope with an outbreak of cholera in the summer months when the infection had been brought in by the refugees in large numbers and it had threatened to spread all over the countryside too. Upto 20 September, 1971, 46,752 cases of cholera were reported and from them 5,834 persons died in the hospitals, health centers and camps. In this effort, international agencies who rendered all possible assistance urgently which was greatly appreciated by India. The Government of India had also been specially concerned over the incidence of malnutrition among children in the camps. In this context the Government of India approved of a scheme called 'Operation Life Line' which looked after over 2 million children and cost about Rs.3 crore (US\$ 4.1 million).⁵⁰

Water Supply & Sanitation: Guidelines in regard to the measures to be taken for housing, environmental sanitation, water supply, latrines, garbage

⁴⁹ *Idem.*

⁵⁰ Statement by G.S. Kahlon, Rehabilitation Secretary, Government of India, Bangladesh War of Independence Documents, Vol.XIV, op.cit., p. 93.

and refuse collection and disposal were issued to the States. A norm of one tubewell per 200 persons was prescribed. About 4300 deep tubewells were sunk and about 21,000 latrines were constructed. For drilling deep tubewells with a large diameter as well as handpump tubewells with small diameter, 48 drilling rigs of different categories were arranged. In addition, water tankers were arranged for the distribution of water.⁵¹

Education: As the refugees from the East Pakistan were to stay in India for a temporary period and they were to return to their homes eventually, it was not considered necessary to provide any elaborate, formal schooling for them here in India. Accordingly in the camps, a scheme of educational lectures for boys and girls at junior stage in the age group of 6 to 11 and in the senior stage in the age group of 11 to 14 was introduced. Adult education through audio-visual methods was also imparted. The children were taught in Bengali so that they could acquire some knowledge of Bengali and learn simple arithmetic and could write ordinary letters. No regular classes were organized on institutional lines. Teachers were recruited from among the refugees or social workers from non-political and non-sectarian organization and the N.S.S. Payment of a daily honorarium at the rate of Rs. 1/- per teacher was sanctioned, when necessary. The refugees in camps were encouraged to undertake social welfare activities such as distribution of ration, construction of shelter, looking after the sanitation and general cleanliness of the camp

⁵¹ Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-1972, pp. 7-8.

premises etc. With a view to provide recreational entertainment to the refugees in camps, community radio sets were provided. Arrangements were also made to provide facilities for simple games like football, kabaddi, kho-kho etc. The women were also encouraged to keep themselves profitably engaged in swing, handicraft, bidi-making, tat-patti making etc. With a view that the refugee unattached women and orphans could live in congenial surroundings, homes for unattached women and orphanages which were to be run with the help of social organizations of non-political and non-sectarian character. In these homes, the unattached women were given training in sewing, cutting, doll-making, first-aid, nursing, handicraft etc.⁵²

Repatriation of Refugees: Immediately after the surrender of the Pakistani forces and the creation of the Republic of Bangladesh, the refugees started going back to their country. From 1 January, 1972 an organized programme for the return of refugees was finalized by the Department of Rehabilitation in consultation with Bangladesh authorities. The returning refugees were allowed 2 weeks ration. The State Governments were authorized to exercise their discretion in allowing one week's ration in kind and the cash equivalent of one week's ration calculated at a rate not exceeding Rs. 1.10 per adult in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura and Rs. 1/- in West Bengal and other Central Camps and 60 paise per minor (in the age group of 1-8 years) per day. The refugees from camps who traveled under their own arrangements from border

⁵² Ibid., pp. 13-14.

to their homes were paid journey money for adult at the rate of Rs.2 for a distance of 10 miles from the border, Rs.5 for a distance of 10 to 30 miles and Rs.10 for a distance of beyond 30 miles and traveling expenses at half the above rates allowed to minors in the age group of 3-12 years. Camp refugees to whom clothing and blankets had been distributed were permitted to take along those items with them. The returning refugees from the camps were also paid a cash grant at the rate of Rs.30 per adult and Rs.15 per child (below 8 years) on reaching their destination in Bangladesh by the concerned authorities. The total cost on account of this item was estimated at Rs.185.8 million or Rs. 18.58 crores and this amount was to be made available to the Bangladesh Government as a grant. At the time of return the refugees were required to surrender their ration cards, border slips and registration cards. They were issued with a certificate (Refugees Return Cards) in the prescribed form. The Government of India estimated the total cost of food, transport, etc. in respect of the refugees return to Bangladesh at Rs.1,200 million or Rs. 120 crores.⁵³

Minister of Labour and Rehabilitation informed the Members of the Consultative Committee for the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation that so far upto date out of total of nearly ten million Bangladesh refugees who came into India as a result of terrible atrocities of the Pak Army on them last year, over 87 lakhs had already returned to Bangladesh. Out of the remaining

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 19-21.

11,92 lakhs, 3 lakhs of refugees in camps were expected to return to Bangladesh shortly and all necessary arrangements for the purpose had been made by train, road and inland water-ways. He also informed the Members that 8.87 lakhs refugees were reported to be still with their relations and friends outside camps. They were also expected to go back very soon.⁵⁴ Table 5.6 shows the elaborate figures of repatriation of refugees to Bangladesh.

Table 5.6
Repatriation of Refugees up to 19 February, 1972

State	No. of Refugees Repatriated to Bangladesh	** In Camps (awaiting repartition)	Outside Camps (awaiting repartition)	Total (awaiting repartition)
West Bengal	63,25,978	85,233	824,705	9,09,938
Assam	2,60,526	44,405	42,624	87,029
Meghalaya	6,67,986	--	--	--
Tripura	13,45,501	16,399	19,749	36,148
Bihar	21,525	15,207	--	15,207
Madhya Pradesh	82,133	1,37,165	--	1,37,165
Uttar Pradesh	3,369	6,800	--	6,800
Total	87,07,018	3,05,209	8,87,078	11,92,287

Source: 'Statement issued by the Government of India, February 19, 1972', India-Bangladesh Relations Documents – 1971-2000, vol.-V, p.2385.

This means that almost nine million refugees had already been repatriated in a period of little less than two months. So, the obvious problem

⁵⁴ 'Briefing by the Indian Minister of Labour and Rehabilitation R.K. Khadiolkar to the members of the consultative committee of parliament, New Delhi, February 21, 1972', India-Bangladesh Relations Documents – 1971-2000, Vol.V, op.cit., p. 2386.

for the Indian Government was that a good number of the refugees who chose to stay on with relatives and friends until March were likely to want to stay longer, so that the last million may turn out to be much more difficult to repatriate than the first nine million. Anticipating that the Central Government might be instructed the concerned State Authorities to initiate necessary steps to find out those remaining refugees specially who were staying on with relatives and friends. This initiative might have reflect tremendous impact to repatriated the most of the refugees, which we could perceive on the Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India. Table 5.7 evaluates the figures of repatriation of refugees to Bangladesh upto 21 March, 1972.

Table 5.7
The Figure of Repatriation of Refugees to Bangladesh
up to 21 March, 1972

State	No. of Refugees Repatriated to Bangladesh	No. of Refugees Still Awaiting Repatriated
West Bengal	72,23,157	12,759
Assam	3,08,287	39,268
Tripura	13,69,687	11,962
Bihar	29,163	7,569
Madhya Pradesh	2,19,298	--
Uttar Pradesh	7,834	2,335
Total	98,25,412	73,893

Source: Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1971-72, p.18.

Assessment: From the above discussion, we can make an assessment that through the Government of India was successful quite at length to find out and deported those war victim refugees who were desiring to stay longer. In fact, there were some refugees who shrewd enough to hoodwink the Government of India to avoid deportation. These refugees numbered 72,893, according to the report of the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation on 21 March, 1971. Out of these 73,893 refugees, 37,268 refugees were to be repatriated from Assam alone. Rest of the refugees were staying in the States i.e., West Bengal 12,759 refugees, Tripura 11,962 refugees, Bihar 7,569 refugees and Uttar Pradesh 2,335 refugees respectively.

In comparison to approximately 10 million East Pakistani refugees came to India due to atrocities of the Pakistani Army, merely 74 thousand remained, which is not a tall-talk. Because it could be possible in any such incident, when there was large scale devastation occur. But unfortunately historians like Dr. (Mrs.) S.L. Baruah of Dibrugarh University, Assam stated, 'In Assam, too, the news of the victory of Bangladesh was, in general, hailed with joy as elsewhere in India. In the wake of the war, several lakhs of Bengali immigrants poured into Assam but after the war was over, only a few returned home. The issue of these foreign nationals was first raised by the All Assam Students Union in 1974.'⁵⁵ So like as Dr. Nagendra Nath Acharyya, Department of History, Gauhati University argued, 'The Independence War

⁵⁵ Baruah, Dr (Mrs.) S.L., A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munohiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1985, p. 654.

of Bangladesh of 1971-72 had been a great set back to the economy of Assam. After signing of the “Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Peace” at Dacca between the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Muzibur Rahman, several lakhs of Bengqali immigrants poured, into Assam. In fact, Assam hailed with joy on the victory of Bangladesh independence but after the war a few Bangladesh nationals returned home. As a result Assam ha to raise the issue of foreigner’s, and it was first raised by the All Assam Students Union in 1974 for deporting all the foreign nationals⁵⁶ In reality, there wee 3,47,555 refugees influxed into Assam upto 15 December, 1971, out of which 3,08,287 refugees returned back to Bangladesh upto 21 March, 1972. Nearly 40 thousand yet to return. Who were perhaves either accommodated by their relatives or friends or mangled up within the society which is similar to the other side of the border.

⁵⁶ Acharyya, Dr. N.N., A Brief History of Assam: From Earliest Times to the Year 1983, Omsons Publications, Guwahati, New Delhi, 1987, p. 275.