Chapter V

Stree Parva : The Women’s Chapter

Women were the worst victims of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Yet, their plight for long had remained a closed chapter, with the ‘high-politics’ of Partition dominating all administrative and scholarly imagination. However, with the recent focus on the ‘human’ dimension of this tragedy, the women have finally found their rightful place in Partition historiography. In this context it is important to make a note of the changing trends in documenting women’s experiences. Whereas the earlier emphasis was solely on the theme of victimisation of the women, scholars now concentrate more on the constructive role played by them in the very process of rehabilitation.

The following chapter looks at the rehabilitation policy of the State vis-à-vis the ‘refugee women’. Here the focus is on the role of the State as a protector of its subjects, and also as that of a benevolent patriarch. Drawing parallels from the experience of the Punjabi refugee women, the aim of this chapter is to see how far the Bengali refugee woman was aided by the State in the process of rehabilitation.

Historiography—The Story so Far

Urvashi Butalia in her path-breaking book, The Other Side of Silence, probably makes the first attempt to actually document the experiences of the women. The only shortcoming noted in it, as agreed by the author herself, is that it covers only the experiences of the Hindu and Sikh women coming from West Pakistan. By discussing the experience of violence and the Recovery and Restoration of Abducted Persons Act these scholars point

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1 To borrow the term from Jyotirmoyee Devi who uses it to define that untold chapter of the history of women and their sufferings which seldom finds mention in the history of humankind. According to Devi, ‘there is no recorded history of the real stree parva… The stree parva humiliation by men? The stree parva of all times? The chapter that remains in control of husband, son, father and one’s own community—there is no history of that silent humiliation, that final pain… The stree parva has not ended; the last word is not yet spoken.’ [Translated from original in Bengali by Jasodhara Bagchi in the introduction to, Enakshi Chatterjee (translator), The River Churning By: A Partition Novel (Jyotirmoyee Devi author)]


3 The most important and path-breaking works in this direction include—Urvashi Butalia, The Other Side of Silence, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries and No Woman’s Land; Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), The Trauma and Triumph; and, Gargi Chakravartty, Coming out of Partition among others.
out the dilemma of the helpless women caught between the two nation-states and their men.\(^4\) The focus, therefore, is on the theme of women as victims of partition.

The need, however, is to look beyond this sole image of the women as helpless victims of this ‘greatest human tragedy’. Thus, to look at not only 1947—the period of partition violence—rather, to look at a period much beyond that. The ways in which the women rebuild their lost lives and their contribution towards the challenge facing the nascent nation-state—the rehabilitation of the many refugees—should be the focus now. Aid from the State was crucial for resettlement, but where such aid was not easily forthcoming, or was too little, the women, too, contributed.

Yet, another change required in our understanding of partition is to not straightjacket the varied experiences of the displaced persons into one common experience. To state the ‘Punjab-model’ as the model of understanding this mass displacement of people across the two countries and drawing inferences from it would be a mistake. Deriving from the experiences in Bengal and Sindh it is clear that the minorities were subject to other forms of violence which may not have been as ‘direct’ as it was in Punjab.

Thus, having discussed briefly some of the broader themes covered in this chapter, I now attempt at defining violence. It is because the State defined one set of refugees in general, and women in particular as ‘genuine’ victims of that State-defined ‘real’ violence that this set of refugees and women were privileged over the other.

**Defining Violence**

When on 24\(^{th}\) October 2008, a nun from Orissa testified in public against a gang of right-wing Hindu activists who raped her, she brought to light an age-old malady in the human society—the sexual violation of women remains the ultimate means of subjugating a community, state or nation, as the case may be. To put it in more succinct terms, ‘It is a reminder that rape continues to be used as a weapon of war. This woman was raped because the men waging a war against the Christians in Orissa wanted to teach them a

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lesson they would not forget...They believed that this would silence their “enemy” forever.\(^5\)

Let us now move back in time and focus on partition violence. It is here that this ‘weapon of war’ was mastered and used on an unprecedented scale. What was shocking was that the women had only two options before them: ‘honour killing’ at the hands of their own family/ community which was hailed as an act of martyrdom, or violation of their honour at the hands of the ‘other’ which was considered a cause of shame and insult. However, the experience of violence was not always so explicit and direct. There were other forms of violence which were often dismissed as mere ‘psychological fear’, thereby denying it any degree of seriousness.

Such instances of violence can be observed in many of the later day narratives and memoirs of the refugees who came from East Bengal. The threat to the honour of their women was, of course, the prime concern for the Hindu refugee from East Pakistan. Certain incidents narrated by them highlight this fear in more clear terms. To cite one example: one of them told Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, the DM (24-Parganas) and also Rehabilitation Commissioner for West Bengal, that often when the women went to take a bath in the pond, some Muslim men would remark, ‘Pak Pak Pakistan, Hindur Bhator Mussolman’ [This is Pakistan, the husband of a Hindu will be a Mussalman]. In yet another incident narrated by another refugee it was said that one of the Muslims called out to the ladies in the pond ‘E bibi, bela je bede cholo. Aar deri keno? Ebar ghore cholo.’ [Oh Bibi, its evening now, why delay any further, let's go home.]\(^6\)

Upon hearing these incidents, Bandopadhyay noted that the reasons for migration were genuine, but surprisingly, even he remarks that these factors were primarily psychological—‘manoshik nipiron’. What seemed ‘psychological’ to the distant government and the people of West Bengal, as well as the rest of India, was a reality lived by the Hindu women in East Pakistan everyday in those times. A first-hand account of this omnipresent fear in the minds of the Hindu women can be observed in Nalini Mitra’s statements: ‘It became increasingly difficult for me to pass through a locality infested (sic) by Bihari Muslims on my way to college.’ But it was only when in the

\(^5\) Kalpana Sharma, ‘Going Public’ in The Hindu, 2\(^{nd}\) November, 2008, p. 3
workplace too, she heard obscene remarks being directed towards her, that she realised it was time to leave—’At that instant I realised that it would no longer be possible to stay in my beloved motherland. How could one live in such a filthy environment?’\footnote{Nalini Mitra (Director of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department of the West Bengal Government) interviewed by the research team, School of Women Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, in Seminar, 510, Interviews.}

Asoka Gupta and her husband, Saibal Gupta, recorded testimonies of many East Bengal refugees on an individual initiative for the purpose of submitting these eyewitness accounts to the Enquiry Commission set up by the Government of West Bengal in the aftermath of the 1964 riots. There are a few testimonies of the refugee-women as well. These women were agriculturists, and all of them spoke of the gruesome violence they were either themselves exposed to, or that which they had heard of. Thus, Bhatarani Ghosh of Rajshahi District states that her parents and brother and sister were killed by the Muslims of their village (she names them as well) who later occupied their home. When her husband tried to oppose this forcible occupation of their home, he was threatened of dire consequences. In the face of such mounting pressure, they both left the village and crossed over to India.

Other accounts by these refugee men and women and mention the following factors which compelled their migration to India: abduction of women, ‘pollution’ of temples, destruction of idols of worship, washing beef in their wells, throwing the carcasses of pig in the courtyard etc.\footnote{Asoka Gupta Archives, School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.}

These accounts show how insecure the Hindus felt in East Pakistan, and yet, their real fears were dismissed as a mere psychological construction. As pointed out by Nehru,

> Honourable Members have said that people in East Bengal have not been led to come away because of newspaper articles or by public speeches, that there are other causes. Of course there are other causes. Who says any newspaper speech or an article can make a million people come away? … but when there is this huge upset in people’s minds and people are frightened and are full of fear, then every little thing counts… we are dealing with not only an economic upset or social upset but a psychological problem of the greatest magnitude.\footnote{Reply to the debate in Parliament on the situation in Bengal, 9^{th} August 1950. SWJN, Vol. 15 part I, p. 279.}

It is my argument that when the State recognises violence, it also recognises the victims of such violence as its direct responsibility. It then extends far-reaching help to these
victims. The State recognised mass abductions, sexual violation and forcible conversion as ‘real violence’. Only those women who were exposed to such violence became the immediate responsibility of the State. They would be the first beneficiaries of State ‘benevolence’. Thus, women coming from East Pakistan would have to face more hardships for they were not always seen as victims of such ghastly violence.

**Rehabilitation of Refugee Women**

Asha Hans has rightly commented that the ‘woman-child dyad has more specific needs than the general group of refugees.’ She argues that the government should be extremely mindful of their specific needs. Such concerns are perhaps best reflected in Rameshwari Nehru’s analysis of the situation in the following words—

… these women and children were the victims of partition and its subsequent upheaval, it is, in the opinion of all right thinking people, obligatory on the part of the Government to provide for their maintenance and care. In its declaration of policy, the Government has acknowledged this responsibility, and the Prime Minister also has given repeated assurances to the people, that unattached destitute women and children would be fully looked after by the State.

In fact she felt that such women should be dealt with as one would deal with victims of war, hence she suggests that they should be categorised as ‘war-widows’ and ‘war-orphans’. In order to critically analyse the response of the State to the issue of refugee-women I will look at the following two aspects of the rehabilitation programme:

- Facilitating the entry of refugee women in India.
- State sponsored programme of rehabilitation of refugee women.

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10 Note that any serious attempt at rehabilitation for the refugees from the east began only post 1950. This year was when the Khulna riots of 1950 had led to large-scale migration across the eastern borders. Till then, only adhoc measures were adopted by the Government of West Bengal, with very little contribution from the Government of India, if at all. Women coming from riot-hit Punjab (and rest of West Pakistan) as also the riot victims from East Pakistan were referred to as ‘war widows’ by Rameshwari Nehru. Rameshwari Nehru Papers, S. No 1. NMML.


13 Ibid.
STATE AID TO WOMEN COMING FROM WEST PAKISTAN

Facilitating the Entry of Women into the State

This section discusses the programme of recovery and restoration of abducted women as initiated by both the governments in India and Pakistan. Chapter I of this dissertation has described in detail the procedure involved. The following section elaborates upon the debates around it.

The views discussed here are of the two important women involved in the implementation of this programme, both of whom were strictly opposed to each other—Mridula Sarabhai and Rameshwari Nehru. Whereas, the former supported the restoration programme and in fact worked assiduously towards it, the latter was much opposed to it, and in fact, instrumental in finally bringing it to an end. Thus, I present this women’s question from the point of view of the women themselves. The main difference in the views of Sarabhai and Nehru was that whereas the former denied any agency to the women, the latter was in favour of taking into account the opinion of the women.

Regarding the arbitrary nature of the programme, Sarabhai noted that no doubt this procedure involved ‘a certain amount of coercion, wrongly described as force, disregard of human rights, detention etc’ but she asked, ‘is it really a violation of the fundamental status and rights of the free citizen, or is it rather like a surgical case, where the surgeon has to inflict additional suffering on the patient in order to get a permanent cure, and perhaps even to gamble with the patient’s life.’ The metaphor ‘surgical cure’, like the phrase ‘surgical accuracy’ used by the powers that partitioned India, was rather inappropriate in its description of the recovery and restoration programme. The kind of problems that it brought about were just too many—unwilling women, problem of children born to such women, reluctance in accepting these women by their family, mistaken identities, exploitation of women en route to the transit camps or in the camps itself, and finally, the use of force and coercion.

\[14\] F. No. 1—G(R) 49 Vol. 1, 1949, M/o States G (R) Branch, Article by Mridula Sarabhai, ‘Abducted Women: Typical Problem Cases’. (NAI)

\[15\] Joya Chatterji remarks upon the incorrect use of such phrases like ‘clinical precision’ and ‘surgical accuracy’ used often to describe the process of creating the borders in the Eastern and Western fronts. ‘The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe’s Line and Bengal’s Border Landscape 1947-52’ Modern Asian Studies, January 1999.
Sarabhai treated resistance to restoration as momentary, and one that would pass away the moment they met their family members on the other side of the border. And even though she realised that the women had a genuine fear of not being accepted in their families, she felt that this issue should be resolved by forcing the families to accept them. The fact that women might have reconciled to the new situation was unthinkable for Sarabhai. As noted by her, ‘In treating such cases the usual code of human rights cannot be applied, nor can time factor be considered. The wish of the women concerned should not be given undue weight. Their statements are almost false, or at least misleading and valueless’.

Commenting upon those cases where the women seemed to have been well-settled in their new homes, she writes, ‘There are instances—extremely rare indeed—of women finding themselves in a good new home. To them I would appeal in the interests of the other unfortunate ones to get out of their present environment, to be brave enough to go back to their former relatives and make the necessary readjustments…’ Thus, clearly denying any agency of free-will to the women. Certainly, her strong will and sense of determination towards this cause enabled many a woman to come out of a really traumatic experience and free them from the abductor homes where they were not happy; yet, for those women who had resigned to their fate and also those who were probably happy in their homes, this forcible evacuation was unwelcome and meant in actual fact double-displacement.

What Sarabhai was doing was out of a sense of undoing the wrongs of partition which was a noble intention. However, the coercive means used went too far, and denying the women a use of their individual will defeated whatever noble intentions Sarabhai may have had. With the benefit of hindsight, it is observed that the programme became a means of simply claiming the women of one community as ours and the other as theirs, and who must be returned if we wanted to ‘cleanse’ our nation and ourselves of

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17 Anees Kidwai notes this as one factor in resistance to recovery. There were some women, who coming from poor backgrounds, often having nothing to eat or wear, were now living with ‘kind’ men who gave them good clothes to wear and food to eat, and they also went to see movies together! ‘How could they leave such good men and once again go back to a life of poverty and deprivation… therefore, they wanted to forget the dreadful past and dangerous future and simply live happily in the present.’ Kidwai, Azadi Ki Chaon Mein, p. 130.
the moral wrongs done during the partition. Strangely then independence did not bring with it the free will of the women. It was still a handful of men and women who would take decisions as to where they belonged!

Rameshwari Nehru begged to differ. In her appraisal of the recovery and restoration programme, she thought that the individual will of the women ought to be respected. She reviewed the work of recovery and restoration of women from three angles—human, women and political. From the human perspective, she considered it ‘inadvisable to continue the work of recovery any longer’\(^\text{18}\). Two years had passed, and by now, women would have settled in their homes, some had children and would not like to leave them behind etc. She also noted that violent resistance to the recovery programme was sufficient evidence of this unwillingness to go back. According to her, any report which suggested that these women were happy once they reached their original families should not be believed, since Pakistan did not have a search service bureau like India which implied that it was rather doubtful whether the women actually reached their original homes. Thus, she commented that ‘By sending them away, we have brought about grief and the dislocation of their accepted family life, without in the least promoting human happiness.’\(^\text{19}\)

From the ‘women’s angle’, she objected to the policy on three accounts:

1. women workers played no part in the disposal of the women who have been recovered, this work is entirely in the hands of the Superintendent of Police (India and Pakistan)

2. some women are exploited for commercial purposes and passed from hand to hand, or are lodged in place of vice, and those who are in actual need of being rescued are seldom traced or recovered.

3. the woman’s will is not taken into consideration at all. \textit{She is once again reduced to chattel status without having the right to decide her own future or mould her own life}.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\)Ibid.

\(^{20}\)Ibid.
She found this programme unsuccessful when viewed from the political angle as well since it left the Hindus and Sikhs dissatisfied with the results—far more Muslim women had been recovered than Hindu or Sikh women. She writes, ‘I personally would not have taken any notice of the disparity between the key figures of the two Dominions if I were confident that we were doing something that was right and just. But under the present circumstances, I feel that we cannot have even that consideration.’

Her main critique was that the work in Pakistan was really unsatisfactory—there was no similar ordinance in Pakistan, social workers were not appointed, district camps were not started, transport was not available, and finally, if women were converted to Islam then they were not recovered, rather returned to the abductors. Therefore, she wished that by July 1950 this programme should be stopped altogether. But the Act continued till 1954 when it was finally abrogated.

However, for our purpose, it is important to note that the State claimed its women using this Act. Such women became the unquestioned citizens of our country, whether they were a willing party to it or not. More importantly, they were the deserving candidates for State aid in the rehabilitation programme.

Providing Rehabilitation

State aid to women in the western region was provided in numerous ways—training in crafts, rehabilitation loans to start a business once training is completed, compensation money for loss of property in West Pakistan, and finally, the setting up of Homes for the ‘unattached women’ and those families which were headed by these women. Whereas, the first two options were applicable to all refugee women, the third was restricted only to the refugee women coming from West Pakistan. It is the fourth option which I will discuss in detail in this chapter to note the differences in State aid to women coming from West and East Pakistan.

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21 Ibid.
22 Note: Women were entitled to compensation money only in the absence of a male head of the family or any other close male relative. There was no question of compensation money for the women in the eastern states, since the policy of compensation was not followed here at all.
23 Women belonging to refugee families headed by males, and also the ‘unattached’ women in both the western and eastern region.
24 I have chosen this option as a point of comparison since the Homes catered to a specific category of refugee women—the ‘unattached women’—who, according to the guidelines, would be the direct
A ‘Home’ For the ‘Unattached Women’

The following section looks at the one important institution set up by the State for the exclusive purpose of the rehabilitation of the unattached women or families which were headed by the women—the Women’s Homes.

Defining ‘Permanent Liability’:

The State realised that among the refugees there were those who could not be expected to rebuild their lives without the continued support of the government, and thus, these people would remain—‘permanent liability’—for the government. The following people were to be considered as such:

1. **The Old:** men over the age of 65 and women over the age of 65, having no able-bodied male son or relative to look after them, were classified as such.
2. **The Infirm:** men and women who suffer from a permanent disability and hence, cannot perform any work for self-support, also who do not have an able-bodied male son or relative.
3. **Unattached Women:** those women who have no adult able-bodied male son, father or father-in-law or any other relative to support them.
4. **Orphans:** unattached boys upto 16 years of age and girls until they got married or were gainfully employed, and whose parents are dead and they have no adult relative to look after them.
5. **Dependents:** of persons in category 1 and 2 entitled to gratuitous relief will include wives, unmarried daughters and sons upto 16 years of age; and dependents of category 3 will include unmarried daughters and sons upto age 16 only. Further, if boy studying in class 9 or 10, he will be allowed to continue upto matriculation, but if he fails, his dole will be continued only if he joins a vocational training institute, and that, too, till the age of 18 only. Adopted children will not be considered as dependents.
6. **TB Patients:** their families would be entitled to the allowances till the patient is discharged from the sanatorium.

responsibility of the State, whether coming from East or West Pakistan. Hence, there is a common ground. At the same time, the differences when pointed out would show how the State was handling the same issue in different ways.
7. **Displaced women who were deserted by their husbands:** they, too, were eligible for the allowances as ‘hard cases’ which was solely at the discretion of the State government. A noteworthy point in this regard is that ‘In order to guard against *collusion between husband and wife to derive undue advantage, of this provision*, even though only for a temporary period, it is considered necessary that such deserted women should be admitted to Homes/Infirmaries in a State other than where they were residing before their desertion.’

8. **Hard Cases:** included those which were not covered in the above categories but which deserved consideration nonetheless. This was totally at the discretion of the State government and all such cases would have to be recorded by the head of the rehabilitation department of the State government.

Hence, these were the categories which could seek government aid on a ‘permanent’ basis. There were a few sub-clauses which reduced the scope of aid to these displaced persons. Therefore, a person once discharged from the Home/Infirmary on payment of rehabilitation loan/grant would not be easily re-admitted, unless she could prove that she is still in a state of destitution. Also, a person who received Rs 500 or more as compensation money, too, would not be admitted to such Homes/Infirmaries, unless he/she willingly gave up his/her claim to that amount prior to seeking admission to the Home/Infirmary.

Looking at the above qualifications added to the definition of this category of displaced persons, certain observations can be made. The overarching concern clearly was to economise, i.e. by restricting the categories and adding such qualifications to it, the government surely did not want a vast number of people to claim these benefits. But on the positive side, the government had a noble intention of wrapping up the rehabilitation work by 31st March 1956 which meant that the programme had a beginning.

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26 Under the scheme of compensation for material losses suffered on account of partition and displacement—*The Compensation and Rehabilitation Act (1954)*. As discussed in Chapter II and III it was exclusively for DP’s from West Pakistan.
and an end, and was not supposed to be an endless saga as it turned out to be in the East.\textsuperscript{27}

An annual review of these Homes was conducted by a Committee which was set up exclusively for the purpose of ‘weeding out’ the ‘ineligible’ inmates. Such ‘ineligible inmates’ would, however, be discharged from the Homes/Infirmaries only after the payment of a ‘compassionate grant equivalent to three months dole admissible to the family’, and also, as far as possible, ‘alternative accommodation’ would be provided to them alongwith ‘rehabilitation assistance as is admissible to displaced persons in general’.\textsuperscript{28}

From the above analysis it can be concluded that while deciding on rehabilitation policies, the State was governed by the following two considerations:

- The economic point of view\textsuperscript{29}, which meant considering a single unit family as the criteria for the bare minimum assistance it would provide.\textsuperscript{30}
- A note of urgency, so that the refugees do not get used to free doles and allowances, and are instead involved in some work or the other so that at a later stage they are totally self-reliant.\textsuperscript{31}

Thus, having discussed who constituted the category of ‘permanent liability’ and who did not, I now discuss the functioning of such Homes/Infirmaries in Delhi.

\textsuperscript{27} 7 such homes still exist in West Bengal in a much dilapidated condition.

\textsuperscript{28} Ministry of Rehabilitation, Dated 15\textsuperscript{th} March 1955, ‘Reorganization For Homes/Infirmaries For Destitute Displaced Persons From West Pakistan As A Result Of Recommendations Made By The Home’s Reorganization Committee’, SWS, JU, Kolkata. p. 4

\textsuperscript{29} In fact, early on, even Rameshwari Nehru had pointed out to the inadequate means adopted by the GOI in dealing with this issue of the unattached women and children, inspite of giving top priority to this issue in policy. She notes, ‘in actual practice, however, this policy has not been implemented, on the plea, frequently urged, of financial stringency. This excuse must not stand in the way of the pressing needs of these women and children, whose claim to immediate relief should receive high priority.’ Adding further she notes, ‘[government has to] overcome all obstacles, financial or otherwise, that stand in the way. If we are short of money, we borrow or raise it by fresh taxation.’

Note dated 5\textsuperscript{th} December 1949 by Smt Rameshvari Nehru, Honorary Adviser, Women’s Section, Ministry of Rehabilitation. Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Report I ‘Report of the work Done by the Women’s Section of Ministry of Rehabilitation’. Rameshwari Nehru Papers, NMML, New Delhi.

\textsuperscript{30} Note the scaling down of the distribution of cash doles with an increase in the number of family members on p. 14.

\textsuperscript{31} Nehru’s speech at the Kurukshetra Camp dated 8\textsuperscript{th} April 1948 was completely devoted to the issue of how refugees must not sit ‘idle’ and find some work which will make the refugees more alert and help in the growth of their self-confidence. He maintained that while the government would do its all to help the refugees to find some work and thus provide them the necessary training, it was upto the refugees to make use of such government help in becoming self-reliant: ‘We will train you and send you to various places where you can settle down and work. All this we are doing but we will succeed only when you have the will to work. If you keep sitting here doing nothing, you will get sapped, your troubles will increase and you will have proved you are useless.’ SWJN, vol. 6, p. 96.
Rehabilitating Refugee Women in Delhi

Under the aegis of the Women’s Section in Delhi, two homes for the destitute women and children were opened —Satnarian Home (Subzi Mandi) and the Lahore Sheds (King Edward Road). Apart from these homes, there was the Mehrauli Dharamshala for the aged men and women.\(^{32}\) A home for children was set up at Rambagh.\(^{33}\) We also find a reference to the setting up of a Bal Niketan\(^{34}\) (children’s school in Kingsway Camp, later shifted to the Satnarian Home) and a Gram Sevika Shikhsha Kendra.

After studying in these schools (Rambagh Home and Bal Niketan), boys and girls were encouraged to go for higher studies. But those students who did not do well in the middle school examinations and showed no aptitude for further studies would have to join the Vocational Training Centres.\(^{35}\)

A Vocational Training Centre was set up by the Women’s Section in Curzon Road for training women in useful crafts whereby they could become self-reliant.\(^{36}\) There were a total of 12 such Training-cum-Production Centres in Delhi.\(^{37}\) The women trained in such centres were neither unattached nor entirely destitute, ‘but who nonetheless need to augment their meagre family income to maintain their children’.\(^{38}\) These centres received ample support from the government. An acknowledgement of such government help is observed in the review of the work done by the Women’s Section—‘We are thankful to the Ministry of Home Affairs who appreciated the situation and issued directive to all the

\(^{32}\) Originally meant only for the aged and disabled women, but later on a few old couples were also included. Here they were provided free food, clothing, shelter and medical aid.

\(^{33}\) Children in the age-group of 8-12 were admitted in this school. It was a residential school, and most of the children studying here were those whose mothers were either residing in the Lahore Sheds Home or in some camp, unable to take care of them.

\(^{34}\) A school run on similar pattern and which was later shifted to the Satnarian Home along with the Gram Sevika Kendra, which in turn trained women to work in villages.

\(^{35}\) Eg: Vocational Training Centre at Subzimandi and Harijan Udyogshala at Kingsway Camp.

\(^{36}\) Women were trained in the following crafts—tailoring, spinning, weaving, basket-making, soap-making, vegetable and fruit preservation, dress-making, stenography, typing, clerical and commercial work.

\(^{37}\) These were located at: Humayun Tomb, Hindu Mahasabha Bhawan, Lahore Sheds home, Mehrauli, Shahdara, Lodhi road, Kingsway Camp, Karol Bagh, Subzi Mandi, Central Lane, Connaught Circus and Bela Road.

\(^{38}\) This is reflective of the main point of this chapter—women were not only passive victims of partition, rather in post-partition scenario, they actively participated in the process of rehabilitation, coming out of their homes, and also of their traditional roles—that of the Home-Maker. In this statement I find a subtle recognition granted to this role of the women by the State itself.

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Ministries and Heads of Departments to have their class IV servants liveries stitched through this section."  

The Women’s Section in Delhi, collaborated with the Employment Bureau of the Ministry of Labour, and tried to secure employment for such women. The product of their labour was made to reach the market, once again on government initiative. For this purpose, a Sales Depot, known as the ‘Refugee Handicrafts’ was opened by the Women’s Section in Delhi. Besides, on government initiative, such handicrafts were sent to numerous fairs and exhibitions as well. This detailed discussion on government role in the buying and selling of such handicrafts is to be kept in mind, for in the case of Bengal, it will be seen that in the lack of this close cooperation, how an otherwise well-meant initiative could go wrong.

**Falling Short—Drawbacks of the Women’s Rehabilitation Programme**

As mentioned before, the organising principle of rehabilitation was the family as a unit. It is this family, it seems, which the State wanted to restore. The State defined the family in quite broad terms, allowing for extended families in theory, yet, in actual practice, the policies were so designed that a splitting up of the family became inevitable. Thus, according to the State norms, a family comprised:

- In the case of existing inmates as it is at presented constituted (no splitting up being allowed); and,

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40 Barakhamba Road, CP, Delhi.

41 And also maybe because it reduced the burden on the exchequer when it came to providing economic assistance, for family being the unit counted for rehabilitation, clubbing together as many as possible under one head would economize State expenditure.

42 As per Government directive— ‘those inmates of Homes/Infirmaries who constitute a permanent liability of government may be given option to leave Homes/Infirmaries and live with their relatives, provided their dependents continue to live in the Homes.’ Thus, if their dependents chose to stay out of the Home/Infirmary, they would not be given any assistance. Also, wives of the old and infirm men, too, could stay with their husbands outside the Home/Infirmary and be entitled to the cash doles, yet, in case they wanted their dependents to benefit from such assistance, here also these dependents would have to stay back in the Homes. Therefore, admission to PL Homes and Infirmaries led to a division of families. Though this may not have been the intention of the State.

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In the case of new entrants—husband, wife, mother, father, minor children, and any other relative who messes with the other member of the family.\textsuperscript{43}

But the State was certainly unmindful of the impact of its directives. The emphasis added in the first point above is to bring to note the fact that certainly such splitting of families was taking place. Looking at the table one can guess the reason behind such an act: the dole amount was inversely proportional to the number of members in the family. With the upper limit fixed at Rs 70 per month per family, certainly this princely sum was not enough for these destitute families. Splitting up the family could well be an option for them.

**Scale of Dole—**

- One member family……………….. Rs 16 per month
- Two member family……………… Rs 15 per month
- Three member family…………….. Rs 14 per month
- Four member family……………… Rs 13 per month
- Five member family……………… Rs 12 per month
- Six member family………………… Rs 11 per month

Taking up the category of the ‘deserted wives’, note the remarks of the State —‘In order to guard against *collusion between husband and wife to derive undue advantage, of this provision*, even though only for a temporary period, it is considered necessary that such deserted women should be admitted to Homes/Infirmaries in a State other than where they were residing before their desertion.’\textsuperscript{44} It is difficult to imagine a scenario where the husband would abandon his wife, merely to ‘derive undue advantage of this provision, even though only for a temporary period’. But the fact that there is a special mention of this category, and of the assumption that such advantages could be taken of, is illustrative of the fact that perhaps such incidents did happen, if only rarely.

Yet, another place where the State fell short in its objective of successfully rehabilitating such refugees can be observed in the grievances of these women as recorded in some of the interviews—‘Do tell us how are we to settle up by learning

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\textsuperscript{43} Ministry of Rehabilitation, Dated 15\textsuperscript{th} March 1955, ‘Reorganization For Homes/Infirmaries For Destitute Displaced Persons From West Pakistan As A Result Of Recommendations Made By The Home’s Reorganization Committee’, SWS, JU, Kolkata, p. 5

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. p. 3 (emphasis added)
Weaving or Sports Goods making? Where are we to get so much equipment from so as to start this trade? Is it not wastage of Government money and woman power to teach us a craft which we cannot take up in future?45

Durga Rani, the superintendent of the Karnal Mahila Ashram, points out the numerous problems that plagued the Ashram—the most important was the safety of the women there.46 She notes, ‘Slowly the women settled but there are those who could never accept what happened, either financially or emotionally… Mothers of daughters never quite settled down.47 We tried to look after them as well as we could. I was quite strict, I wouldn’t let them go out alone. We used to say, go out in groups of seven or eight. We tried to keep them safe…’48

Apart from the shortcomings as mentioned above, later day surveys also show how these policies could not reinstate the economic status of the refugees to their pre-partition times in most of the cases.49

So where the State fell short, the refugees made up for the loss. The next section, therefore, deals with the self-initiative of the refugee women themselves in ‘coming out of partition’50

From Victims to Survivors

For long assigned to a life of seclusion, partition in one single stroke brought many women into active public life. Here I refer to not only those women who were housed in the PL Homes, but also to those who were involved officially and unofficially in the process of recovery and restoration of women and in the management of these camps and homes. Thus, for e.g. Begum Anis Kidwai writes in her memoir how she, who so long

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46 She cites instances when the watchman or other staff members eloped with the women housed here, or how they were taunted by the men in the marketplace. Often men would forcibly enter the Ashram.
47 In Ritu Menon’s Borders and Boundaries, one of the inmates of the Karnal Mahila Ashram, Gyan Devi, makes a telling comment that even after 50 years of independence seven of the original inmates remained here: ‘Putran waliyani dhar gaiyan, thiyan waliyani mar gaiyan.’ (Those with sons have been able to settle down, those with daughters are as good as dead). Menon and Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries, p. 134.
48 Menon and Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries, interview with Durga Rani, p. 146.
49 VKRV Rao’s study of the four townships.
50 Phrase borrowed from the title of Gargi Chakravarty’s book, Coming out of Partition, New Delhi: Bluehay Books (2007), which deals with the issue of refugee women and their survival stories in Bengal. But likewise, this ‘coming out’ can be observed in the case of refugee women from West Pakistan.
had rarely ventured out of the inner quarters of her home in Lucknow, was now out in the streets of Delhi, working sincerely for the cause of recovery and restoration of Muslim women and also in the relief camps in Purana Qila and Humayun Tomb. Similarly, many other such women had ‘come out’ to help in the cause of relief and rehabilitation of refugees in general and women in particular: Kamla Behn Patel, Premvati Thapar, Krishna Thapar, Durga Rani to name a few.

In many families, where the male head had been killed in the partition riots, the women were thrust upon with the responsibility of fending for the family. This was a new responsibility which the middle-class and elite women had no experience of. Rameshwari Nehru remarked upon this very dilemma that the government would face in rehabilitating the ‘urban’ woman, who, according to Nehru, ‘besides looking after their homes have done little other work, and except for a smattering of tailoring, embroidery or some other handicrafts they have no previous experience for earning their livelihood.’

As pointed out by her, it was easier to rehabilitate the ‘rural’ women, since ‘they seldom came unattached and settled down with their husbands/menfolk wherever land is allotted or where other facilities are provided to them.’ In the rural sector, the contribution of women in running the household, though equal to that of the men and also seldom recognised, yet had always been a significant one, and so there was no significant change in their position even in the post-partition period: she had even earlier toiled in the fields, and she would continue to do so, given the opportunity. Thus, according to Rameshwari Nehru, it was the middle class women who were the problem case because these women could not be disposed off simply as additional hands in the field or as labourers in general. They had to be suitably rehabilitated without as far as possible disturbing their social status. This aspect remained a crucial drawback in the rehabilitation process—the social inequalities persisted. Thus, as stated by Yasmin Khan, ‘Partition did not completely shatter the social pecking order.’

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51 Serial No 12, Article dated 1st September 1950 on rehabilitation of displaced women by Rameshwari Nehru, Rameshwari Nehru Papers, NMML, New Delhi.
52 Ibid.
53 The rural land settlement programme too, as shown in chapter II, was not unmindful of the need to preserve the economic disparities between big, small and medium landowners.
54 Khan, The Great Divide, p. 173
account of such class consciousness is noted in Durga Rani’s recollection of the women in Karnal Mahila Ashram, Haryana, ‘Lower class women went out to work, they worked as domestic servants, but those from a well-off background didn’t. They wouldn’t leave the Ashram, they sewed or embroidered and stayed inside its four walls. Women from poor homes worked as farm labour, went to the wholesale market, picked potatoes, cleaned cotton.’

The ‘urban’ women then had to rely on the training provided by the State in the Vocational Training Centres to find suitable employment. But many showed individual initiative as well. To cite an example from one of the interviews taken by Anjali Bharadwaj, the individual initiative of the refugee women in Delhi can be observed. A big general store in Rajinder Nagar market place is called Bibiji Ka General Store. Bibi Lajwanti set up this store initially in a small room of the home she was living in with her brothers and their family. Her father was paralysed and husband had been killed in the riots. She did not want to be a burden upon her brothers and so started selling knickknacks from this small room. Gradually the business took off and she shifted to a bigger home. Likewise, the Store also expanded, and as it stands today is one of the biggest in this area, now run by her sons. There are other instances also where it is seen that women having been trained in the crafts, set up their own small business enterprises which prospered.

Thus, for women there were only a few limited avenues to explore in terms of employment, yet they made the most of it and contributed immensely to the running of the household economy.

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55 Interview with Durga Rani, Superintendent Karnal Mahila Ashram, Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*, p. 146.
THE EASTERN EXPERIENCE

Facilitating their Entry into West Bengal

The programme of recovery and restoration of abducted women in the East was not as elaborately planned or discussed as it was in the West. This was so because it was believed that women in the east were not really subjected to such ‘direct’ violence.\(^{57}\)

Such a projection can be read in two ways. Either the toning down of these events was in following the general agenda of the State to undermine the violence in the East so as to discourage migration, or it reflected the general apathy of the State towards the plight of the minorities in the east, which in turn was governed by the economics of rehabilitation.\(^{58}\)

That the State surely wanted to tone down the genuine experience of violence in the east is further noted in a one-of-its-kind means adopted by the State to address this issue— the setting up of the Dacca Transit Home.

The Dacca Transit Home

The Delhi Pact was signed by the two Governments to restore confidence among the minorities on both sides. One of the consequences of this pact was the setting up of the Search Service Bureau in Calcutta, and alongwith it was set up a Search Service Section/Liaison Office attached to the Deputy High Commission in Dacca. It is in this office that the Dacca Transit Home was housed. It was started by Mridula Sarabhai, with the exclusive function of sheltering the unattached and other women of the minority community. There was one Search Liaison Office Assistant whose primary duty was to trace out the abducted Hindu girls as soon as he/she received information on such girls from the Search Service Bureau in Calcutta. Upon recovering such women, the officer would have to arrange to send them to their respective families. In the event that it was not possible to do so, the women were admitted to the Home. The Home was set up with the exclusive purpose of providing a secure home for the women who felt threatened by

\(^{57}\) This is a point which emerges from WBLA debates and also newspaper reports where any such issue is at first sought to be denied then seen as voluntary or in worst cases rejected altogether as incorrect reporting.

\(^{58}\) ‘No exact information is available about the number of women abducted in East Bengal or the number of women converted to Islam.’ Statement made in the ‘Note on the indo-Pakistan Agreement of the 8th April 1950’. Full text cited in Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhashri Ghosh (eds) The Trauma and Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India, vol. II, Kolkata: Stree (2009), p. 255.
the members of the other community. These women would be safely evacuated to West Bengal if their fears proved to be genuine, else they were kept here till the time they felt it was safe to return to their homes and families.

Two purposes were solved by the setting up of this Home: the concern for the security of ‘our’ women was clearly evident, but, it was also clear that the rhetoric of ‘peaceful conditions not amounting to any strong reason for migration’ had to be maintained.

There is no reference of any such Home founded for the women coming from West Pakistan.\textsuperscript{59} In fact, our entire discussion on the recovery and restoration programme in the West shows that the decision to migrate or not rested with the State, not with the women themselves. Further, by contrast, abducted women were not to be kept in the same state for too long, since it was believed that the abductor family would try to influence either the officials in getting her back, or the mere presence of the woman in the same state could influence her decision in favour of staying back. Hence, almost as soon as they were recovered, these women were quickly shifted to the Transit camp, and thereafter, restored to their families.

As observed in the records, very few women sought shelter here, and as a consequence there were repeated orders by the Government of India to shut down the home. This suggestion was, however, rejected by the Deputy High Commissioner on the grounds that the closure of this Home would have ‘a demoralizing effect not only in the minority community in East Pakistan but may also provoke bitter criticism from the public in India.’\textsuperscript{60} Yet again we observe a ‘psychological’ means to solve what the State believed was a ‘psychological’ problem!

A close observation of the debate over the closure of this Home highlights the differences between the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal. The central government was quite keen on closing down this Home, seeing the poor rate of occupancy in this Home, and also since it believed that the Search Service Bureau in Calcutta and the Search Service Liaison office in Dacca was not really performing any

\textsuperscript{59} In fact, the Pakistan government opposed the setting up of such a home in East Pakistan because there was no similar home for the Muslim women in West Bengal.

\textsuperscript{60} File note dated 28/1/1960 in F No. I(4)/60-BL, ‘Transit Home for Abducted Women in Dacca, Continuance of.’ MEA, NAI.
‘useful work’. But the Government of West Bengal kept insisting on the token importance of the Home. The DHC, Dacca, on his part, too, kept on insisting upon the relevance of this Home:

… the Home maintained by this Mission alongwith the SLO continues to receive and shelter girls belonging to the minority community who fall victims in the hands of the undesirable elements of the majority community in East Pakistan do not warrant the closure of the Home as crimes against women are unlikely to drop in the near future. [though the Home] receives only a fraction of the Hindu women who suffer indignities and dishonour in East Pakistan; but all the same, the fact that a Home is maintained by this Mission and that some girls find refuge and security there, establishes a certain amount of confidence in the Hindu population of this province. The closure of the Home, on the other hand, will give them a rude shock.

While pressing for the need to continue with this Home, two important reasons were put forward: first, that closure would have a negative impact upon the minority community in East Pakistan and also the majority community in West Bengal, and secondly, from the economic point of view, the Home was not really a drain on the country’s coffers. Both these points are reflective of the State’s concerns regarding the rehabilitation of refugees in general. The debate over the winding up of this Home also highlights the fact that the situation in East was not clearly understood at the Centre on account of its distance from it.

Ultimately, the Home did get an extension of one year till March 1961. I believe, it continued to maintain such confidence in East Pakistan till 1964, whereafter, no amount of such ‘psychological’ means could prevent the large scale migration of the minorities, in the wake of the violent repercussions felt in East Pakistan as a result of the Hazrat Bal mosque incident in India.

61 In fact upon Sardar Swaran Singh’s insistence the staff of the Office had been reduced—the post of one filed-worker, lady worker, UD assistant, typist and peon had already been abolished. Singh (Minister of Work, Health and Supply) was recommending the abolition of the post of Liaison Officer as well, and altogether winding up the Search Service Bureau in Calcutta.

62 Dr B C Roy was in much favour of this Home.

63 Letter from First Secy, DHC, Dacca to Under Secy, Ministry of Rehabilitation Directorate, Government of India, Kolkata dated 22nd Jan 1960, F No. I (4)/60-BL, ‘Transit Home for Abducted Women in Dacca, Continuance of.’ MEA, NAI.

64 In fact, the Directorate of the Rehabilitation department was set up in West Bengal with the intention of speeding up the time lost in correspondence between the Centre and the State. However, in Dr B C Roy’s correspondences, and even in the legislative assembly debates, I observed the constant reference to time lost in getting major policy decisions cleared from the Centre, specifically those which involved vast financial expenditure.
I now look at yet another method which was employed by the State to help the destitute women coming from East Pakistan. The Migration Certificate (MC), post 1950, had become the only legal means to enter Indian Territory from East Pakistan, and these MC’s, as we shall see, were really difficult to obtain. But as pointed out earlier, the State had a specific responsibility towards the women, hence, it was much easier for a certain category of women to obtain these MC’s.

**Migration Certificates**

Migration, in general, was discouraged by both the governments for the eastern borders. This was so because, as mentioned before, the government did not notice any ‘real threat’ to the minorities in East Bengal. Therefore curbs and restrictions on migration were imposed at regular intervals—whether it was passports, migration certificates, stopping of doles, declaring refugees as illegal migrants etc. Refugee women, however, were treated differently.

It was the refugee women who comprised the few ‘priority cases’ where the MC’s had to be granted on an immediate basis. As per the directives issued by the Ministry of External Affairs to the High Commissioner for India in Karachi and passed on to the Deputy High Commissioner for India in Dacca, the first priority was to be given to the following persons:

1. orphans with no guardians in East Pakistan
2. *unattached women and widows with no livelihood in East Pakistan*
3. *wives joining husbands in India*
4. families living in areas considered unsafe, for example, in isolated pockets or where there is *apprehension about abduction of girls or their elopement under influence.*
5. grown up girls going to India for marriage. (The migration certificate should in such a case be *issued only to the girl concerned. Her family should not be given this priority only on the ground that a girl of the family is being married in India.*)  

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65 Letter to High Commissioner of India from MEA, dated 11<sup>th</sup> July 1956. F. No. 29/2/56-PSP, MEA, 1956, Proposal to print form of MC on security paper and to revise the form of application for MC, (NAI, New Delhi). Emphasis added.
Of these categories, it is clear that the State had to take up the responsibility of categories 1 and 2 only, which would not have been a very daunting task after all. The orphan children and unattached women could be put up in the Homes meant for them where they would be trained in basic crafts which could help them in self-employment at a later stage. Category 4 was the responsibility of the State, however, upon their arrival in India they would be treated like the ordinary refugee families. Similar adhoc measures, as provided to the ordinary refugee from East Pakistan, would be provided to them. Categories 3 and 5 would have to fend for themselves, and were, thus, not the direct responsibility of the State. This was clearly mentioned in the directive as well—‘During interrogation it should be made clear to the applicants falling under categories 3 and 5 of first priority… that they would not be entitled to any relief or rehabilitation benefits in India.’

The next section looks at the role of the State in rehabilitating refugee women coming from East Pakistan.

**State-sponsored Rehabilitation Programme**

**The Women’s Home in the East**

The Government of India awoke to the issue of rehabilitation of refugees coming from East Pakistan in the post-1950 period. Thereafter, we observe a gradual withdrawal of the aid provided by the union government, and an increase in the role of the state government. However, the Permanent Liability camps/homes were to remain the responsibility of the Central government as a matter of policy. In fact, the state government was quite cautious in its approach towards the issue of Homes/Infirmaries, lest any wrong move brings the whole responsibility of maintaining these refugees upon it. Hence, in one of the meetings of the Central Advisory Committee for Homes and

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66 Ibid.

67 The influx of refugees from East Pakistan in the wake of the Khulna riots reached its peak at this time. Immediately the Delhi Pact was signed, but those who had come to the Indian side had to be taken care of and hence the first realization of the refugee problem in the east by the government of India at this time.

68 Transferring the responsibility to the state governments gradually, and the shift from grants to loans are pointers towards such an observation. As noted in the most recent report on the conditions of these PL Camps and Homes—‘The Government of India appeared to be in a hurry in cutting down the expenditure and to get rid of the problem somehow or the other. Ultimately they washed off their hands in this regard in 1974 when they unilaterally transferred the entire burden of the Homes to the State government.’ [Problems of Refugee Camps and Homes in West Bengal (The Screening Committee Report), Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, G/o West Bengal, 1989, p. 7]
Infirmaries in the eastern region, a suggestion was made to do away with the term used to describe such Homes and such refugees as ‘Permanent Liability’, and instead use the phrase ‘Camps for unattached displaced women or/and old and infirm displaced persons’. But this was rejected on the grounds that ‘it will not be possible for the state government to claim reimbursement of expenditure incurred on their maintenance without specific sanction from the Government of India. According to the existing arrangement, all expenditure incurred on camps is reimbursable to the State government under a general sanction issued in November 1950.’

Thus, these refugees were directly under the supervision of the Government of India.

To compare the functioning of these institutes in the East and West, I will look at the following features:

- eligibility criteria,
- assistance provided and administration, and
- success of the scheme

Criteria for Eligibility:

In terms of defining the criteria for eligibility for admission to these institutes, there is not much difference observed. Nonetheless, there were a few essential differences. At certain points, along the eastern border, interception centres were set up.

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69 Agenda of meeting of the Central Advisory Committee for Homes and infirmaries in the eastern region to be held on 27th June 1956. Asoka Gupta Papers, SWS, JU, Kolkata

70 Earlier the Homes and Infirmary were directly under the Ministry of Rehabilitation till 1958. But when talks of winding up the Ministry started doing the rounds, it was decided to shift the responsibility of these Homes and Infirmary to the Ministry of Home Affairs (1958 onwards), and later to the Ministry of Education (1960). Finally, it was brought under the Department of Social Welfare from 1964 onwards.

71 After all, the PL Homes were run directly by the government of India, hence, would have to follow the regulations stipulated in the 1955 Memorandum, discussed in detail in the homes for women coming from West Pakistan section above.

72 The term interception itself is representative of the unwelcoming attitude of the Government of India vis-à-vis the refugees from the east. A common term in the present day western border of our country, rightly so to intercept infiltration from the other side, but in use, as can be seen from this document and also in the IB records of West Bengal, since a long time (post 1950’s). What seemed illegal migration to the State, was simply the movement of the minorities towards a safer home. Yet, such terms were used, and offices were set up to check what the State believed was illegal migration. And even if not considered illegal, certainly not welcome and one that should be prevented as far as possible. Hence, the setting up of ‘interception posts’, issuance of ‘border slips’, a ‘screening’ of the people coming in, and very strict controls enforced on the influx by government, were means adopted which, in hindsight, now seem to be just as strict as the
refugees were questioned upon their arrival and ‘on being satisfied about their claim
given interception slips to qualify them as refugees. To such refugees as would depend
entirely upon the government for food and shelter, a special class of interception slip is
issued to them to entitle them to camps… Unattached women and their children, and
aged and infirm persons with their dependents are separated and sent to the Permanent
Liability camps.’

The next set of differences was in the process of ‘screening out’ or ‘weeding out’ the
ineligible inmates/families. As pointed out by the Committee of Review of the
Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, ‘in the case of absentee doles the time limit for
striking off the names from the registars [registers] of Homes in West Bengal is one
month, whereas in the western region it is three consecutive months. It is a matter of
regret that the Government should have allowed such a discrimination between the
Homes in the Eastern and Western regions.’ Further, if the income of the inmates
exceeded the ceiling of Rs 60 per month, their doles would be disallowed. There was no
such limit in the Western region in the initial period of its setting up, and in fact the
women were encouraged to work and earn more for becoming self-reliant. Later, as noted
by the Committee, the ceiling of family income for striking off the names or stopping
cash doles of these inmates was fixed at Rs 125 per month, way above that for their
counterparts in West Bengal. Such discrimination is reflective of the attitude of the
State, which was to dispose off this burden as soon as possible, and by any and every
means.

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73 Report of the Committee appointed by the West Bengal government to enquire into the Technical and Vocational training of Displaced Persons from East Pakistan now residing in West Bengal, Government of West Bengal, 1955, p. 3
75 Ibid. p. 21
Assistance Provided:

An undated report published by the Women’s Section of West Bengal describes in detail how the issue of the unattatched women and their families was being handled by this section. The women were to be rehabilitated in either of the following ways:

- Rehabilitation through land and loan to families declared rehabilitable.
- *Rehabilitation by restoring a large number of families to the husbands or relatives remained untraced for so long*
- Rehabilitation through small trade and loan
- Rehabilitation through employment by imparting vocational, professional and practical training.
- *Rehabilitation of young girls through marriage.*

The report states that by applying the above mentioned policies for the purpose of rehabilitating such women and families, they have been able to reduce the number of dependent families from the original number of 10364 ‘unattached families’ at the last count taken on 30th June 1957, whereafter any fresh admission to refugee camps was stopped, to 4983 families only.\(^76\)

Women were first grouped according to their age and ability to work, and only then were they granted rehabilitation assistance. Regarding the problems faced in the Women’s Homes, it is noted that since these Homes were set up in haste in the available military barracks, at present they were in a dilapidated condition, and, required urgent repair and reconstruction. Also, the water and electric supply in the Homes was erratic and a cause of complaint among the inmates. But more problematic was the arbitrary ‘screening of the inmates’, which represented the State’s attitude towards the refugees coming from East Pakistan as simply that of disposing off the numbers with scant regard to their actual rehabilitation. For example when a boy in the family attained the age of 18, under the existing policy, ‘the family is screened out of rehabilitation irrespective of his

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\(^76\) Between 1958 to 1964, as mentioned before, influx across the eastern border was considered as illegal. The argument given by the State was that peaceful condition existed in East Pakistan and any influx was now only in greed for the free doles. Hence refugees who came in this period have been termed as illegal migrants and were not entitled to any government assistance. Another reason for stopping fresh admissions could be that, this was roughly the same period when admission to the Homes/Infirmaries was stopped in the west as well. Hence need for some correlation, though not in scales of assistance though, as will be seen above!
ability to earn and to maintain a family often consisting of minor brothers and grown up sisters.\textsuperscript{77}

All such methods of ‘weeding out’ the ineligibles are a pointer towards the fact that the government wanted to dispose of this problem quickly. Though, we find a similar intention in the west as well, yet, significant differences remain: the concern over screening out the ineligibles from the Homes in the West is first noted in 1955, and the weeding out process was not to be carried out without ensuring that the person/family was in a position to sustain a normal livelihood.\textsuperscript{78}

The Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal\textsuperscript{79} compared the functioning of such Homes in the Western and Eastern regions to bring out the pathetic state of affairs of these Homes in the latter region.\textsuperscript{80} The discriminatory scales of assistance provided to the homes in the east were highlighted using statistical data in this report. Whether it was in terms of the per head maintenance grant\textsuperscript{81} or in fixing the criteria for declaring an inmate as ineligible for admission to the Home different standards were followed:

\begin{quote}
\textit{[we] are strongly of the opinion that such differential treatment in respect of maintenance grant to the refugees in Homes and Infirmaries in West Bengal tantamount to discrimination by the Centre. [we] note with concern that there is a lack of coordination between the Centre and the State in dealing with the social and human problem of the refugees.}\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

The Committee also blamed the state government for not taking up this issue of discrimination in a serious manner with the central government—

\textsuperscript{77} Undated report published by the Women’s section regarding the work done so far in West Bengal. [possibly dated June 1957]. Asoka Gupta Papers, SWS, JU, Kolkata, p. 4. Similarly, orphans and children of the unattached women were immediately struck of the P L registers immediately after the training period was over irrespective of the fact whether they found jobs or not. Also, if the mother of the son died the son would not be taken as PL, rather would be seen as a single-unit family, irrespective of his employment status.

\textsuperscript{78} By 1955 the rehabilitation efforts for refugees from the west was nearing an end, but in the east it was just making a start, therefore, using the western model in the east was grossly unfair.

\textsuperscript{79} Appointed by the Government of India in 1968 with the ‘task of examining the functioning of Homes and Infirmaries in West Bengal and recommending suitable measures for their improvement’. It included A C Guha (Chairman) alongwith 9 other members. The report was submitted to the Ministry of Education in 1973.

\textsuperscript{80} It is interesting to note that even this official document uses a comparative analysis to prove the inadequacy of the aid given to the refugees in the East. This is the crux of this dissertation as well.

\textsuperscript{81} Rs 25 in the East and Rs 28 in the West. The former being raised to the latter scale nearly after a whole year. p. 27

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. p. 33.
there has been a serious lapse on the part of the State Government in not taking up the matter with the Central Government in the right earnest with a view to ironing out the existing disparities. The Central Government too should not have allowed such a discrimination as it was bound to have serious social and political repercussions.\textsuperscript{83}

In fact, the Committee noted that the scale of assistance extended to the inmates of the Homes in the East was much less compared to that provided to the inmates of the Vagrants’ Homes\textsuperscript{84} as well— ‘to look after vagrants/destitute is a social and moral responsibility of the State, whereas, in the case of the refugees it is a political, moral and social obligation. The refugees should not, therefore, be subjected to discriminatory and a second rate treatment.’\textsuperscript{85}

Success:
A gradual reduction in the numbers of such refugees housed in these Homes, and consequently, a reduction in the numbers of such Homes and Infirmaries itself, was seen as a measure of success in their rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{86} This is noted in the observation made by the review committee as well—‘By the end of 1955, with progressive rehabilitation/dispersal of inmates, the number of recipients under the PL category in the western region was reduced to 26000.’\textsuperscript{87} However, the story in West Bengal was different.

The following table shows how the problem in West Bengal was far from being solved satisfactorily:

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\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. p. 33.
\textsuperscript{84} Run by the Department of Social Welfare for beggars, and other non-refugee destitute.
\textsuperscript{85} Report (1973), p. 60. A much recent report on the condition of Camps and Homes published by the Government of West Bengal in 1989 notes that whereas the minimum per capita expenditure in any of the Homes run by the Department of Social Welfare is Rs 125 per month and Rs 240 is spent per juvenile inmate of these Homes, the same for the Homes for the refugees are abysmally low—Rs 75 and 45 respectively. [Problems of Refugee Camps and Homes in West Bengal (The Screening Committee Report), Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, G/o West Bengal, 1989, p. 14]
\textsuperscript{86} For refugees in general, also, a similar principle is used.
\textsuperscript{87} Report (1973), p. 12. At the time of publication of this report, the number of inmates was further reduced to 3000 in the 15 PL Homes.
Table I
Growth of Homes, Infirmarys and Number of Inmates Receiving Gratuitous Relief in Eastern region during 1951-70.

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<td>INMATES (I)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2600</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTTAR PRADESH</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEST BENGAL</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31500</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>53900</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER STATES</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37700</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59300</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As is evident from this table, there is a visible decrease in the number of inmates and Homes, however, compared to the story in the western region, there was still much to be done here. The most recent figures are as presented below:
### Table II

**Report of Inmates of Eight Camps and Homes, 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Name of the camp/home</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Single-Unit Families</th>
<th>Multi-Unit Families</th>
<th>Total Inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chandmari A/PL Home</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>151</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Habra A/Home</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bansberia W/Home Kartickpur Wing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bhadrakali W/Home</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Ranaghat W/Home</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Champta W/Home</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dhubulia H and I</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cooper’s Camp PL Home</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>177</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>608</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Latest Figures from the RRRD, Kolkata.

In part jest and part fact, the report mentions that ‘Apart from death, desertion etc. rehabilitation is the only normal desired way of getting rid of the camp-life and merging oneself in the general stream of the society.’ This is observed in the interviews of the inmates as well. Women residing in the Homes in the Western region, as soon as they or their able-bodied sons received the rehabilitation grant or even compensation money, left the Homes almost immediately. Sadly, those women who had daughters could not leave

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88 A= Amalgamated Home [i.e. Women’s Home+ Infirmary+ PL Home]; H= Home; I=Infirmary

89 Report (1989), p. 15
since they could not be accommodated in their son-in-laws homes. In the eastern region, however, it is seen that rehabilitation was difficult to receive even for the trained, able-bodied son. Hence, even women with sons were forced to live in these dilapidated Homes. For now, it would suffice to say that the Homes in the western region were much better equipped to handle the issue of permanent rehabilitation of the permanent liability category.90

The Home Inmates
In a recent study of the Home inmates, their grave dissatisfaction at the state of affairs is more than visible.91 The poor maintenance of the Homes, meagre scales of assistance, and a mere hand-to-mouth survival of the inmates, are the points which come out of these interviews most clearly. The dissatisfaction with government policy, many still awaiting rehabilitation benefits, even if not for themselves at least for their sons, are other points which emerge from these interviews.

On being labelled as Permanent Liability:
Immediately upon the death of husband or father, these women were declared as PL and sent to the respective PL Homes. For instance, Khuki Sarkar92 notes with great regret that ‘We were on the verge of being rehabilitated—everything had been finalized—but just at that point my husband died. With two young daughters, I was declared a PL and sent to Chamta. O those agonising days. How can such a paltry dole be sufficient for maintaining my family?’93 Often women took the decision to get admitted in the same Homes of their own free will. Thus, when they saw that it was impossible for their brothers or other relatives to take up the responsibility of their families, they went to such Homes. Labanya Mukherjee states—‘[after my husband died] I refused to be a burden on my relatives.'

90 A report submitted by Asoka Gupta and her team of social workers who had visited the Homes in the western and eastern region with precisely this very aim of drawing a comparison of the state of affairs in the east and west comes to a similar conclusion. Similarly the Committee Report (1973) draws a similar conclusion.
91 Interviews conducted by Dr Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta as part of the SWS project on the refugee women in Bengal, and published in Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subashri Ghosh (eds) The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India, Kolkata: Stree (2009), pp. 199-222.
92 Age about 70-75 years, and resident of the Chamta PL Camp in Nadia District, West Bengal.
93 Interview with Khuki Sarkar by Subashri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta, in Bagchi, Dasgupta, Ghosh (eds), (2009), p. 207.
Instead I asked my brother to make arrangements for my admission to a camp… Here I am totally dependent on doles.  

Dividing Families:
Often families got divided in the process of rehabilitation with some members being admitted to the PL camps and some to the relief camps according to the eligibility criteria. Hence, though they may have come together to this side of the border, yet, at the transit camp itself these families were split-up and the unattached women were sent to the PL homes. Sushila Das stated:

> We crossed over in 1952 when the passport system was introduced. My husband, my two brothers-in-law and their families and I began our journey from Barishal, first by steamer and then by train. We arrived at the Sealdah station, where we stayed for five days and were provided with puffed rice and jaggery. During screening, my brothers-in-law were sent to the Cooper’s camp in Ranaghat while we were sent to Ghusuri Camp where we were holed up in godowns… in the midst of this, my husband died and I was sent to the Bhadrakali Camp…”

Administrating the Homes:
All the inmates interviewed concurred that female superintendents had been far more efficient in running these homes. They noted that the worsening of the situation in the camps directly corresponded to the period when male superintendents took over the administration of the camps. According to Namita Ghosh, ‘From 1972 onwards, the conditions deteriorated sharply. One major reason for this decline was the termination of the women superintendents—who were strict and caring.’ Regarding the current superintendents, all the inmates interviewed stated that these administrators don’t care much for them.

> It will be worth noting that in the western region all the Homes were under the supervision of female social workers, and possibly, therefore, better maintained. In the earlier section we noted how Gyan Devi mentioned the caring role of the female superintendent of their Ashram; even Durga Rani, the superintendent of this Ashram, mentioned how essential it was to make the women feel comfortable in these troubled

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94 Age 70-75 years, resident of Bansberia Camp, Hooghly District, WB. Ibid. p. 217.
95 Sushila Das, age 65-70, Bhadrakali Women’s Home, Hooghly district, WB. Ibid. p. 218.
96 Namita Ghosh, age 60-65, resident of Bansberia Camp, Hooghly District, WB. Ibid. p. 215
times. In fact, the very creation of the Women’s Section to handle the affairs of the refugee women, is representative of the fact that rehabilitation of refugee women involved certain aspects which were best handled by women only.

Discipline—the Watchword in the Homes:
Discipline was the watchword in such homes. And as observed in the interviews of the surviving inmates, gradually the lack of it has led to the deterioration of these homes. Various disciplinary controls exercised upon the inmates included—fixing the work hours in the production centres, the visiting hours of family members, and the distribution of rations. It was the duty of the Superintendent to ensure that the inmates do not leave without permission. There was a fixed time of entry and exit into the homes as well. Describing such a disciplined life of the inmates, Gouri De states: ‘... there was strict discipline. No outsider was allowed inside the camp. A watchman was posted twenty-four hours at the entrance. Even the relatives of the inmates were not allowed to enter the premises. We had to meet them at the gate.... The condition deteriorated in the last 15-20 years. Security became lax. In 1979, hooligans attacked the camp and injured many of the inmates, including my mother and sister.’

In spite of such attempts to maintain order in the Homes, a few incidents show that there were the occasional acts of dissension in the Homes. To cite an example—two inmates of the Chunabathi Camp in Darbhanga district, Bihar, were seen as ‘trouble-makers’ in the camp, and hence the Government of Bihar desired that these inmates be sent back to West Bengal. The following is the description given of the two inmates:

- Shri Makhanlal Saha—Quarrelsome. Had hand in implicating another person on false charges of rape. His son and daughter are also quarrelsome. Collected subscription for puja and misappropriated it. Tries to extract money from persons with threats of assault etc.
- Smt Maharani Mandal—Hot-headed and ill-tempered. Quarrelled and inflicted bleeding injury on an 8 year old boy’s head. Once scattered broken glass pieces in

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97 Gouri De, age 40-45 years, Chamta Camp. Ibid, p. 207.
the playground of the displaced boys and causing injury to them. Taken leading part in camp quarrels.  

In the interviews of the inmates, also, a hint of some rebellious attitude can be observed. Many of them acknowledge their membership of the refugee organisation—United Central Refugee Council (UCRC). They also mention how they participated in protests organised by the UCRC for demanding a better deal in the rehabilitation process. Some of them had been jailed as well for this cause. Nonetheless, they now regret that all their efforts have gone in vain since not much could be attained in spite of participating in such protests. Sushila Das notes, ‘Here I became involved in refugee movements… and took part in demonstrations. Alas! Nothing came of it. The authorities collected our names assuring us of rehabilitation. But these turned out to be false promises.’ Similarly, Surala Das, too, notes how inspite of being actively involved in refugee movements, not much improved in the Homes—‘I was actively involved in movement let by the UCRC… Apart from agitating against the poor quality of rations, we also demanded articles of daily need like buckets, mugs, and lanterns. But alas! Our fate has remained more or less unchanged.’

Other Aid Given to Women
Apart from opening vocational training centres for the women, there were other facilities provided to them as well. The Employment Bureau, which had been set up for the exclusive purpose of providing employment opportunities to the displaced persons, attempted to secure employment for the refugee women as well.

According to the statistics provided by the Directorate of National Employment Service, West Bengal, it was observed that there had been an increase in the demand for employment among women in the post-partition era. This survey, while commenting upon the trends in female employment, shows that as soon as the family was in a

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98 CAC meeting held on 25th November, 1955, SWS, JU, Kolkata.
100 Surabala Das, Bansberia Camp, p. 213.
101 The Vocational Training Centres provided training to such women in various handicrafts like tailoring, basket-weaving, knitting etc. There were four main such centres in West Bengal: Uday Villa, Titagrah, Uttarpara and Habra Production Centre.
relatively better position the traditional norms of the family came back into existence and women were withdrawn from the work scene. It also shows that the maximum number of women employed were unmarried, and post-marriage these women often left their jobs. The survey also shows that the more educated women were to be found in higher income groups, however, their numbers were really few. These women were employed in schools and offices (as clerks and typists). Also these women were mostly unmarried. The majority of the married women constituted the lower income groups. They possibly were those who assisted their husbands in agricultural work or were the ones who were employed in domestic services. In conclusion, the survey maintains that the women preferred clerical jobs and also aspired for training in the same. The solution, thus, recommended for solving the issue of securing employment for women was that there should be more such training institutes which could impart training to the women in office-work.102

**Women’s Contribution towards Rehabilitation**

Hena Chaudhuri’s narrative points to a very unique aspect not found in the narratives from the western region. She refers to the earnings her mother sent from their home in East Bengal as very crucial for their survival in West Bengal.103 Her mother had stayed back in East Bengal to take care of the home and their land, the earnings from which she sent to their family residing in the Chandmari Camp, near Kolkata—‘Our financial condition turned from bad to worse… Ma did her best to send as much cash as possible… She wanted us to maintain the same high standards of living that we had before migrating. Alas, this remained a dream… Ma had to bear the entire burden, which she continued to do cheerfully.’104 Explaining the responsibilities of the women during this period, she notes, ‘The menfolk wandered from place to place in search of work, while the women tried to run the family on a shoestring budget.’105

Regarding her observation that at this time there were a far greater number of unmarried women in Bengal, she notes that this was a direct result of the displacement on

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103 Published in Bagchi, Dasgupta and Ghosh (eds), *Trauma and Triumph*, p. 81-87.
104 Ibid. p. 83
105 Ibid. p. 84
account of partition—‘Girls became the bread earners in many families. They became the shock absorber, sheltering the younger siblings from the harsh realities of life. As a result, they often decided not to marry and have a family of their own… My father… would often tell my elder sister… "Now you are my eldest son”…’

In conclusion, she agrees that Partition had created a grave disruption in the lives of the people in general, and women in particular—‘[it] changed the position of women vis-à-vis society and family. The lives of so many girls were torn asunder by partition. They could never lead a normal life since they had to sacrifice all their aspirations for the maintenance of their families.’

Narratives of women who contributed sincerely towards the economy of the house are far too many. But just as in historiography, similarly in archival records as well, this contribution of the women towards their homes is not easy to locate. It has to be recognised in the very subtle references made in the surveys conducted by the government or later day scholars to study refugee rehabilitation. I now look at some interesting observations made in one such survey conducted the University of Calcutta under the guidance of S N Sen. The study makes a comparative analysis of three class of residents in Calcutta—the Ordinary Residents (OR), the Ordinary Migrants (OM) and the Displaced Migrants (DM).

The results of the survey draw out very important conclusions. First, the percentage of married women among the DM was by far the lowest. Further, ‘Not only is the rate of marriage lower among the displaced migrants, but the age of marriage is also higher among this section of the population.’ According to the study, this is due to the following factors—one that Bengalis in general get married at a later age, and second, more importantly, is the fact that the DM were far more educated than the OR and OM. A third reason can be added as well—the responsibility of the home which put talks of marriage on the back-burner for most of the refugee women.

106 Ibid. p. 85
107 Ibid. p. 87.
108 For the period 1955-58.
109 OR refers to people residing in Calcutta since a long time, the OM are the migrants (mostly from UP and Bihar) who come in search of work in the city, and the DM are the uprooted people from East Pakistan.
111 In comparison to the other linguistic communities which comprise the OM category.
Thus, this survey does corroborate most of the findings of the above section. Yet, as is often the case, the role of the women often goes unnoticed in the official archives. Women make an appearance in the official records only as victims of this mass upheaval or as the class of refugees ‘deserving sympathy of the State’.\textsuperscript{112} Thus, more often they are seen as the scene of action rather than a participant in it all by herself. The few references I found in the official archives to women are in the Intelligence Branch records in West Bengal State Archives as participants in the protest marches or other kinds of demonstrations.

In the IB records of the Government of West Bengal, while describing a particular protest march of the refugees on numerous occasions—against the Eviction Bill or in demanding better living conditions in the camps\textsuperscript{113}, it is noted by the SP in-charge that women are always put in the forefront. In one particular reference, the IG Police is seen to justify the use of violence against women protestors as well, because he says they were used as shields by the refugee men behind them:

> The police naturally do not relish having to use fire-arms against women or for that matter against men. In cases relating to rioting or to the exercise of the right of private defence there is quite rightly no discrimination in law between male and female offenders. Unfortunately, there have been several instances lately in which women have taken a particularly vicious part in creating disturbances... and in others, have deliberately been placed in the forefront of riotous crowds. The principle to be followed in dispersing unlawful assemblies is that the minimum amount of force necessary is to be used... It is undeniable that women who participate in violence do occasionally get injured by police firing, but in the circumstances which prevail today this is inevitable.\textsuperscript{114}

\textit{‘Coming out of Partition’: the West Bengal Story}

So far, the trials and tribulations of the refugee women have been described. However, in Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novel \textit{Purbo Paschim}, Pratap’s sister Supriti is also shown as a victim of refugee activities. Her husband is killed in the process of trying to free his land\textsuperscript{115} from the refugees who have forcibly occupied it. Supriti’s in-laws, who were of

\textsuperscript{112} Rameshwari Nehru Papers.
\textsuperscript{113} Food, cash doles and sanitation requirement were the most important demands in all these mass protests of the refugees
\textsuperscript{114} F. No. IB 128, IG’s Note in response to why teargas was used against women in a process, dated, 5th May 1950, WBSA, Kolkata.
\textsuperscript{115} His Bagaan-Baari
West Bengal origin, held her East Bengal roots responsible for all the problems that fell on the family.

She was now forced to lead a life of penury: restricted to just one single room in the house and denied any source of livelihood. Eventually, not able to bear this kind of treatment anymore, and specially to ensure a better future for her daughter, she moved out of the home into her brother’s home. Keen to get her daughter educated, she used whatever little she had been able to bring from her in-laws’ home and thus refusing to be a burden on her brother. Eventually, her daughter also starts giving private tuitions to earn some extra money for her education. She grows up to become a successful doctor and settles in London. Thus, the similar motifs of ‘primacy to education’ and ‘working for a living’ are seen in this case of the West Bengal women as well, dispossessed of their lands by the refugees.

In another case, Geeta Mashi, who belonged to a middle-class family with just about enough land to feed the family of four-five members, was wronged by a refugee family who requested shelter at their home for a few days. The latter then, occupied their home and refused to leave. There were fights everyday which often turned ugly, and ultimately, concerned about the safety of his daughter, and also for peace in general, Mashi’s father moved out of his home, giving in to the pressure of this refugee family.

Much later, Mashi’s brothers tried to win back the home, but failed in their attempts. Mashi, too, was rendered a destitute after her husband’s death. Hence, she took up the only option before her—that of working in the homes of people as a domestic help. But as mentioned before, she could never tell this to her children, and deep within she nursed a strict dislike for the refugees who had brought this disruption in her life.

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116 Her brother, Pratap, was a refugee from East Pakistan and was putting up with his mother, wife and two sons in a rented humble accommodation which was a far cry from his own luxurious desher bari in East Bengal.

117 It is seen that Pratap is quite pained everytime he sells his sister’s jewellery or when he sees his niece going out for work. But there is little that he can do to help the situation.

118 About 70-75 years of age, worked as a maid in my aunt’s home in Kolkata. She passed away in 2009, and interestingly, to this day her immediate family members did not know that she worked in my aunt’s home as a maid. It was far too much for her to even mention this to her son and three daughters. My aunt faithfully kept the secret and maintained that she merely cooked in our home. In fact, such was her grace and behaviour, symbolic of her bhadralok upbringing, if I may say so, that whoever came to my aunt’s home, at first would always mistake her for being my aunt’s mother or maybe mother-in-law. One of them, out of respect, did the customary pronam as well to her, which as my aunt recollects, Geeta Mashi took quite obligingly.
Dr B C Roy, while speaking in favour of the Eviction Bill, mentioned a few such instances where the forcible acquisition of land by the refugees had displaced the original owners. For example Smt Radharani Naskar was a widow, and her husband’s 3 bigha land near Dum Dum municipality was forcibly occupied by the refugees. They had also started cultivating it. She lodged a complaint in the Sub Divisional office in Barrackpur, but received no help since the refugees resisted any sort of attempt at removal. She went personally to them and pleaded for restoration of her land back to her—‘Ami stri-lok hayeo—jara jomite grihadi nirmana koreche ebong jomi katche o grihadi korche, taader onek kakuti-minoti kore bola shoteyo tara amaar kothayekarapata ado na koraye…’[119] [me, being a woman, still I approached these people who had started constructing homes in my land and also started cultivating my land and requested them to leave, but to no avail]. Hence, as a final resort she wrote to the Chief Minister to help her out.[120] Thus, there certainly were a few cases where the refugees had dispossessed the original residents from their homes.

The original residents of West Bengal included Muslims. Oral testimony shows how Muslims were dispossessed of their lands and homes. In fact, theirs were the first homes and lands to be occupied, and this was justified according to the understanding that Muslims had demanded Pakistan and, therefore, that is where they belonged. The occupation of their homes was, therefore, seen as natural and also rightful.

The opposition leaders insisted that the property of the Muslims should be utilized for accommodating refugees, just as it had been done in the west. The ruling party members explained that the refugee problem in the east was enormous because the Muslims had not crossed over to Pakistan as they had in the west. Thus, for both, the dispossession of Muslims was seen as integral to the rehabilitation of the displaced Hindus. Whereas the former felt that evacuee land was not being utilised for this purpose, the latter argued that there was not much evacuee property in West Bengal.

[120] The context within which this letter was cited was the passing of the Eviction Bill. Hence, Jyoti Basu, in his reply, to such examples cited as cited by BC Roy mentions that Roy and the Congress party were playing to the tune of the property-holders and citing such instances to garner sympathy for them. However, Basu believed that refugees were squatting only on ‘paritoko’ [abandoned] land, i.e land which was not being used for long and had been lying waste. The refugees, according to Basu, would never dispossess needy persons from their land since they knew very well first-hand what dispossession meant. Hence, he condemns all such incidents mentioned by Roy and strongly opposes the Bill.
Such a feeling then naturally seeped into the minds of the refugees as well who saw Muslims as responsible for their present plight and believed that in occupying their homes or lands they were not doing anything wrong or illegitimate—merely replicating what they had experienced in East Pakistan. But in this process Muslims lost much. Many had decided to stay back, in Kishwar Jahan’s words—‘You see, since my childhood, I was spiritually bound to India and its people. My identity was first and foremost Indian. My religion was secondary.’121 Yet, situations compelled others to leave—seeing their home occupied by Hindus, verbal or direct attack upon them, threats etc were reason why many left for Pakistan.122

Oral accounts and newspaper reports show that during the 1950 riots, many Muslims shifted to what could be termed as Muslim zones— Park Circus, Beck Bagan and Maidan. Most of them came to the tents set up by the government in these areas purely as a temporary measure, but later when they returned home they saw it was occupied by refugees. This compelled them to make the move to East Pakistan.123 It is such dispossession which the Muslim MLA’s in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly feared, and hence they spoke much in favour of the Eviction Bill.

Thus, this was the other side of the story of rehabilitation. In either cases, women had a leading role to play in the rebuilding of lives in the most trying times—whether as a refugee women, or as one who had been dispossessed of her original home. The narratives of the latter cases are very few. There is a marked silence regarding such cases in the official records as well.124

121 Interview of Kishwar Jahan taken by Gargi Chakravartty, in Bagchi, Dasgupta and Ghosh (eds), Trauma and Triumph, Vol II, p. 175.
122 Quite a few left thinking of the better opportunities in what they visualized as a Muslim State, and many purely on principle to serve the new State.
123 Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhuri, Unraveling the Past: Remembering the communal violence in Hooghly, 1950, in Bagchi, Dasgupta and Ghosh (eds), Trauma and Triumph, Vol II, pp. 234-249.
124 During my research in the RR&R Department in Kolkata, I tried to find out about the rehabilitation of the ‘returning Muslims’ post-1950 Delhi Pact. Much to my disappointment, there is significant little that the records could show. Apart from one single register bearing the names of about 7 Muslim families relocated in areas other than their original place of residence, there was nothing much I could find. I also failed in my efforts to talk to resident families in the Park Circus area which is by far, the most heavily populated Muslim area in Kolkata, and also where many Muslim families had taken shelter during the riots of 1950 and 1964. They eventually settled down here, but none whom I met, came out to speak on their experiences. One of the ladies, on conditions of anonymity, did tell me that her grandparents had temporarily shifted to Dhaka in 1950, but not being able to find a strong foothold, returned back. These were the times when both the governments were encouraging a return of the migrants. Her grandparents took a flight back to Kolkata. Nonetheless, their posh home in South Kolkata had been occupied which they
Representing the Refugee Woman

In Asok Mitra’s ‘Take a Girl Like Her’, the story of the average refugee girl is narrated.\textsuperscript{125} She who has to take up the burden of the rest of her family, she who must forego all marriage proposals till her family is in a position to fend for itself, she who is the one who has to sacrifice her wants and desires to ensure her family is not deprived of theirs—she is the typical refugee girl. Mitra poignantly points out how such women just kept getting entangled in the web of life and could not spare even a moment for themselves. Their income was so crucial to the dying family that for many, they were seldom considered as girls itself\textsuperscript{126}—‘Whoever takes on the load of responsibility for once gets stuck with it forever…. Everybody, mother included, took it for granted that the girl would go about earning the extra money.’\textsuperscript{127} Describing the monotonous life of such a girl, Mitra writes—

\ldots there is no variation in the theme from day-to-day. She has nothing to look forward to, she has nothing to plan for, except the short term arithmetic of how much to try to borrow from which neighbour or school colleague… [brothers would waste away the money earned by her in expensive restaurants, but she could not] for she was the \textit{leading earner} in the family, and the entire salary she meticulously hands over to her mother. Nobody cares to ask how many saris she has…There is no question of marriage… you need a minimal glow of health even for \textsl{divertissements} like that. This Bengali girl is nobody’s desire… she has nothing to look forward to, spinsterdom, give or take a few years, is going to set in early…\textsuperscript{128}

Such were the difficult circumstances of those times which demanded this sacrifice from the women. In Mitra’s words—‘She has not got anything out of the country’s independence apart from the inexorable slide towards pauperisation. Much more than any of the rest of the family, she is the one who has suffered the most. Yet, there is a certain inner reservoir of courage in her. She has been able to sail through the remorseless process of history much better than the rest of the household.’\textsuperscript{129}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{125} Asok Mitra, \textit{Calcutta Diary}, p.16-20.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Recollect the comment made in an earlier section ‘From now on you are my son.’
\item \textsuperscript{127} Mitra, p. 17.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid, p. 19
\item \textsuperscript{129} Mitra, ‘The Song of Mother Courage’ in \textit{Calcutta Diary}, p. 24.
\end{itemize}
The refugee woman was immortalised in cinema. Ritwik Ghatak’s, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, remains the one film which comes closest to reality in its depiction of the plight of the refugee woman (Nita). \(^{130}\) She, too, is shown to take up the burden of her entire family upon herself foregiving her own wants and desires, and even marriage. As if to make a strong statement, lest we forget the contribution of such women and their sacrifice, Nita’s last words are made to echo in the whole valley (the T B sanatorium where she breathes her last) as she desperately expresses her desire to live: ‘*Dada ami banchte chayee! Dada ami banchte chayee!*’ [Dada, I want to live!]

The life stories of the many Nitas in Bengal do not find any place in official records. It was those women who participated in violent protests and those who made demands for rehabilitation who found a place at least in the criminal records. The women who silently bore the burden of their families were immortalised in family history or in works of literature and cinema.

**Summing Up**

This chapter focussed on the issue of rehabilitation of the refugee women coming from Pakistan (West and East). Here we noted the dual role played by the State: that of a protector and also of a benevolent patriarch. In its role as the protector, the State sought to recover its women from the ‘enemy’ territory, and also restore the ‘other’ women to what it perceived as their rightful community/nation. In its role as that of the benevolent patriarch, the State took the responsibility of rehabilitating the single/unattached women in the special homes and production-cum-training centres set up for them. Kasturba Niketan in Delhi and Uday Villa in Kolkata became the most prominent of such Homes for women. The purpose was to help the women come out of the trauma of partition and victimhood, and to stand upon their own feet. Indeed, for many women these aims were fulfilled to a large extent. Gradually, not only the destitute, single refugee women, but also those from refugee families joined the training centres and learnt useful craft which they may or may not have used immediately. \(^{131}\) Partition had created that atmosphere

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\(^{130}\) In all the interviews I took whenever I asked the question of refugee woman and their experiences, almost unanimously they all referred to this film as the one which best represented their plight.

\(^{131}\) Smt Sudershan Talwar (nee Savita Seth) joined the Training Centre for Refugees in Ghaziabad and obtained a first-class degree in stitching in 1953. However, as she recollects, she never used this knowledge
where women were willing to ‘come out’ and participate in active public life like never before. Thus, the State, on its part, tried to solve the issue of rehabilitating the refugee women through these nascent social-welfare schemes.

But a closer analysis highlights the conservative nature underlying these schemes, i.e. the State did not want to disrupt the status quo—whether it was regarding the position of women in the society, or whether it was the internal class differences. Thus, it was the unattached women that the State took custody of, and second, the ultimate rehabilitation of the single-women was in their being settled in family life after marriage. Note that social workers and camp superintendents proudly recollected the dowries they were able to collect for the marriage of such women: ‘No girl ever left without a proper dowry of Rs 5000-6000 or more.’

This concern regarding getting the women married is found in official documents as well: ‘It is realised that whatever might be done by the Government for rehabilitation of the unattached displaced women, the final and ultimate rehabilitation of the young refugee girls cannot be achieved unless they were settled peacefully in some family. So it is decided by the Honourable Minister in the conference on 9.5.1955 that every effort should be made to rehabilitate these young girls through marriage.’ Once settled in this manner, they would no longer be the responsibility of the State, unless, as mentioned before, they were the inmates of the Permanent Liability camps. Once again, the economics of rehabilitation is seen to govern this otherwise noble thought of the

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Durga Rani interview in Menon and Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries, p. 181. She states that though the Government did not provide for so much money, she was able to arrange this amount using her contacts and acquaintances in the area. In the East, too, various government publications mention that a significant sum was given to the refugee women at the time of marriage.

Letter dated 23rd May, 1955, From Deputy Director (Women’s Resettlement) to Smt Asoka Gupta, regarding the ‘Formation of an Advisory Board for Work’. This board, as suggested by the minister, would comprise—Ramola Sinha, Asoka Gupta, Seeta Chowdhury, Planning Advisor (R&R Department), Director (Women’s Resettlement) and Deputy Director (Women’s Resettlement); Asoka Gupta Collection, Schools of Women Studies (SWS), Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Emphasis added.
State; women, once married, would be entitled to rehabilitation only as per the norms adopted for rehabilitating ‘displaced persons in general’.134

Regarding the internal class differences, it is observed that the main concern of the State was the suitable rehabilitation of the urban refugee women. All the production-cum-training centres were located in the towns and cities. The market for the goods prepared was also in the city itself. The idea of vocational training was in fact carefully thought out especially for these women. For the rural refugee women neither education nor vocational training was thought out as an option for their rehabilitation. They were settled in the countryside to work on the fields or even if in the city, then they were employed more often as domestic help.

Finally, another point which emerges from the point of view of the State, upon an analysis of the rehabilitation policies for the refugee women is the East-West divide. This has been pointed out in the relevant section of the chapter; here I only wish to briefly mention the fact that while women had similar experiences in the west and east—they were the most vulnerable targets of the most gruesome form of violence, they underwent a massive disruption in their everyday lives, they were the most deserving candidates of State aid and ‘sympathy’ as well, and, finally, they contributed significantly towards the rehabilitation process in their families—the differences arose in the nature of the aid provided by the State to the refugee women. The ‘genuine victims’ were seen as distinct from those coming out of ‘psychological fear’, hence, the difference in the treatment meted out to them.

This then is from the point of view of the State. Now to look at the issues arising from the point of view of the women. The most visible change brought about by this disruption was the increased participation of the women in the public sphere. Even though under the aegis of Gandhi women had come out in public and participated in the national movement, yet, in the post-partition period coming out of the seclusion was not simply a matter of choice, rather that of survival. Often women chose to participate in the post-partition rehabilitation work because it was in such social work that they found some

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134 This is the term used for referring to those refugees who did not fall in the special category which included the following: ‘unattached women’, ‘old’, ‘infirm’, ‘orphans’, ‘deserted wives’, ‘hard cases’, and, ‘TB patients’ and the ‘dependents’ of the above mentioned categories. I will discuss this classification in greater detail subsequently.
means of succour for their lives which had been torn apart by the violence of partition. This is noted in the memoirs of these active social workers, almost all of whom saw in their new responsibility a means to forget their traumatised past and move forward. As noted by Anis Kidwai:

I was going to this city to drown the greatest sorrow of my life, in the hope that in the deluge that washed over us, I would cite some distant shore upon which I may anchor my future... I often wonder what would have happened of me if I had not received Gandhiji’s guidance at that perilous juncture of my life... I would still be standing distressed at the crossroads, unmoving, uncertain where to go.¹³⁵

Yet, for others it was a choice they had to make to help the family survive. This is noted in the increased emphasis on education and employment, even over marriage, in the post-partition times. The men in the house silently acquiesced to this new situation for it was necessary to acquire as many helping hands as possible to run the household. And in those families which had no male as the head of the family, as it is the burden fell upon the women.

A report published by the Directorate of National Employment Service in 1958 elaborates on the aspect of marriage taking a backseat in the life of these refugee women: ‘... the partition of India has dealt a severe blow to the family life of several millions of Bengalees in East Pakistan who were compelled to migrate to India leaving behind their sources of income in land and properties. They have been landed in such a plight that joint efforts of male and female members are needed in most cases to retrieve their fallen fortunes. There are numerous families which, in the absence of male earners, have to depend entirely on one or more of their female members. All these factors have tended to progressively increase the number of women job-seekers.’¹³⁶ The report further mentions the increase in the number of women seeking employment—‘In 1953 the average number of monthly women registrants with the employment exchange of India was 4256 per month. While in 1957 it rose to 8563 per month, i.e. there was a 100% increase during the last five years.’¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Ibid. p.1
Thus, we find that women began to take up this role earnestly out of the emergent compelling factors. But once this role was taken up then it became important to set aside the thought of marriage. This was the most important break from the past for the Bengali women.\footnote{138} Manas Ray cites the example of his sister to explain such a predicament of the ‘refugee-woman’:

My didi had completed her BA degree by then, and as one more enactment of the much-repeated allegory she took up a job as a junior stenographer in a government office. Marriage proposals were put on the back burner; her job came handy in stabilizing the listing boat that was our family.\footnote{139}

These refugee women from East Bengal inspired the women of West Bengal as well. Manikunta Sen writes, ‘I noticed a positive awakening particularly amongst women. Had they not been uprooted, this change might not have occurred so quickly.’\footnote{140} She notes further, ‘I was often on tour and whenever I boarded a train, I used to run into these women who travel up and down, crowding the compartments meant for women, and for men too… I learnt that some were at school, some at college, while others were teaching.’\footnote{141}

Many also saw the positive side that this disruption had brought. ‘I had spread my wings’ said Bibi Inder Kaur, who till then had received very basic education, but after coming to Delhi, she pursued higher studies and taught in Miranda House College, was Principal of Mata Sundri College, and finally shifted to Amritsar where she became the principal of a College and continued teaching till the age of 75. Similarly, women from East Pakistan also saw this as an opportunity to come out of the antahpur.

Yet, there were those for whom this ‘coming out of partition’ was not without a heavy price on their personal lives. Quite a few women remained single in their desire to keep the settle their families first. It is though oral history that this aspect comes to light. As told by Bithi Chakravarti, a refugee woman from East Pakistan, ‘At one point, he (Dr Chakravarti, her would-be-husband) proposed that I go abroad and settle down with him, assuring me that money would be sent to my family. But I refused. I wanted all my

\footnote{138} A similar situation can be observed in the west as well.
\footnote{140} Manikunta Sen, In search of Freedom, p. 181
\footnote{141} Ibid. p. 181
brothers and sisters to get properly settled before I got married. I am grateful that he waited for me.'\textsuperscript{142} However, there were many, who unlike Bithi, remained single.

In conclusion, I suggest that refugee women from Bengal had much to struggle for. It was not a smooth passage for them in the face of their often non-recognition as victims of ‘genuine’ violence, and thus sans any ‘genuine’ reason for migrating to India. Refugee women from Punjab, victims of the worst form of violence, were seen as the responsibility of the state. The State tried to do the most for these women. A good deal of this—as in recovery—was forcing these women to be Indians by their penal transportation from homes in Pakistan to India. Though in the process there were some arbitrary decisions taken up as well, but the point of consolation was that the rehabilitation of refugees coming from Punjab was not a matter of struggle between the state and the refugees. Rather, here the two worked in tandem with each other and this healthy cooperation resulted in the successful story of rehabilitation in the West.

Refugee women in Delhi asserted their political rights in much the same vein as their counterparts in the east. The fortnightly reports in the Police Records in Delhi had a regular column on the activities of ‘refugees’, ‘Muslims’, and ‘women’. this allows us a glimpse into how actively women participated in protests and marches, demanding for the provision of basic necessities in the camps—roofed accommodation, food, water, cash doles etc.\textsuperscript{143} The means used by the women were fasting, participating in mass rallies, squatting in front of the homes of politicians, and also submitting memorandums. To cite one such intelligence report: ‘30 women of Kingsway Refugee Camp have registered their names for offering satyagraha in front of the bungalow of the honourable Prime Minister tomorrow (18.3.49). They will reach the place individually so as to avoid interception by the police.’\textsuperscript{144} Women participated in such processions often of their own volition or on many occasions to support their men.

But what made it really easy for the women coming from West Pakistan to assert themselves was because post-partition they were the ‘no-questions-asked citizens’\textsuperscript{145} of this country. This was so because the principle of the exchange of population had been

\textsuperscript{142} Interview with Bithi Chakravarti in Gargi Chakravartty, \textit{Coming Out of Partition}, p. 173
\textsuperscript{143} Police Records, NMML, New Delhi.
\textsuperscript{144} (Secret) CID report. F No 26 IInd Installment, Police Records, NMML, New Delhi.
\textsuperscript{145} To borrow the term from Shahid Amin. It applied not only to women; it included all the Hindus and Sikhs who migrated to India from West Pakistan.
accepted for the western borders. The borders in the east were to be maintained as soft
borders, however, the refugee influx was regulated strictly. Only a specific category of
women were permitted entry from East Pakistan into Indian Territory. Women would be
treated in much the same way as the other refugee families in the east were being treated,
unless they were the victims of violence, or those who had lost the male guardian in their
family. It is in such circumstances that one observes a greater participation of refugee
women in rehabilitation politics in Bengal. Their role here was therefore, all-round—
economic, political and social. This can be observed in the varied personal memories of
the refugees. Whereas, in the memories of the Punjabi migrants only those women who
sacrificed their lives to protect family, communal and state honour are remembered and
immortalised, among the Bengali migrants, one often notes the silent pride among the
Bangals as they speak about their women who ably supported their families and
sacrificed their own personal desires.

The ultimate proof of the lack of adequate State aid in the east is that these Homes
still exist and its inmates still await rehabilitation assistance, which is a stark reminder of
the ‘incomplete’ job done in the east.