Chapter: 5

Ashoka Gupta (1912-2008)

Ashoka Gupta was one of those women, who in the 1940s, made the transition from a house-wife in an educated middle class family to a life of serving the larger world outside, possible. Never holding a paid post throughout her life, she used her skills of home management to serve the society at large. She wrote: ‘. . . shouldering family responsibilities became the training ground for my later work in the field of social service.’ As regards her transition from a middle class house-wife to a woman with larger commitments of the world outside, she wrote that her generation was imbued with a deep sense of patriotism that made it almost impossible to remain ignorant of the outer world or not to do anything for the country. She also felt that as a member of the educated middle class, it was her duty to help the less fortunate. ‘. . . being in a position to help the community, I made every effort to do so.’

5.1 Ashoka Gupta’s growing years

Ashoka’s parents were renowned persons; her father, Kiron Chandra Sen, was an eminent lawyer while her mother, Jyotirmoyee Devi was a famous writer. They resided in Patna. Ashoka lost her father when she was about six years old. After her father’s untimely death, Ashoka along with her mother and other

1 Ashoka Gupta, In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century, (Kolkata, Stree, 2008), Ashoka Gupta’s autobiography, translated from Bengali by Sipra Bhattacharya and Ranjana Dasgupta, p.3. Henceforth to be cited as In the Path of Service.

2 Ibid, p.2

3 Ibid, p.2
siblings shifted to Jaipur where her maternal grandfather was a cabinet minister in the
native state of Jaipur and had a big estate. They were looked after well by her
maternal grandfather and her uncles. The way her mother’s family took care of them
had a profound influence on Ashoka’s life. She wrote:

I became aware of the selfless way in which my mother’s brothers took upon
themselves the care of her large family, and perhaps this instilled in me the desire to
fulfil family responsibilities to the utmost, a norm which has ever remained a guiding
principle of my life.4

When her elder brother Arun was sent away to Delhi for schooling, on Jyotirmoyee
Devi’s insistence, six year old Ashoka too was sent away as there were few schools in
Jaipur.5 It was around 1922 that she along with her mother and other siblings shifted
back to Calcutta and she was admitted to the Duff School. This school through its
varied activities played an important role in instilling in young Ashoka the value of
social service. She acknowledged that it was from Duff School that she learnt to
involve herself in welfare activities like organising plays to raise funds, or a feast for
the children of the orphanages, visiting hospitals and taking fruits for the patients or
collecting money for the victims during natural calamity. 6 In her own words: ‘The
desire and the enthusiasm to be of service, and the way to raise funds, I think I have
learnt both these from Duff School.’7 Later it was from St. Margaret’s Convent that she
completed her Matriculation.

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4 In the Path of Service, p.3.

5 Jasodhara Bagchi, Introduction, A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta, (New Delhi, Niyogi
books, 2013), compiled and edited by Sharmistha Dutta Gupta and Narayani Gupta, p.15. Henceforth to
be cited as A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta.

6 In the Path of Service, p.20.

7 Ibid, p.20.
During her school days, she joined the Girl Guide movement, where she rose to an important leadership position at the all Indian hierarchy. From Girl Guide training camps, she learnt things like first-aid, home nursing, use of wheel-chair etc. As Guides, they drafted charts, and staged little skits in Baby Shows organised by different schools in the Calcutta Museum grounds with a view to educating the people of the necessity of bringing up healthy children. She writes: ‘The motto “help all the people at all times” became firmly fixed in my mind as a principle to be followed at all times.’

At the end of her school years, she wished to study medicine, but financial constraints stood in the way and she opted for a course in pure science in Bethune College instead. When she was in college she was exposed to many women revolutionaries. She admired them but never cherished to join them. As her family was not financially independent, she felt that her foremost duty was to complete her education with utmost sincerity. She wrote:

So even if I secretly harboured political inclinations, I did nothing that would disrupt my studies. Wearing khadi was the only personal statement of political protest that I allowed myself to make.

During her college days she also became aware of women’s life. She observed that a married woman spent her entire life in bondage, having no identity of her own, while the widowed or unmarried women or the childless women, though unhappy, were relatively free.

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8 In the Path of Service p.24.

9 Ibid, p.33.
5.2 Ashoka’s role models: her mother and others

The real hidden strength in Ashoka’s life was her mother.\(^\text{10}\) In Ashoka’s own words: ‘The difference in age between me and my mother was nineteen years. I cannot remember when that difference dwindled.’\(^\text{11}\) During her early years in Jaipur Ashoka could not spend much time with her mother, because Jyotirmoyee Debi took upon herself the task of shouldering the enormous responsibilities of her brother’s household. It was later in Calcutta that the two really came closer to each other. Before Jyotirmoyee Debi’s writing career started, she disliked her financial dependence upon her brothers. But as far as her daughters were concerned, she made no distinction between them and her sons. Ashoka wrote: ‘She always took care that her daughters should be properly educated and never ever did she differentiate between my brother and me.’\(^\text{12}\) After coming to Calcutta from Jaipur, her mother encouraged her to read books and periodicals of different kinds, not excluding those that were primarily meant for the adults. While raising her children, she also prepared herself for a writing career by closely observing the society around her. Ashoka wrote:

The trials and tribulations of her life as a young widow made her specially sensitive to conditions of women, issues which she raised with unfailing courage and honesty in her stories, novels and essays.\(^\text{13}\)

As early as 1917, Jyotirmoyee Devi wrote an article about the hardships that a widow had to endure and she also criticised the social attitude towards them. Moreover,


\(^\text{12}\) *In the Path of Service*, p.30.

\(^\text{13}\) *Ibid*, pp.3-4.
Jyotirmoyee Debi was always ready to nurse her sick relatives anywhere in India. In this context Jasodhara Bagchi wrote that Ashoka’s strongly motivated social work, a special eye for the deprived, the marginalised and sexually exploited, certainly grew out of her familial bonding with her highly talented and socially committed mother.\textsuperscript{14} Her mother’s modern outlook was also manifested with regard to the issue of Ashoka’s marriage. When her relatives pressed her mother to arrange Ashoka’s marriage as she had younger sisters after her, her mother stood firm that Ashoka should be allowed to complete her degree course and she would agree to a marriage proposal only if he found a scholar groom. After Ashoka’s marriage was fixed, Jyotirmoyee Debi permitted Ashoka to exchange letters with her would be husband and also to meet him in person as these would give the couple an opportunity to know each other. Ashoka recalled:

\begin{quote}
At that time, I used to think that such close mixing was common in our social circle but as I grew more experienced in the art of arranging marriages for others, I realised how rare it actually was.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Ashoka summed up her mother’s influence in the following words: ‘Her strength of character and personality has remained an inspiration to me all my life.’\textsuperscript{16}

Apart from her mother, other women, who were not mere housewives but made an identity for themselves, also unknowingly influenced young Ashoka. One such woman was Santosh Kumari Gupta, related to her father’s family who used to run a newspaper called \textit{Sramik} and worked for the jute mill workers. One of her father’s cousins married a foreign lady who was a member of Girl Guides, and used to take part in activities like Baby Shows, Fetes, and Exhibitions. Ashoka was very

\textsuperscript{14} Jasodhara Bagchi, \textit{A Fighting Spirit}, p.16.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.40.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}. p.4.
much impressed with such selfless works. She wrote: ‘Perhaps I had unconsciously discovered my role models.’

5.3 Her marriage and a new beginning

On 27th April, 1933, Ashoka got married to Saibal Kumar Gupta, an ICS officer. She accompanied her husband in his postings in different districts. Her husband’s family was a big one and as the eldest son of the family her husband had numerous obligations to fulfil. As his wife, Ashoka gladly accepted her responsibility towards his family. Looking after the household, meeting countless visitors, arranging medical treatment for her sick relatives and organising marriages for the near ones—she discharged all her duties efficiently without any qualms. She wrote: ‘I am convinced that these domestic duties played a great role in training me for my later endeavours in the field of social work.’ In the midst of all these her studies suffered. She had to give up thehonours in mathematics and was awarded the B.Sc. degree with distinction. However, her academic career ended after her graduation. She wrote later: ‘... we thought that women went to work only out of financial necessity. Even I had never realised then, that taking up a job could give one’s life a sort of fulfilment.’

It was during her stay in Faridpur, that she became a part of an official circle, consisting of her husband, the District Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police and the District Judge. She started playing tennis in the clubs. While she was in Faridpur, the Jubilee Celebration of Queen Victoria was organised and an

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17 In the Path of Service. P.28.
18 Ibid, p.63.
19 Ibid, p.51.
entertainment committee was constituted featuring white ladies, officers’ wives and some distinguished Indian ladies. When the committee decided to feed the school children on this occasion, Ashoka protested and argued that poor and destitute children should be fed instead. But her suggestion did not find any favour.

5.4 **Venturing out of home**

It was in the 1930s that she finally set her foot outside her home. Mere household duties failed to satisfy her. She wrote: ‘I often could not find a meeting point between them [household duties] and my innermost desires.’\(^{20}\) That is why she finally ventured out of home. While she was in Dacca, in 1936 she became a member of the AIWC, Dacca branch. In 1938 several organisations like AIWC, Dacca branch, Ananda Ashram, Dipali Sangha and National Conference of Women decided to come together to raise funds. Ashoka somehow became involved with the endeavour. She was to direct a cultural programme and to raise funds. She successfully conducted the show and was able to collect Rs. 500, which was quite an amount in those times. She along with others also organised an exhibition of craft items made by different women’s groups. Ashoka learnt a lot from this endeavour. She wrote:

> I also saw for myself the tremendous skills of women from the underprivileged sections of society. I began to comprehend that these very skills could be harnessed to set them on the road to financial independence.\(^{21}\)

Later when her husband was posted in Jessore, she and other officers’ wives formed the Child and Female Welfare Society to raise funds for a women’s hospital as there were not a single clinic for women. When the Japanese bombed Calcutta during the

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\(^{20}\) *In the Path of Service*, p.58.

\(^{21}\) *Ibid*, p.57.
World War-II, she was in Krishnanagar. She considered her stay in Krishnanagar for two and a half years as one of the most eventful periods of her life because, in her own words ‘... I began “working” for a cause for the first time.’ Her tasks involved finding alternative spaces for the evacuating institutions of Calcutta, rehabilitating the evacuees, supervising the production of khadi in the villages, or furthering the cause of the Quit India Movement. ‘I was in the thick of all this activity, more as a trainee than as a leader.’ She was fortunate to have received full support for her outdoor activities from her mother-in-law who looked after the household in her absence.

But it was the famine of 1943 which marked the real beginning of her career of social service which she carried forward through the riot-torn days in Noakhali which was one of the most memorable periods of her life. She stayed in Noakhali till partition became a reality. After independence she plunged wholeheartedly into the task of refugee rehabilitation. It was in 1947 that she along with other fellow social workers founded the Mahila Seva Samiti to rehabilitate refugee women and set them towards the path of financial freedom. She was also instrumental in establishing the Adi Buniyadi Vidyapith for girls belonging to the lower strata of the society. She became a member of the Central Advisory Committee, Ministry of Rehabilitation and also a member of the Women’s Co-ordinating Council. She was also one of the members of the group that prepared the ‘Report of a Tour of Inspection of Some of the Refugee Homes in North-Western India’ after visiting several Homes, training centres for refugees, women and children in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi. When the Dandakaranya Project was undertaken for settling the East Bengalee

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22 In the Path of Service, p.73.

23 Ibid, p.73.
refugees, she accompanied her husband there, who was made the President of Dandakaranya Development Authority. During her stay there she gained first-hand knowledge of the lack of facilities there. She was also instrumental in establishing the Kondagaon Mahila Mandal there. She had also worked with different organisations like Central Social welfare Board, Kasturba Trust, S-O-S Children’s Village etc. She became the AIWC president in 1986. She had also visited countries like U.S.A, Germany, and Brazil in different capacities. From the 1990s, she became more involved as committee members, engaging herself in policy making and consultation, rather than an active field worker. Till her last days she continued to give her suggestions and advice to different organisations.

5.5 The Bengal Famine of 1943: The genesis of Ashoka’s relief activity and social work

As has been mentioned earlier, the event which kick-started her career of social service in a real way, was the 1943 Famine of Bengal. Ashoka was in Krishnanagar, immediately before the famine erupted in an ugly way in 1942. With the World War II already in full swing and Calcutta being a target of bomb attacks many institutions in Calcutta had started evacuating in the countryside out of panic. Some of such institutions contacted Ashoka Gupta for the sake of an alternative accommodation. Ashoka along with her husband tried their best to help these institutions to find alternate spaces. Some of these institutions were Lady Abala Bose’s Nari Siksha Samiti, Shilpa Bhavan headed by Amiya Paul, Sarojnalini Dutt Memorial Association and many others. Ashoka noted in her book that she and her husband were co-opted as committee members or as patrons. She wrote, ‘We were made
committee members in some cases and patrons in others.’24 It was during her stay in Krishnanagar that she first felt the shadow of the impending food crisis, though at that point, she was not aware of the gravity of the situation. However, she knew that prices of rice had sky-rocketed. She found that women were selling their entire stock of rice. When the distressed women were asked questions about what they would eat after the entire stock of rice was sold, the women would reply that they would eat spinach and other green vegetables or collect roots which were still to be found in abundance in the villages.25 Ashoka tried to help them by buying the entire stock at Rs.30 at least.26 During this time, she was able to make arrangements for providing cooked meals to the slum children of Bunopara. In the midst of all these, her husband was transferred to Bankura. Ashoka commented in her autobiographical sketch that it was here that ‘. . . we actually witnessed the famine and the consequent starvation with our own eyes.’27 When she came to Bankura, rice was still available at fairly low prices. But gradually she noticed that the villagers were trekking towards the town. Their numbers increased day by day. Those who used to work at their house informed her that the rural people had almost nothing to eat in the villages as the government had bought all the rice. The paddy fields during the month of September were full, but they were to be harvested in mid-October. It was at this juncture exclaimed Ashoka that Usha Halder, the wife of the Commissioner, ‘. . . drew us out of our sheltered existence to

24 In the Path of Service, p.73.

25 Ibid, p.73.

26 Ibid, p.73.

27 Ibid, p.74.
work for others.28 Already in 1940, Usha Halder had established the Bankura Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic; the foundation stone of that building had been laid by the celebrated poet Rabindranath Tagore. A Relief Committee had been formed headed by Usha Halder. Women like Ashoka and other officers’ wives as well as local ladies too had willingly extended their support to this committee. Usha Halder had drawn up a roster by which all members were instructed to go towards the villages from where the starving people were coming to the town of Bankura. They normally went on foot, but sometimes the Commissioner or the District Magistrate would provide them with a car. Sometimes old deserted ladies left alone in the villages, were given shelter in the clinic. Under the guidance of Usha Halder, the AIWC picked up the abandoned children, sometimes along with their mothers and offered them food and shelter at the clinic. The Relief Committee also started a gruel kitchen to feed the hungry. Usha Halder took the lead in collecting rations, milk and medicines and procured the services of doctors, nurses and children who were on the verge of death.29

During this time some AIWC members including Urmila Mehta, Renuka Ray, Phulrenu Guha and Viljyatyabhkshi Pandit (then President), visited Bankura and resided in Ashoka’s house. ‘Mrs. Pandit filled us with enthusiasm and encouraged us.’30 A meeting with the local dignitaries was organised and Mrs. Pandit attended it. A local gentleman donated one lakh of rupees. As many children were orphaned during the famine, Mrs. Pandit advised Ashoka to start an institution for the orphans. This was

28 In the Path of Service, p.77.


30 In the Path of Service, p.76.
how the Sishu Sadan of Bankura started. Apart from studies the home used to impart basic education like spinning, looking after the cows and the poultry, growing vegetables, looking after the flower plants etc. Ashoka recalled later that innumerable skeletal children, taken from the jaws of death were brought to them during this time and they recovered slowly. She wrote:

Today – so many years later –when some of the children of Bankura’s Sishu Sadan, now strong and healthy young people, meet me and call out Ranga-Ma and stand in front me, I cannot recall what they used to look like in those times. But the same joy fills my heart even now. I think to myself, if I hadn’t looked after them, someone else would have . . . But I would have been denied this feeling of joy.

One of the primary aims of such relief programmes was to make the people especially women self-reliant either by giving them some sort of employment or opening handicraft centres. At the Bankura clinic, instead of employing nurses, mothers were engaged to look after the children, thereby providing meaningful engagements to the women. Young girls were also given training in home-nursing and first-aid. On the advice of Usha Halder, later, arrangements were made to train the girls in basic health care and hygiene and midwifery by the doctors of Dufferin Hospital. Craft classes were also organised. However, they received no grants from the government to carry on these welfare activities. They had to raise money through programmes and functions. Ashoka and her colleagues also started working among the Christian population in the area called Christiandanga, in Bankura. The local women were trained by the missionaries in embroidery, stitching etc. Ashoka suggested that a

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33 Ibid, p.27.

34 In the Path of Service, p.85.
room of her house could function as the training centre for stitching and embroidery lessons. She wrote: ‘Their work was exquisite, be it embroidery or drawn thread work or stitching.’ She along with other families of the civil servants started experimenting with dyeing, printing and decorating the material provided to them (15m. per family), which was unsuitable for soft furnishings. This way they began to make napkins and other such things. They were also able to start a charka centre. Some of the girls worked with khadi, others were involved in embroidery. She along with others also took responsibility of marketing their finished products. Occasionally, exhibitions were held with these items and as Bankura had many rich people including a prosperous Marwari community, these items were easily sold out. While working with these women, she realised that those who worked in the charka centre were the poorest, while those who did embroidery used to earn quite well.

She was also moved by the strong and hardy Santhal women who covered long distances to sell Sal leaves but received very little money for it. A widespread curse for the Santhali population was the spread of leprosy. Ashoka thus, decided to work amongst the lepers for quite some time. Leprosy patients were sent to the hospitals where their testing and treatment could be done. As the children of the leprosy patients were at the risk of contracting the disease, a place was organised in Bankura for these children. They also started awareness campaigns on leprosy and more importantly on its cure. They tried to disseminate the idea that leprosy was curable.

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35 In the Path of Service, p.81.

36 Ibid, p.81.
After Kasturba Gandhi’s death in 1944, Kasturba Trust was formed with the aim that women would work for women. Ashoka became interested in it and found that the policy “You weave, we shall buy” a very practical method of work. So she started corresponding with others to plan something similar in line. It was around this time, in 1945, that her husband was transferred to Chittagong. So she had to leave Bankura. About the significance of her Bankura experience she wrote: ‘It was the place which provided the foundation for my lifelong involvement with relief activity and social work.’

5.6. Ashoka Gupta on the Rationing System

After the Bengal Famine of 1943 the British Government had introduced a rationing system for all household commodities as well as for clothes. But the way the system was operating was causing immense hardships to the common people. Ashoka, always concerned about the difficulties of common people did not remain a silent spectator. Instead, she decided to pen her views on the mismanagement of the rationing system in two essays, under the penname *Janaika Bangali Grihini* (A Certain Bengali Housewife). She did this after interviewing many ordinary housewives in Chittagong. Jasodhara Bagchi argued that these two essays demonstrated that how Ashoka was determined to articulate a trenchant critique of the unnecessary hardships inflicted on Indian families by British rulers; a fact which was often missed out as the rulers remained uninformed of the exact nature of

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37 *In the Path of Service*, p.86.

38 *Ibid*, p.86.
requirements that a typical Bengali family would have. It is also to be noted that she presented her argument with exact figures, weights and measures. The essay titled *Rationing O Bangali Grihini* (Rationing and Bengali Housewife) was published in *Probasi* in *Chaitra*, 1352(B.S.). Here she pointed out that the rice distributed by the rationing system was of such poor quality that it was almost putrefied. But, alas, those responsible for this were never punished. Since cooking of such a poor quality of rice took a lot more time, a large amount of fuel was being unnecessarily wasted. The amount of rice allotted per head, she felt, was far less adequate than what was required. As milk, fish and fruits were out of the reach of ordinary families, rice, pulses and vegetables in small amounts were the only staple food for them. As women did all the labouring tasks in the household, they normally ate their full, widows who used to eat only once also ate their full. Moreover, in most Bengali households school children used to have rice after school. She also pointed out that from the age of 8-9, children used to have food like a grown up, even more at times. But the government had perhaps ignored all these facts and she warned the society that this sort of faulty rationing system would give rise to a bunch of undernourished, frail Bengali children. She further pointed out that atta or wheat flour was not very popular with the Bengalis. Still, if good quality of atta could have been supplied, then the households could have managed with roti instead of rice. But then again, as the wheat or atta was not preserved in the right way, decomposition set in before it came to the market. Next, she came to two essential items, salt and sugar. She argued that the stipulated amount of a seer of salt per head was more than excess while the same amount of sugar per head was far less adequate. When the people of Bengal were thus deprived

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of sugar, then the same was being regularly supplied to Britain. Next, she argued that the stipulated amount of mustard oil of half a seer, per head, manifested the policy holder’s ignorance. This amount, according to her was insufficient and more importantly, in the absence of ghee, milk, eggs or fish it was mustard oil which was the only source of fat in the Bengali diet. In ordinary Bengali family, mustard oil was also used for massaging before bath both by the adults as well as the children, which she feared would have to be discontinued in the present system. Lastly, she lashed out at the government for its poor storage system of rice. Rice used to decompose first when stored in sacks. But if rice was stored in proper granaries, then the process of decomposition could have been arrested. She ends the essay by pointing out that perhaps all her writings would prove futile if the government decided to turn a deaf ear to the problem.40

In another essay titled Bastro Rationing Ebong Bangali Sansar (Cloth Rationing and Bengali Household), she criticised the government order that all coupons for the first quarter would be deemed cancelled if the allocated clothes were not purchased by the month of June. But Ashok conducted a month by month analysis and showed that up to the month of May, an average Bengali household was not in a position to buy any clothes due to different types of expenditures like admission fees for the children, new books, coaching fees, school-college fees etc. It was only in June that a household could afford to buy new clothes, and that too the ones with very low prices ranging from ten-fifteen rupees. Moreover, she argued that middle and lower-middle class families had to buy the necessary clothes little by little at a time between

June and September. Buying used to increase during the Durga Pooja and after that up to June, the Bengalis normally did not buy much clothes. So, considering the circumstances, she found the government order unjust and felt that consumers should be allowed to buy the stipulated amount anytime during the year. The system of distribution of coupons was in disarray. She pointed out that in rural areas rationing system was not introduced and without ration cards, rural women were not eligible to get any cloth coupons. But it was these poor women who needed the coupons most. She highlighted their plight by pointing out that the rural women who used to earn a living by making khoi or muri or threshing paddy, were no longer able to do their work because of lack of clothes to cover themselves. Moreover, neither the cloth rationing department knew what was being supplied to the shopkeepers, nor did the shopkeepers know what was there in the bales. As a result, bales of untrendy cloth arrived in the shops. The cloth rationing system was particularly inconvenient for women as the stipulated amount of clothes were not sufficient to make women’s inner or girls’ dresses. The authorities also failed to see that a household also required cloth to make bed sheets, pillow covers and other essential commodities. Unlike in England where special coupons were being issued to expectant mothers, here no such system existed. She went on to say that the prevailing rationing system of food and clothes was creating the necessary space for the growth of black-marketing, because if people were unable to obtain food and clothes in sufficient amount, they were forced to turn to black-market to meet their exigencies.41

5.7. The Noakhali Riot of 1946 and her relief work

Ashoka was in Chittagong when the devastating communal riots erupted in Noakhali. At Chittagong she had already started working under the banner of the AIWC, Chittagong branch, with Nellie Sengupta as the President. She worked primarily for the women affected by the famine or displaced by the war. Owing to mismanagement in the rationing system, people could not have sufficient food. Ashoka became involved with the distribution of grains in her neighbourhood. The grain was supplied by English ladies, most of them were officers’ wives who used to receive grains at a cheap price. The grain was stored at Ashoka’s house and distributed to the needy women in accordance with the size of their families. Cards containing all their details were maintained. One day some of the ladies, supplying grains, to Ashoka enquired about the ratio of Hindu and Muslim recipients and whether they numbered equal or not. Ashoka however, felt that this was a deliberate attempt to politicise the issue as a destitute woman had hardly any religion.\(^{42}\)

When she was thus busy with welfare works, the Great Calcutta Killing of 16\(^{th}\) August, 1946 took place. She heard from her relatives that in Calcutta, the market places were looted and there was tremendous scarcity of food and vegetables. She again used her ability in the domestic front to help her relatives to tide over the food crisis. In Chittagong ole (a vegetable like yam) grew in abundance and it could be preserved for quite some time. Ashoka send as much yam as possible to her relatives and friends so that they would have something to eat.

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\(^{42}\) In the Path of Service, p.88.
Ashoka later on recalled that until the month of August when the Calcutta riots broke out no one could ever imagine that there was so much of simmering hatred piled up between the two communities which would eventually burst into flames, as it did during the Great Calcutta Killing. Soon after the Calcutta riots stray incidents of stabbing the Hindus started in the town of Chittagong and continued unabated till the end of September. But the most frightening fact was that a section of the administration acted in such a way that it instilled fear into the minds of the minority community in Chittagong. She pointed out that a fund raising campaign was launched by the District Magistrate, F.A. Karim to aid the Muslim riot victims in Calcutta. But the leaflet, through which appeals for aid had been circulated, was so worded that it tantamount to a threat for the Hindus. The latter were pressurised to make large contributions otherwise there were possibilities of retaliation.\(^3\) The most striking fact was that although the riots started on 10\(^{th}\) October, people like Ashoka had no inkling about the reality, although Chittagong was the Divisional Headquarters for Noakhali district. This clearly proved that Ashoka was right in assuming that a part of the administration in fact had aided the rioters. The news of the riots finally reached them through the Bengali Dailies on 18\(^{th}\) October. Ashoka now proposed that after the Noakhali carnage, fund raising would be conducted both for the Muslim victims in Calcutta as well as for the Hindu victims in Noakhali. Such a gesture, she hoped, would help promote communal harmony and restore confidence in both the communities. But her suggestion was not accepted by the women’s wing, of which Mrs. F.A. Karim

\(^3\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, *Evidence given by Ashoka Gupta* (to whom not indicated), *Papers and Correspondence pertaining to refugee rehabilitation work in Noakhali*. 333
was the Chairman, as also the Main Committee. In fact, no fund raising was done for the Noakhali victims at any time during the period up to August, 1947.\(^{44}\)

As soon as the news of riots reached, the AIWC members of the Chittagong branch met at Nellie Sengupta’s house and a Relief Committee was set up which would engage in relief activities. Ashoka was made the convenor of the committee. Initially, they resolved to distribute food, medicines and clothes to the people who had fled from their villages empty-handed. She wrote:

> We collected relief material, organised ourselves into groups and went into various districts: to Feni or to Ramganj or Choumuhani. We would discover the routes by which these refugees were fleeing, and hand over the material to them . . . We tried to persuade them to return to their villages, but they refused to do so.\(^{45}\)

At this point Ashoka was particularly anxious about the fate of abducted and molested girls. ‘It was the thought of the mental trauma of the poor tortured young girls and young women that haunted me.’\(^{46}\) Moreover, as Hindu society was quite conservative in its attitude towards its women, therefore, there was always the possibility that a molested girl might not be taken back by her family. She thought: ‘. . . if a girl was physically tortured, and her family refused to take her back, she would develop hatred not only towards her family, but towards society as well.’\(^{47}\) So she was determined to rescue the abducted girls first and thereafter persuade their families to bring them back.

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\(^{44}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. *Evidence given by Ashoka Gupta (to whom not indicated), Papers and Correspondence pertaining to refugee rehabilitation work in Noakhali.*

\(^{45}\) *In the Path of Service*, pp.89-90.

\(^{46}\) Ibid, p.90.

\(^{47}\) Ibid, p.91.
On 20th October, 1946, she met the District Commissioner, Mr. Carter with this issue in mind. But Mr. Carter showed reluctance and was even sarcastic.\textsuperscript{48} Mr Carter told her: “It will take time. It may even take years. How can you rescue so many young girls?”\textsuperscript{49} Not only that, Ashoka wrote, Mr. Carter positively obstructed their way concealing the information that the Congress President, Acharya Kripalini, his wife Sm. Sucheta Kripalini and others had already visited the place.\textsuperscript{50} When Ashoka met Sucheta, she informed the latter of her resolve to rescue the abducted girls. Sucheta’s response was encouraging but she too reminded Ashoka that the task was both difficult and time consuming.

She also penned her views on this sensitive issue. She was disheartened by the fact that despite so many atrocities, committed on the women the civil society did not come forward to register its strong protest on the issue. In a letter dated 25.10.46 to the Editor of The Statesman she wrote:

Fifteen days have passed since the trouble started at Noakhali and from the very beginning press reports showed that offences against women were committed on a large scale. Yet the Anglo Indian Press was inexplicably silent and very few British men and women whom I met expressed even a lukewarm interest in the affair. I feel that when crimes against women are committed, the question should not arise whether this is a civil war or a rising of one community against one another, but that women as a community should come forward and say that this state of affairs should not be tolerated . . . Is it too much to expect that ladies of the highest rank in British and Indian societies should lead a band of women volunteers and visit every house in the affected area to rescue abducted women and girls in order to save them from the dishonour and the agony to which they are being daily subjected at the present moment?. . . I suspect

\textsuperscript{48} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Evidence given by Ashoka Gupta, Papers and correspondence pertaining to refugee rehabilitation work in Noakhali.

\textsuperscript{49} In the Path of Service, p.91.

\textsuperscript{50} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Evidence given by Ashoka Gupta, Papers and Correspondence pertaining to refugee Rehabilitation work in Noakhali.
there is a tendency to pay more attention to check arson, looting and murder and less to rescue work.\textsuperscript{51}

She also reminded the government that it was their foremost duty to protect the honour of the women.

From 26\textsuperscript{th} October onwards, she along with the other members of the Relief Committee, started going to the villages of Noakhali looking out for abducted women and undertaking general relief work in the railway stations every seven days. They also learnt from the victims the horrors of violence and also prepared a list of the affected villages.\textsuperscript{52} Initially, the army did not allow the relief party to penetrate into the villages in the remote areas. It was only after Kripalinis visit that they were allowed to enter Noakhali under armed escort.

From 30\textsuperscript{th} October to 4\textsuperscript{th} November, 1946 she undertook a tour of a portion of Trippera and Noakhali districts to get first-hand information about the situation. After arriving in Chandpur on the 30\textsuperscript{th} October, she found a woman in labour pain, lying on the station platform. It was on her repeated requests that the R.W.A.C (Royal Women’s Auxiliary Corps) and Red Cross Centre-in-charge shifted the pained woman to the Elgin Hospital. Ashoka found the condition of the refugees at Chandpur appalling. She also complained to Major Little boy about the rude and unsympathetic behaviour of his military police towards the refugees. On 1\textsuperscript{st} November, early in the morning, she and her group visited the Faridgunge P.S and the relief camp. There were about five to six thousand refugees who complained to her that they were provided

\textsuperscript{51} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Letter written by Ashoka Gupta, dated 25\textsuperscript{th} October, 1946, paper and correspondence pertaining to refugee rehabilitation work in Noakhali.

poor quality rice and as a result they had bowel problems. The women complained that the attackers had broken their sankhas (conch bangles) and wiped off their vermillion mark on their parting. However, she got no definite response on the issue of abduction of women. She also noted that a number of victims were converted. Her next halt was at Raipura where they put up at the Pal family’s two storied house. She observed that although the house survived, the family temple was completely in ruins. The big Raipura market was almost deserted as most of the shops and the stalls belonged to the Hindus. Two big Akhras (Vaishnava place of worship) with their deities and belongings were completely dismantled and looted. The fact that although fragmented, humanity still remained was demonstrated by an incident where one Hindu family whose house had been burnt down, was sheltered by a Muslim neighbour for three days at the risk of his own safety. Till the arrival of the military, the male population had to go to the mosque for namaj. Here also, she did not get a clue of abduction. But there was talk of forcible marriage. Next they proceeded to Ramganj P.S via country-boats. But later they decided to proceed on foot. At first they reached Karoa or Karpa village (No.5 Union). Here houses were unharmed, probably because mass conversions took place. The villagers met them, women cried before them and they insisted on military posting or patrolling for their safety. Here Ashoka noted that the holy text of the Hindus ‘Gita’ was burnt. At Chandpur-a Hindu majority village was completely devastated. Here a refugee centre had come up where about 4000 refugees had taken shelter. R.W.A.C was to open a medical centre shortly. At 4 p.m. the group reached Ramgunge P.S after walking about six to seven miles. There were
about ten to twelve thousand refugees already and many more were coming.\textsuperscript{53}

On 3\textsuperscript{rd} November they reached Lamchar and saw that barring three pucca (permanent) houses, all other houses had been burnt down. Here, the villagers showed courage and fought with the attackers with whatever their hands could lay on. A few young men even dared to lodge a complaint in Ramgunj P.S. Hiding in mud and water during the day; they covered the distance of six to seven miles in two days. In Lamchar they found that three refugee camps where opened in the three undamaged houses, sheltering about two-three thousand people. Military was posted there and R.W.A.C was also opening a centre within a day or two.\textsuperscript{54}

The most devastating scenario, she witnessed was at Karpara. Here the Zaminder, Rajendralal Roy was brutally murdered by his Muslim peasants who attacked his house. She observed that the house was completely ruined and the big rafters were reduced to charcoal. Here for the first time she got a little bit of information about abduction of women. She learnt from reliable sources that four women, more or less distantly related to the Roy Family had been taken away and till that time they could not be traced. One of the women was seven months’ pregnant and another was a little eight year old girl. Another young girl of a neighbour was also missing. After her tour she suggested that following measures were to be taken urgently:

1) Search parties for abducted women,

\textsuperscript{53} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Tour impressions and experiences of a portion of Tipperah and Noakhali Districts from 30\textsuperscript{th} October to 4\textsuperscript{th} November, 1946(6 days), Sub: File no.1.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
2) Forming volunteer corps, patrol areas with armed guards,

3) Posting of more military,

4) Reassuring people that they were still Hindus,

5) Re-establishing them in their own homesteads by putting up some sort of huts as soon as possible,

6) Making arrangements for reaping the *aman* crop immediately and giving it to the rightful owners.55

5.8 Arrival of Gandhiji in riot torn Noakhali

On 7\textsuperscript{th} November, Gandhiji on his way to Choumuhani arrived at Chandpur with a view to restore communal peace. Ashoka on a sudden impulse decided to meet him. She along with her son, Partha, first attended a prayer meeting on the steamer in which Gandhi had come to Chandpur. Attending the prayer meeting was a lifetime experience for her that she later on recounted, ‘I was so moved that I could not speak.’56 She along with her colleagues decided to board the same train that was to take Gandhiji to Choumuhani. After reaching there, Gandhiji held a prayer meeting in the evening in a large compound where he addressed the people asking them to be fearless. He advised them not to be obsessed by the terrible incidents that had taken place so far and not to flee their villages. Sucheta Kripalini, Renuka Ray and other women workers of the AIWC met Gandhiji and sought for his guidance, because

55 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), *Tour impressions and experiences of a portion of Tipperah and Noakhali Districts from 30\textsuperscript{th} October to 4\textsuperscript{th} November, 1946* (6 days), Sub. File no.1.

56 *In the Path of service*, p.92.
their efforts had not borne any fruits. Renuka Ray spoke on their behalf. Gandhiji provided them a plan of action by which they would have to go and live with the people in order to work for them.\textsuperscript{57} It was decided that each worker would be assigned one particular police station. ‘Her work would cover all the villages under its jurisdiction. Thus she would acquaint herself with the actual situation in the area and be able to find out about the abducted women.’\textsuperscript{58} Ashoka’s daughter Kasturi was then a year and a half only, but that did not stop her from taking up the assignment which meant that she would have to stay away from her home for a long period. She decided to go to Lakshmipur Police station area. Both her husband and her mother-in-law supported her decision.

Ashoka Gupta along with Dr. Phulrenu Guha and Phullarani Das of the AIWC toured Noakhali from 7\textsuperscript{th} to 13\textsuperscript{th} November with their headquarters at Lakshmipur. They visited about twenty villages including Bejoynagar, Ahmadinagar, Angilpur, Parbatinagar, Jahanabad, some portions of Hamchandi, Hansbadi, Dalalbazar, Charmandal, Tumchar, Charruhita, kalirchar, Abdullapur, Piyarapur, Banchanagar, Charlamachi, and Lamchari etc. Most of these villages were inhabited by backward Hindu communities of Namasudras and Jugis origins. Ashoka was quick to detect a common pattern in the attacks. In most villages a large number of houses including the handlooms were burnt to ashes and houses that escaped destruction by fire were plundered. Many villagers had fled and some of them who stayed back were forced to

\textsuperscript{57} In the Path of Service, p.93.

\textsuperscript{58} Ashoka Gupta, Noakhali 1946: Working under the Guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, published in Trauma and the Triumph, p.160.
live under improvised sheds. On 8th November, they saw two burnt down houses on their way past Banchanagar and heard that no one was left in the villages. They also heard that all the Hindus had left Majupur and Aurangzebpur. Hindus were terrorised by a number of ways. In some cases, Hindus were accused of setting fire to the houses of the Muslims. In some cases Hindus were forced to leave their villages as they were threatened by the Muslims that without this they would face false accusations that they were guilty of burning down the houses of the Muslims. In Angilpur for example, Hindus were accused of setting fire on two rooms of a Muslim house, while in Sanarpur the fleeing villagers informed them that it was actually the Muslims who had set fire on their own houses and then put the blame on the Hindus. In Gourinagar, they found that only one Hindu family was living and they were in a terrified state. On their way to Ahladinagar, Ashoka found that many villagers were preparing to leave either by boat or on foot. Ashoka and her teammates tried to assure them that they should stay back given the fact that they had lovely paddy crops in the fields. Such assurances gave them some confidence and some of them even returned. In Ahladinagar, most of the inhabitants were Jugis. Here the pucca house of Radhamohan Nath, a wealthy, influential man, was burnt down and nearly 500 people had taken shelter there. Even hospitals were not spared from these barbaric attacks. On 9th November, they found that the big hospital of the Naths in Sahapur was looted and the

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60 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Handwritten Diary written in Bengali on Noakhali by Ashoka Gupta, Speeches/Writings by her, translation mine.

61 Ibid, translation mine.

62 Ibid.
house of the Acharyas was reduced to ashes, no Hindu was left there. They also came across a number of cases where Hindus were falsely implicated of burning down the houses of the Muslims. In Parbatinagar, they heard that a Hindu was wrongly arrested for such a crime while in South Hansbadi, they found that three members of the Saha family, namely, Jogindra, Indrachandra and Prangopal were arrested on the charge of setting fire on a local Muslim’s house. They also came across cases where Hindus were forced to give donations to the League. In Bejynagar, they found that one thousand rupees were forcefully taken as donations for the League. In Hetampur, Jahanabad and Hasnabad, no house was either looted or burnt down, but the villagers had to give donations for the League. After touring these villages Ashoka and her teammates felt that the Hindus were living in a terrible terrified state as thirty-four Hindus were arrested in different cases. They also witnessed the devastation on a massive scale. In Dalalbazar, the landlord Nalini Kishore Ray’s house was almost reduced to ruins while in Charmandal where most of the inhabitants were Namasudras (numbering about 6,000), most of the houses were burnt down, though the Hindus did not leave as yet. Here 17 quarters of Ramesh Das was burnt down. In another Namasudra village Charruhita, at least 125 houses were burnt down, though none had left. In Tumchar of the twenty-eight houses, eleven had been burnt down. In Piyarapur most of the Hindu houses were burnt down.

63 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Handwritten Diary written in Bengali by Ashoka Gupta, Speeches/Writings by her.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.
Secondly, Ashoka and her teammates observed that conversion under threat of death was universal, but at the same time they acknowledged that though conversion saved life, it did not protect the house from loot and arson.\textsuperscript{68} After conversion, women had to break their conch bangles and rub off the vermillion mark on their parting. The places of worship were defiled and Hindus were forced to eat beef. On 8\textsuperscript{th} November, when they were touring the villages, they found that a group of Hindus belonging to the Nath community was fleeing Sanarpur and they informed Ashoka’s team that they were all forcefully converted to Islam, conch bangles of the married women were broken and vermillion mark was rubbed off. Jagabandhu Debnath of Parbatinagar also informed them that in his village, all were forcefully converted to Islam. In Ahladinagar and adjoining villages, after conversion, women were forced to remarry their husbands; even a fifty-five year old woman was not spared. In Hasnadi and Panchbari prayer rooms were defiled by cow slaughtering. In Mirzapur they heard that a cousin boy and a girl were married off after conversion. In Haschadi, conversion as well as looting took place in Bholanath Saha’s house. In Tumchar, they found that cow was slaughtered and places of worship were defiled. In Dasgram they found that even minor boys were involved in breaking of conch bangles and rubbing off vermillion mark. On 15\textsuperscript{th} October in Rajendra Sen’s house, everyone was converted and a fatwa was issued that no Hindu would be allowed to live in the village unless they were converted to Islam. In Abirnagar, every convert was asked to write his previous name and present name in a piece of paper. In Kalirchar in Dwarikanath Mistri’s house, everyone was converted to Islam and the attackers even

\textsuperscript{68} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Sub: File no.1. See also Hindustan Standard dated 20\textsuperscript{th} November, 1946, Special Branch File no. PY-660/45, 1945, West Bengal Police Archive.
destroyed the vermillion and the conch bangles, hidden in the garden.\textsuperscript{69} In some cases, the team noted, that Hindus were aiding the Muslims. For example, in Banchanagar (no.4 Union), one Rajendranath was acting as informer of the Muslims and was keen to accept Islam and was pressurising his wife for the same.\textsuperscript{70}

Thirdly, the team noted that in most cases, culprits were known persons belonging either to the same village or neighbouring villages. Some of the culprits came from the Western char (a strip of sandy land rising out of the bed of a river or a sea above the water-level). Not only were the victims pressurised not to mention any names but were also threatened not to lodge any statements with the police. After talking to the victims, Ashoka and her team found that copies of written statement submitted in the police-stations reached the majority community within twenty-four hours.\textsuperscript{71} In Parbatinagar they came across some of the Hindus who could identify the Muslims who were involved in anti-social activities, but did not dare to mention their names out of a fear of further molestation. In Hasnadi, they met Captain Abdul, son of Ismail Byapari, who hailed from West Hasnadi. That this man, was involved in conversion, breaking of conch bangles of women and many other things, was confided to the team by the Hindus. In Charmandal, the Muslims were terrorising the Hindus by saying that the military and the volunteers would not be there forever. After that the Hindus would be at the mercy of the Muslims. Here they came to know that two Hindu men - Gopal and Ramgopal were threatened by the Muslims that if

\textsuperscript{69} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, \textit{Handwritten Diary written in Bengali by Ashoka Gupta, Speeches/Writings by her.}

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{71} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, \textit{Sub. File no.1.} See also Hindustan Standard dated 20\textsuperscript{th} November, 1946, \textit{Special Branch File no. PY-660/45, West Bengal Police Archive.}
they dared to depose before the police, they would be cut into pieces. In Piyarapur, they came to know that some Muslims namely, Mijanur Rahaman, Abdul Haque, Abdul Kader, Sirajul Haq Bhuiyan and others had compelled the Hindus to convert to Islam under life threat. They were forced to marry their daughters to Muslims and give donations to the League. The Hindus had reportedly agreed, but in spite of that the Hindu houses were set on fire. In kalirchar, in a peace committee meeting, Muslims had reportedly told the Hindus to give statements to the police without mentioning any name; otherwise, Hindus had to face the consequences. So after touring the villages the team got the impression that the Hindus were in a tormented state and did not dare to depose before the police. Also, there was considerable doubt whether they would ever be able to make any statements, if they decided to stay on. So her suggestion was:

unless protection is guaranteed truth cannot be told by those who are staying on, it can only be told by those who have left the villages for good and do not propose to come back.

The group observed that the government relief, had not reached these villages until the 12th of November and food shortage was acute. The price of rice was at Rs.20/- per maund but the people having lost everything in the riots virtually had no buying capacity at all. A few cattle, betel nuts and coconuts were the only possessions that they were left with but these commodities had no selling price. Moreover, in riot torn villages most people were suffering from lack of clothes.

72 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library(New Delhi), Handwritten Diary written in Bengali by Ashoka Gupta, Speeches/ Writings by her.

73 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Sub: File no.1, See also the Hindustan Standard dated 20th November, 1946, Special Branch. File no. PY-660/45, West Bengal Police Archive.
possessing not more than a piece of cloth and almost no utensils. Ashoka also noted that a considerable number of people were suffering from diseases like Malaria, or Cholera and felt that unless a special effort was given people would die without any medical aid. She observed that though there was a good possibility of aman harvests in the ensuing months yet, the Hindus were afraid to go near the fields. They tried to assure the fleeing villagers not to go away, leaving behind their crops, betel nuts and coconuts. Sometimes they were successful in convincing the people to get back to their villages. They also came across cases of forcible stealing of betel nuts and coconuts. In Lakshmipur, for example, a man from Bejownagar informed her, that one Muslim named Asiruddin of Namaz Ali’s family had been stealing coconuts and betel nuts from Jagatchandra Balaichandra Majumder’s house. But the family was too scared to protest. In Charmandal too they came across such cases. Ashoka felt that the Hindus were too scared to protest and even if they protested, it meant little.

Ashoka and her team also started collecting statistics of crimes committed against women. They observed that even women were not spared from physical assault. In Bejownagar, for example, Harimohan Chakraborty’s mother suffered a neck injury when her necklace was forcibly taken away. In Charmandal too they came across a case where a sixty year old Saraswati Sundari, was hit hard in her waist as the rioters attempted to take away the money and the ornaments that she

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74 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi, Sub: File no.1, See also the Hindustan Standard dated 20th November, 1946, Special Branch. File no. PY-660/45, West Bengal Police Archive.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her.
had tugged under her waist in a pouch. They also came across cases of forcible marriage, molestation and even rape. Young girls, who had not yet reached their marriageable age, were not spared. But it was not easy to extract information from the victims. ‘Sometimes we had to talk to them alone for a long time before they dared come forward with their pitiful story.’

On 10th November when they were touring the villages, they came to know that a married girl Haridasi aged 17/18 years was abducted by the Muslims. She was freed a day later. In both North and South Haschadi, they discovered that several attempts had been made by the Muslims to forcibly marry the Hindu girls. In North Haschadi they came to know that the family of Gourchandra Nath had been compelled to arrange a marriage of their eleven year old granddaughter Surbala to a Muslim. But on the evening of 6th November when the family had refused to comply with the proposal, the bride’s uncle had been tied up and Sona Miyan’s house was set on fire. But when the Muslims surrounded Gourchandra’s house, the women had managed to flee to the jungles. Similarly, in North Haschadi Ras Govind Jugi’s widowed daughter-in-law was pressurised to marry a Muslim. They also managed to escape.

In Charmandal every women, including the married and the widowed were coerced to marry Muslims. Here they also came across cases of molestation of young women. Pramila, daughter of Jogindra Halder was tortured in the rear garden during the riots. In Charruhita, a number of forced marriages took place which were even solemnised by the Maulabis. Aushya Miyan by threatening Rajani Halder with a sickle, forcibly married his already married 12/13 year old daughter,

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78 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her.


80 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her.
Karunya. Along with the daughter, her aunt and mother were also taken away. On the third day of the incident, when her family tried to bring them back, they were allowed to return. Similarly 10/11 years old Abala was forcibly married to Anu Miyan, son of Tayeb Ali. The girl abducted on that night, but was returned to her family the following day. The girl’s family was threatened by the Muslims. Nirmala, aged 9/10, daughter of Radhamohan Sarkar was forcibly married to Manu Miyan, son of Julal Ahmed. The girl was then staying at her parents’ house. In one incident, Gagan Chandra Majumder was attacked with a knife because he somehow managed to stall the forcible marriage of his niece Karunya to Majidullah. In one or two cases, the women escaped the horror of forcible marriage by either fleeing to their relatives’ houses or to their husbands’ house, in case of married girls. In Tumchar too, such forcible marriages took place. Bindhu Basini, aged ten, unmarried, was forcibly married to Palla Miyan of Charruhita, and the marriage was conducted by the Maulabi of Charruhita. The girl’s father was threatened by a sickle. The girl was asked to eat beef and even raw beef was thrown at her. The girl’s aunt, however, succeeded in persuading the groom’s family to bring the girl back to her family. But Ashoka heard that the girl was to be taken away by them again. Manitara, aged 12/13, daughter of Chandrakanta Talukdar was forcibly married to Labja Miyan, son of Majid Ali.\(^1\) Luckily many parents of the girls did not consider such marriages valid and brought back their girls after the disturbance was over. In some cases, however, forcible marriages were averted, after persuasion by the girl’s family or by the timely intervention of the neighbouring family. In some cases refusal to forcible marriage resulted in the house being put on fire. In Dasgram, Iyadullah,

\(^{1}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her.
Abdul Chhamant Munshi and Machhlanda Maulabi had proposed marriage to Khagendra Majumder’s daughter Menoka. When the Majumders fled, the three Muslims allegedly looted the house and set it on fire. Similarly Banikanta Das’s house was burnt down, as he refused to marry her daughters to the Muslims. The scheduled forcible weddings of Brajomohan Das’s daughter Pranpriya and Parvati Das’s daughter Haripriya were stalled because of timely intervention of the army in Lakshmipur.\(^{82}\) Like the testimony of Manikuntala Sen during the Calcutta riots of 1946, where a section of Hindu women had aided their men in acts of violence, similarly Ashoka saw that a section of Muslim women too, did not prevent their husbands from committing atrocities on women. In Dasgram, Anasua, wife of Upendra Das confessed to Ashoka that when she was hiding in Korban Ali’s garden, Nur Miyan’s wife told her: “Why do you flee? Be of our religion, eat beef and get your daughters married to our family”\(^{83}\)

There were also cases of molestation here. Sudhakar Das’s eligible daughter, Nayantara, aged fourteen, was abducted by Nurachora, taken to Charruhita and molested. Pankajbala, aged seventeen/eighteen and married was also molested in the garden. When her mother-in-law passed away, the Muslims did not allow the body to be cremated, instead they floated the body in the river. In Charruhita, Ali Ahmed Munshi tried to get Anandasundari, daughter of Bhairav Majumder, married to Sadulla. But they refused and as a result Sadulla ill-treated her.\(^{84}\) Ashoka’s experience also pointed out that even a section of educated Muslims were not against such forcible marriages. She noted that in Charruhita Sashi Majumder’s daughter Sudebi Sundari,

\(^{82}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, *Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her.*

\(^{83}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{84}\) *Ibid.*
aged ten was married to Sayed Ahmed, who belonged to a doctor’s family in Tumchar. In Charruhita they also came to know of the Muslims who played a leading role in torturing the Hindus.\(^{85}\)

Another serious point that she and her teammates raised was the misuse of the Red Cross badges by the majority community. They noted that a number of local volunteers wearing Red Cross badges not less than 1900 belonged to the majority community who were regarded a terror to the affected people. They stationed themselves at cross roads or ferry ghats (a landing stage as on the bank of a river, pond etc.) to get information of the newcomers. She noted that even those who were accused of hooliganism were freely wearing Red Cross badges. These volunteers allegedly arrested innocent Hindus on false charges of arson.\(^{86}\) On 9\(^{th}\) November, she and her team met Mr. Makinani, D.M. of Noakhali and discussed with them the immoral practices carried out in the name of Red Cross. They also questioned the necessity of deploying 1900 volunteers for relief work. Dr. Guha, one of her teammates had a heated argument with Abdul Hakim, M.L.A over the irregularities that were taking place in the name of Red Cross. They also met the D.S.P and circle officers and learnt that all Hindus, detained had been granted bail.\(^{87}\) More alarming,

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\(^{85}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, *Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her*.


\(^{87}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, *Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her*,
was the fact that except at Lakshmipur, the team did not notice a single Red Cross milk centre or evidence of any activity in the area that they toured.88

But in the days of darkness, not all human values were lost. They found out that some Muslims, even at the cost of risking their lives, had tried to save their neighbours. Generally they found that the older generation was more or less united in condemning the violence. Some of the Muslims were even ready to identify the perpetrators.89 In course of their tour, in Ahladinagar, they went to the house of Nabab Ali Chowdhury, a benevolent Muslim whose family expressed grief on whatever happened here. In Parbatinagar, the Hindus informed them that a group of benevolent Muslims had really helped them during the riots. In Tumchar too, they met a number of Muslims who had helped the Hindus.90 But she noted, that the younger generation of Muslims did not think like their seniors. She wrote: ‘We met very few young Muslims who talked to us frankly about the incident.’91 She herself faced an unpleasant situation during one of her trips to the interior. Once, when she along with two boys, was going to the villages to distribute relief materials, they were obstructed by Ghulam Sarwar (a riot accused) and his men. Later, a local M.L.A intervened and asked her to go alone. She wrote: ‘I put forth my views very strongly and would not back down. He [the M.L.A] swore that I would not be allowed to go to the villages in

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89 Ibid.

90 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Handwritten Diary on Noakhali, Speeches/Writings by her.

91 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Sub: File no.1, See also Hindustan Standard, dated 20th November, 1946, Special Branch File no.PY-660/45.
the future.’ After her return, she sent a report to Gandhiji informing him how local Muslim workers were unnecessarily hampering their work.

In this way for a month they toured the villages to have first-hand information about the situation. They also distributed relief materials. But when they asked the villagers to return to their villages, they refused. Also their efforts to rescue the abducted girls came to a nought. She wrote: ‘We never found the abducted girls. How well organised the villagers were! Where had they taken the girls, where had they hidden them?’ Moreover, even if a girl returned, she was afraid to admit that she was raped for fear of social stigma. So, at this stage Ashoka was quite frustrated and disheartened. She now decided to seek Gandhiji’s advice in this regard and wrote a letter to him on 6th December, 1946. Gandhiji was then in Srirampur where a camp had been set up in a burnt down house. In the letter they informed Gandhiji that she and Phullarani Das, on behalf of the AIWC, Chittagong branch, had started their work centering Lakshmipur. But as they had small children at home, they could not stay there for more than fifteen days at a stretch. She also informed Gandhiji that in three villages under Lakshmipur P.S, namely Gopinathpur, North Hamchadi and Khyazpur near Hasundi villagers had respectfully received Gandhian line of thinking and promised to return to their own villages. They then sought Gandhiji’s advice for their future course of action. Gandhiji replied (on 11.12.46): “I take you at your word and say nothing in reply to your letter except that I shall be glad to see you, when you

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92 In the Path of Service, p.93
93 Ibid, p.94.
come and discuss things."\(^95\) Ashoka along with her husband and Phullarani Das and her husband, Ranen Das went to meet Gandhiji. In the meeting, Ashoka proposed that she would work in the villages for fifteen days without a break and then she would return and thereafter, Phullarani would take charge. This way, she thought, they would be able to take care of their household and their children to a certain extent.\(^96\) But Gandhiji argued that “... working for a few days, then returning home, would bring no results. Any sort of work that one undertook, must be done with complete concentration and involvement.”\(^97\) He then further said to them that if they took their small child with them in the villages, then in the situation that was prevailing there, their children might be in danger. Moreover, the workers might have to make supreme sacrifice in course of their work. He told them: “Unless you prove to the villagers that before harming your own children, no one can cause any harm to the villagers, you cannot request the uprooted villagers to return to their own villages.”\(^98\) Saibal Kumar Gupta, present at the meeting commented that Ashoka and others did not realise before that their idea of working in rotation was actually the sign of their mental weakness.\(^99\) Ashoka now informed Gandhiji that she was ready to take up the challenge. But Saibal Gupta now raised an objection on the ground that workers could

\(^{95}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Gandhiji, Sub: File no.1. See also Ashoka Gupta, Noakhalir Durjoger Dine (The Difficult Days of Noakhali), (Kolkata, Dey’s Publishing, 2003), pp.61-62. Translation mine.

\(^{96}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Sub: File no.1. See also Noakhalir Durjoger Dine, p.62. Translation mine.

\(^{97}\) In the Path of Service, p.75.

\(^{98}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Sub: File no.1. See also Noakhalir Durjoger Dine, p.62. Translation mine.

\(^{99}\) Saibal Kumar Gupta, kichhu Smriti Kichhu Katha (Some Memories Some Tales), (Kolkata, Bhibhasa, 1994), cited in Noakhalir Durjoger Dine, p.63. Translation mine.
endanger their own lives, because their life was their own. “But does a mother have any right to endanger the life of an innocent child?”

Saibal Gupta even proposed that he would at once resign from his official post and accompany his wife. To this Gandhiji replied: “Now I require only your wife.”

Gandhiji then resolved the issue between husband and wife. He said that a small child needed her mother more than her father. Therefore, the child must accompany her mother. He also advised Ashoka not to take any decision in haste. Addressing workers like her, he said that they should go to such villages, where everybody had fled out of panic. The villagers would find the courage to return looking at them as their role models. Or they could visit those villages where all the inhabitants were Harijans who had not left their villages but their backbone was broken. They had to be protected from terror and despair.

Ashoka was also reminded the fact that once she took up the task, she would not be able to look back. Her husband could come and meet her at his convenience but she would not be able to return without completing her work. In spite of so much hardship ahead, Ashoka informed Gandhiji that she was fully prepared to take on the challenge. A young playmate was also to accompany her to look after her small daughter Kasturi in her mother’s absence.

Ashoka and Phullarani, started working in Parbatinagar first. After breakfast, they used to go out with relief materials and select a house in a locality as their base for the day. From here, they toured the village and met the villagers. In the

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101 *In the Path of Service*, p.96.

evening, after returning to their camp, they would hold prayer meetings. In this way she and Phullarani worked more than a month in Parbatinagar and Majupur. Most of the inhabitants were weavers. Their houses were burnt down. She noted that even looms, *ghanis* (a large block of wood used in grinding oilseeds to express oil from them), *dhekis* (a kind of husking pedal operated in a seesaw manner) were either destroyed or made unworkable, if they had escaped fire. She realized that it was indeed, difficult to rehabilitate these people.

After working a while, Ashoka decided to set up a base for herself. She selected Tumchar, a Harijan village for this purpose. Meanwhile, Phullarani had to go back due to personal reasons and Sneharani Kanjilal took her place. They set up their base in the house of the Talukdars-the most prominent family in Tumchar. They dug three trench-latrines for the camp inmates and visitors. She recalled that her Girl-Guide training came handy in this regard. The Talukdar family showed the place where a cow was slaughtered and beef was cooked which the family was forced to eat. The young girls of the family were sent to safer places.

She noted that their arrival in Tumchar, certainly gave the local Hindus some sort of encouragement. But their condition was deplorable. She wrote: ‘There was no stock of food-everything had been looted. There was no place to work and earn something.’ Even the Talukdars were surviving on the fish of their pond. They first started distributing relief materials received through the Union Board, AIWC, Congress and other organisations. Relief materials were distributed among riot torn Hindus as well as poor Muslims. They also took the initiative to rebuild the destroyed

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103 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), *Sub: File no.1.*

104 *In the Path of Service*, p.98.
houses. But, in spite of their efforts, Ashoka found that they were unable to win the confidence of both the communities. Though the Hindus did repair their houses, they still lacked the confidence to stay on; it appeared that they were actually bidding their time. On the other hand, the Muslims were, in general, antagonistic to workers like her, as the Muslims felt that all the work of the relief workers were meant only for the Hindus. The attendance of Muslims in prayer meetings too was very low.

During this time, she and Sneharani Kanjilal started reading the Quran under the guidance of a Maulabi, who was a follower of Gandhiji and used to attend his prayer meetings. Gandhiji always believed that studying other religions helped one to understand the unity between all religions. So the Maulabi suggested that in order to understand Islam better they should read the Quran. Both Ashoka and Sneharanani took the challenge. After walking a mile or so, from 7-30 every morning they began to study the Quran. One day the Maulabi’s mother- an ordinary village woman came to meet them while they were reading the Quran. After talking to them, she came to their side and lifted the veil on their head and informed them that one should always cover his/her head while reading the Quran. Ashoka felt embarrassed and later wrote: ‘... how easily an illiterate village woman made us understand that whatever we do, we should do it with respect.’\textsuperscript{105}Ashoka’s husband however, became anxious when he learnt that a section of the orthodox Muslims had written to Gandhiji that no one other than the Muslims had the right to read the Quran. So, he feared that her wife might become a target of the Muslim fanatics. However, luckily, no unpleasant event took place.

\textsuperscript{105} Noakhalir Durjager Dine, p.14.
For three months she was fully immersed in relief work which included organising medical teams, rebuilding houses, undertaking repairing of roads, sinking tube wells, talking to the local people and visiting villages and camps. On behalf of the AIWC, they were running three camps in Majupur, Parbatinagar and Tumchar. One thousand fifty-five persons were taken care of at camp no.1, one thousand one hundred and five persons in camp no.2 and eight hundred persons at camp no.3.\textsuperscript{106} On 11.1.47, she on behalf of the AIWC, Parbatinagar camp, Rescue, Relief and Rehabilitation Committee, Noakhali, wrote to Mr. Zaman, Additional Magistrate, Relief, Noakhali, to supply dried potatoes, dried cabbages and dried onions at their Parbatinagar, Majupur and Bejoynergur camps because the village people were unaware of cooking these dried things. So she wanted the cooking to be done under their supervision and they were also willing to take responsibility of the distribution of the cooked stuff which would be done keeping in mind the taste and the needs of the people.\textsuperscript{107}

From the last week of December to the second week of January, 1947, she along with other workers visited a number of houses in no.4, 5 and 12 Unions to assess the situation. While about 200 hundred refugees from different places had gathered in the Majupur camp and the surrounding houses, about 100 people were staying in a place near Majupur. That a section of people were still willing to come back to their villages was demonstrated by the fact that in Parbatinagar camp in no.5 Union, about 300 people had returned to their villages during the last six or

\textsuperscript{106} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Sub: File no.1.

\textsuperscript{107} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mr. Zaman, dated 11.1.47, Sub: file no.1.
seven days. She also felt that as people had lost almost everything in the riots, adequate foodstuffs in the form of rice and atta should be provided to them by the government until the people were in a position to resume their work which was weaving. Almost every house was looted and she noticed that few handlooms had escaped damage. So, resuming their traditional work was indeed difficult. Barring the families which possessed some amount of paddy lands, the rest had been turned into paupers. So the condition of the refugees was really pathetic.

She further noted that government policy instead of making the lives of the victims easier was actually making it difficult. First there was an unnecessary delay in sanctioning gratuitous relief in the shape of grains. The refugees were being asked by the R.O. to produce U.F.C Ration card or relief cards. But most of the refugees could not produce the card after the loot or arson; and relief cards could not be produced by people coming from distant places as they were issued at Lakshmipur. So she suggested that either identification by their neighbours or a responsible person at the time of grain distribution should be considered sufficient by the R.O. Secondly, she pointed out that there should be free grain distribution at no.5 Union, Parbatinagar and no.1 Union, Hamchandi. Grains were used to be distributed according to a list prepared by the Presidents of the Union Board. But, as many had come afterwards and so if the list was strictly adhered to, then she feared that not even 1000 of the refugees would be covered by the stock. Due to such a policy many were on the point of starvation. The inhuman face of relief policy was once again demonstrated by the fact that for the last three months, free grains were not


109 Ibid.
distributed among the affected people in no.13 Sakchar Union of Lakshmipur. When a
list was indeed made, it was done by persons who never visited the villages after the
riot. She pointed out that the affected people were willing to prepare a classified list
themselves under the supervision of any responsible organisation or person. That the
authorities were indifferent towards the plight of the homeless people was borne by
the fact that on 8.1.47 a number of refugees including 44 women, 56 men and 20
children including a new born baby were driven out of the high school refugee camp at
Lakshmipur by the President of No.4 Union without providing them any alternative
arrangements. Citing such pathetic incidents, she requested Mr. Zaman to consider the
interests of the homeless people as a priority.\textsuperscript{110}

She also felt that more money should be spent by the authorities to provide poor relief in addition to the special relief given to the affected people. She felt that gratuitous relief should be given to all persons. The quantity of rice and atta distributed in Lakshmipur area should be increased because the need of the people was so great after the riots that even refugees from far off areas could not be given any rice. So an increase was absolutely necessary so that ordinary general relief normally given in December and January could be continued.\textsuperscript{111} She felt that if only special relief was given to the affected people and normal relief was altogether stopped then it would be unjust for the poor people and would also put the relief workers in an uneasy situation. Workers like her were there not only for relief and

\textsuperscript{110} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), \textit{Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mr. Zaman, dated 11.1.47, Sub: File no.1.}

\textsuperscript{111} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, \textit{Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mr. Zaman dated 15.1.47, Sub.File no.1.}
rehabilitation but also to bridge the gap between the two communities.\footnote{Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), \textit{Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mr. Zaman dated 15.1.47, Sub.File no.1.}} So she felt that both general relief as well as special relief was to operate side by side.

It dawned upon her that the villagers who were slowly getting back to their villages lacked even the basic necessities due to inadequate government relief. So she felt that if generous contributions in the form of blankets, sari, dhoti, baby’s garments etc. were not given, the incoming refugees would, in every possibility succumb to cold and other diseases. She thus noted that no blankets or clothes were supplied by the government. She also found that the government allotment of two seers of grains (rice or atta) per head per week was not sufficient. Not only was milk not supplied to the villages by the government, it was only the Red Cross which was supplying milk in one or two places. There was also a dearth of doctors and medicines in many villages.\footnote{Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, \textit{Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to the Secretary of the Varnasram Swarajya Sangha, Beneras, dated 18.1.47, Sub: File no.1.}} So the refugees were really in a wretched condition.

Meanwhile a government order had arrived in February, stating that a relief officer would be entrusted to disburse compensation in cash to the riot victims in March. But Ashoka and other workers found that the terms of the G.O was rather vague. According to the order, Rs.250 was to be disbursed to each household while Rs.200 would have to be given to every weaver, fishermen or peasant for procuring tools or implements subject to the production of proofs. Ashoka found the order unjust as Rs.250 was inadequate for large joint families. She met the Additional District Magistrate, Mr. Zaman to explain the loopholes and the officer gave him the necessary document, so that no affected person was deprived of compensation. The
disbursement took place in Charmandal for two days. Ashoka with her workers were present with their own list and saw to it that nobody was left out. When a widow was wrongfully deprived of her compensation, by the President of the Union Board, on the ground that the surviving family members would take care of her, Ashoka took up her case. She argued that the widow had a room and a cow which was slaughtered, cooked and fed to the family. Ultimately the Relief Officer was forced to give the woman compensation. Ashoka later recalled that the aforesaid event had created quite uproar in those days.114

On 28th February, 1947, Gandhiji, then staying at Haimchar, convened a meeting of all the workers working in Harijan villages. In that meeting Gandhiji announced that he was leaving Noakhali for Bihar where a terrible communal riots had erupted. Ashoka and her co-workers were visibly upset at this as Gandhiji’s presence was a major source of inspiration.115 Observing their distress, Gandhiji promised them that he would return to Noakhali soon. Before parting his last advice to the women workers was:

You women must be like Mirabai. If like her, you truly believe that the path you have chosen is the rightful path, then you will also take everyone around you on that path. You will never look back.116 He also advised the workers to live and behave like the villagers, only then would the latter have complete faith on them.117 That is why he was delighted when he heard on one occasion that Ashoka had to walk about nine miles to reach her camp.

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114 In the Path of Service, p.105.
115 Ibid, p, 102.
During the next few months she along with other workers started visiting villages and localities according to their list. She went to both Muslim and Hindu houses to converse with the family members. However, in most Hindu families the women were either sent to the Laksh mipur camp or to other safe places. In Muslim families the women sometimes complained to them that the workers were here only to serve the Hindus, while the poverty of the Muslims were overlooked by the workers. Ashoka and other workers tried to convince them that as the Hindus were the victims, the preference should be given to them. But the workers would also distribute clothes, medicines and other necessary items to needy Muslims. Ashoka recalled they even proposed to send the camp doctor. While a section of the Muslim women gladly accepted their offer, Muslim men generally were indifferent to their efforts. Ashoka also found out that earlier the Hindus were healthy and strong and were capable of physical labour as well. But the riots had devastated them both mentally and physically. Without a source of livelihood, she noted that, they managed to survive somehow. But communal harmony could not be restored between the two communities despite the workers’ best efforts. They gradually realised that they were not going to succeed in this regard. Harassment by the majority community continued unabated. On one such cases of harassment, Gourango Sarker became the victim, when a road was ordered to be constructed right through the middle of his arable lands. After all his pleas had gone in vain, the man came to Ashoka for help. After a lot of efforts Ashoka was able to halt the work for four-five days. Later, the A.D.M. Mr. Zaman surveyed the land and assured Ashoka that the land would be

118 In the Path of Service, p.106.

119 Ibid. p.106.
saved. Unfortunately, Gourango Sarker died shortly due to cholera epidemic, though Ashoka suspected that there might have been a possibility of a foul play in his death.\footnote{Noakhali Durjoger Dine, p.42.}

In another case a refugee attempting to take fuel and wood on his way was ill-treated and abused by a Muslim.\footnote{Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, \textit{Letter by Suresh Gupta, dated}, 2.1.47, \textit{forwarded to Ashoka Gupta,. Sub: File no.1.}} Moreover, as the Hindus had sold their cattle and paddy at a low price for fear of loot, it caused a problem for future cultivation as the prices of commodities continued to be exorbitantly high.\footnote{Ibid.}

Despite her group’s efforts to recover the abducted girls Ashoka found out that they were not successful in this regard. The main hindrance in such a task was that very few women were ready to admit that they were molested or raped. She found that only about 25\% of the returned girls admitted that they had been raped or molested.\footnote{In the Path of Service.} Such refusal to admission was born out of a fear of social ostracisms – which was alarmingly high among the people. Ashoka noted that in few cases abducted girls were taken back by their families, but in innumerable cases the families disowned such girls or in some cases the abducted girls were unable to overcome the trauma. Ashoka admitted: ‘Very rarely were we able to succeed in such situations.’\footnote{Ibid, p.108.} She remembered one incident in Bejoynagar where even after two months of her return to her home a married woman was forced to come to the Union Board Office late at night and then molested every night.\footnote{Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, \textit{Sub: File no.1. Also cited in In the Path of Service, p.108.}} They admitted to Ashoka
that they were afraid of lodging a complaint in the local police station. Ashoka was able to persuade them to come to Lakshmipur Police Station, but the woman and her husband were too terrified to mention any name. With no other option in sight, they fled to safer places. Ashoka was disheartened and wrote: ‘I did not have the strength either to punish the culprits or to protect the tortured. We were mere helpless spectators.’

An important part of their rehabilitation programme was to make arrangements for children and women who were guardian less. Ashoka at first used to make a temporary arrangement either in Lakshmipur camp or in some family. Later they were transferred to Kasturba Trust in Comilla or the Prabartak Sangha in Chittagong. In Majupur they came across two orphan children—a boy and a girl, who were growing up in their maternal uncle’s house. But during the riots the uncle and his wife were burnt to death. The D.M. Mr. Macinarni sent the two helpless children to Ashoka. Due to her effort, the boy was rehabilitated in Prabartak Sangha and the girl in Comilla. In another case, a woman expressed her desire to rehabilitate two of her sons somewhere. Eventually they were rehabilitated in Prabartak Sangha. In Comilla the Kasturba Trust used to run a girls’ school. Gradually the number of students increased here. Labanyalata Chanda was in charge of the school.

During the summer, in mid-April, there was outbreak of Cholera. At first, Ashoka sent Dr. Palit who used to live in Ramanandi village, with injections. But unfortunately Dr. Palit himself became a victim of Cholera and eventually died. As they

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did not have enough stock of medicines in the camp, she went to Dattapara to collect medicine and arrange for the visit of a medical team. The team arrived on the next day.

When she was thus busy with her relief work, she had no inkling of the possibility that the Partition of India was increasingly becoming a reality day by day. They did not have radio or newspapers. So they were completely in the dark about the decisions that were being taken in the corridors of power. She wrote: ‘Perhaps I was like the one-eyed deer- I was so busy dealing with the problem in front of me that I had no time for reality.’\(^{128}\) It was Sucheta Kripalini, who after learning about the outbreak of Cholera, informed Saibal Kumar Gupta to take back her wife and daughter.\(^{129}\) In May her husband was transferred to Calcutta to work for the Partition Committee. Now Ashoka had to leave to take care of her two children. She requested Sucheta to help her in winding up the camp. Gandhiji still wanted Ashoka to stay for a few more months. But Sucheta convinced Gandhiji that it was really an emergency for Ashoka. Before her departure, she distributed all the relief materials, left with her. Sinking of tube-wells was still going on. She also completed the task of inoculation in her area. She did not forget to make financial arrangements for the children she had rescued and sent them to Prabartak Sangha, so that they would not have to face any financial problems after her departure.

Ashoka considered her days in Noakhali as the most rewarding and memorable period in her working life. She wrote:

\(^{128}\) *In the Path of Service*, p.111.

\(^{129}\) *Ibid*, p.111
The work was fulfilling because we were trying on the one hand to bring about an attitudinal change among the strong and on the other helping the weak become strong and courageous.\textsuperscript{130}

The fact that she found acceptance among the people can be gauged from the number of letters she received during the riots, found in her private papers. The subject matter varied from plea for financial help by the students or complaint against harassment of the victims by relief officials or women writing their own experience. Also the workers working in different areas used to maintain regular correspondence with her to seek her advice from time to time.

As regards her personal life the Noakhali episode was the most difficult phase in her life. Her husband supported her endeavour throughout and took care of their two children in her absence. But no doubt he was worried about Ashoka’s safety and the primitive conditions in the camp in which their little daughter was living. But gradually a sense of unhappiness arose in him about this forced separation and how long it would continue. ‘Once he wrote that he felt like just leaving everything and coming away to join me!’\textsuperscript{131} Ashoka was no doubt worried about her family, as she wrote ‘...but my intensely busy life and my deep commitment to Gandhiji’s words made me determined to complete my work and not thinking of my returning home as yet.’\textsuperscript{132} She also recalled later that during her Noakhali days, how her daughter Sakuntala’s teachers in their small ways extended their support to her family. When the principal and another teacher found out how Ashoka’s husband was struggling to plait his daughter’s hair, they made an arrangement whereby Sakuntala could change

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\textsuperscript{130} Ashoka Gupta, “The Joys of Social Service,” A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{131} In the Path of Service, p.110.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid, p.110.
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her dress in school, her hair would be tied neatly before going home. Such gestures really moved Ashoka and made her feel that she ‘had a solid support system behind’ her.\textsuperscript{133}

5.9. The Partition: Its Social Effects and Streams of Refugees

When she arrived in Calcutta there was still violence going on, in spite of Gandhiji’s arrival at the city on 7\textsuperscript{th} August. On Gandhiji’s advice, they organised a women’s meeting after 16\textsuperscript{th} August at the University Institute. Here, H.S. Suhrawardy, the mastermind behind the Great Calcutta Killing on 16\textsuperscript{th} August, 1946, was also present. The crowd in the hall was naturally agitated to see him. In the meeting, Gandhiji again appealed for Hindu-Muslim unity and said that no Muslim should leave India and no Hindu should leave Pakistan.\textsuperscript{134} His last instruction to the women was that women should patrol their locality in groups to maintain communal harmony. It was during one such peace march on 1\textsuperscript{st} September, 1947, that Sachin Mitra, one of her dear colleagues, was stabbed to death.

She observed that for the landowning East Bengali families, leaving their ancestral home and land was indeed a painful decision. Those who owned land were financially very stable. They had paddy from their lands, fish from the pond and enough coconut palms and betel nut plums – so they never had to face any shortage of food. Ashoka felt that there was enough space for everyone to live comfortably and there was more than enough food for all.\textsuperscript{135} Referring to her

\textsuperscript{133} In the Path of Service, p.88.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, p.115.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, p.117.
husband’s family, she recalled that during vacations, the entire family retired to their ancestral home at Bhola and they had a happy get-together; but such a way of life was dependant on its landed property, and this became the first casualty of the Partition.\footnote{In the Path of Service, p.118.} The East Bengalees were deeply attached to their native home and fields. But during the partition, she observed that the communal hatred or mistrust between the two communities was so strong that it induced many to abandon their homes for an uncertain future. In the process the joint family set up broke down. Often the old parents or a young brother stayed back to protect their family home. There was also the possibility that those who stayed back would face the conversion to Islam, as religious coercion was quite strong during the riots. Young women however, could not be left behind at any cost. Women were kidnapped and raped, and this according to her was one of the major reasons behind people leaving their home and hearth. She observed that unlike in Punjab where open killing and abduction took place, marriage followed, in Bengal often the kidnapped women were kept alive in utter humiliation and unspeakable torture of the flesh and the spirit.\footnote{Ibid, p.125.} Another consequence of the partition, was the assertion of the Muslims for a higher place in the social strata. In East Bengal, Muslims were considered socially inferior. But in the aftermath of the riot, the Muslims started demanding equal status with the Hindu middle class. So, in some cases, Ashoka felt, the Hindus decided to migrate not out of a fear of life, but out of uncertainty that they might lose their social dignity.\footnote{Ibid, p.126.} She also pointed out that both Punjab and Bengal bore the brunt of Partition. But in the case of Punjab, the entire
family either migrated or stayed back. So the fragmentation of the family which took place in Bengal, did not happen in case of Punjab.

It was Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, the first Chief Minister of West Bengal who entrusted social workers to knit woollens for the refugees in Punjab, who were without warm clothes. Apart from the AIWC, other women’s organisations like the Punjabi Mahila Samiti, Gujrati Mahila Samiti, Maharashtra Mahila Samaj, All Bengal Women’s Union were involved in the task. The first Governor of West Bengal, C. Rajagopalachari provided space to them to stock the materials, while Dr. Prafulla Ghosh, provided them a car twice a week. The workers would distribute the wool among the various organisations and would collect the finished products after few days. Ashoka Gupta’s daughter Kasturi recalled that bales of jungle green merino wool were gifted from Australia and some of these were stacked in the long verandah of their house. Ashoka also employed a number of women, interested in such voluntary works. She also started playing an advisory role to different organisations. To raise funds for the refugees different welfare organisations came together and a cultural programme was organised under the banner of the AIWC in 1948. Women from different parts of India, participated in the show, held in New Empire Theatre. A sum of Rs.9000 was raised by the show and none of the participants took any money for the show.

When she was thus busy in relief work for the Punjabi refugees, she admitted that, she and others had no inkling of the problems that would soon

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139 In the Path of Service, p.128.

erupt on the Eastern side, resulting from the partition. Unlike in Punjab, where complete transfer of population had taken place, there was no real influx of refugees in West Bengal, between 1947 and 1949 where it happened in the truest sense. Even the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru asserted that in spite of the Partition, the Hindus would remain in East Pakistan, as there was no real enmity between the two communities. Most of those who came during this period usually came for a few days, to explore the possibility of a new life. They normally stayed with their relatives. For those who were coming from East Pakistan, a reception centre was set up in her house where all the details of the incoming people were recorded; problems like arranging medical aid or helping them to locate relatives etc. were taken care of. She mentioned that although the passport system had not yet been introduced, the people coming from the other side, were subjected to harassments like minute questioning, inspection of their belongings or even making them part with their money or jewellery. From 1949 onwards communal disturbances started surfacing in Khulna and Barisal. By the end of 1951, she pointed out 28 lakhs Hindus had crossed the border and entered Assam, Tripura and West Bengal. In 1950 The Nehru-Liaquat Pact was concluded which arrested the flow of the refugees temporarily. As a result of the pact, the Indian border was sealed, and the passport system was introduced. But in 1953 about 3,00,000 to 4,00,000 people migrated to India. The influx continued unabated, and by the end of 1956, the total figure of refugees, who came to India was

141 In the Path of Service, p.119.
142 Ibid, p.119.
143 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), A Note on Rehabilitation of Refugees from East Pakistan, Sub: File no.1.
approximately estimated around 39 lakhs. But the real figure, she argued, was much higher than this, as many families who crossed over, never sought any government help. Many had relatives on this side who helped them to resettle. Some settled on their own initiative. About the refugee influx she wrote:

I had never seen such a vast tide of humanity as at that time. It was the same at all the borders: at the Bongaon Border, at the Gedey border, at the Darshana border or at Sealdah. Many came almost empty-handed. In India, neither did they receive any monetary compensation, nor any evacuee property as in Punjab.

Ashoka felt, that the partition took its greatest toll from the women; left with no other source of livelihood, they often resorted to immoral ways of earning. She said, ‘We used to hear that in these colonies, girls could be picked up at any hour.’ The girls were tortured and exploited. Workers like Ashoka Gupta tried to rescue some of them and offer vocational training or sewing lessons. But she admitted that ‘... how much money could something like sewing bring in? Especially when one’s very sustenance, the medical treatment of one’s family, depended on it?’ She noted that trafficking of women, increase in looting or burglary were all signs of that moral decline. The concept of a nuclear family, comprising a son, wife and aged parents also started taking shape during this period. The unmarried sister or widowed aunt was to be sent to another camp. Old age camps sprang up in Dhubulia, Kalaikunda and Dudhkundi. Old age homes were also started in Belur and Kashi.

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144 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), A Note on Rehabilitation of Refugees from East Pakistan, Sub: File no.1.

145 In the Path of Service, p.127.

146 Ibid, p.135.

147 Ibid, p.135.
5.10. Plunging into Refugee Rehabilitation Work

When streams of refugees started arriving in West Bengal, Ashoka noted that there was no readiness to accommodate these unfortunate uprooted people. She termed the situation in Sealdah Station as ‘chaotic.’\textsuperscript{148} The AIWC sent its workers to the Sealdah Station and the volunteers worked in groups, led by Mira Dutta Gupta and Snehalata Kanjilal. The volunteers maintained a roster and worked accordingly. Similar work was also carried out in border areas. Ashoka noted: ‘The team work was very efficient, particularly as there was no political interference, no political overtones.’\textsuperscript{149} Those who stayed on the platform of Sealdah station, were served \textit{khichdi} every day. She wrote:

No one kept track whether the children had eaten, or whether the food was edible or not. Mothers did not know whether the children could be sent to school. Old people were extremely upset. There were no facilities at all.\textsuperscript{150} She herself witnessed the deplorable condition that was prevailing at the camps in Titagarh, Ranaghat and Dhupguri. She wrote:

Just a roof put up overhead somehow, nothing else whatsoever. A weekly dole would be handed to the refugees. Eight rupees for the children, twelve for the adults. A single family got eighteen rupees. But no constructive measures had been taken for them.\textsuperscript{151} She also found out that the administrative system was faulty. She wrote:

The superintendents of the camps had no authority at all, all they could do was to write to their superiors who would petition further higher-ups, and so things went on. If the

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.122.

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Ibid}, p.123.

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Ibid}, p.138.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ibid}, p.138.
superintendent asked for some relief material, there was no surety that he would get it.\textsuperscript{152}

The callousness of the rehabilitation policy, she pointed out, was well borne out by the fact that the government had introduced a provision that while crossing the border; the refugees would have to fill up a questionnaire, revealing a detailed information. But as nobody, ever went through these records, the refugees never got any monetary compensation for what they had left behind in East Pakistan.

So she plunged deeper into relief work. The tasks were manifold. First, the refugees who had no friends or relatives were sent to AIWC centre at Bethune Row or to the Nari Seva Sangha or All Bengal Women’s Union. Secondly, girls were sent to women’s camps in Titagarh or the Refugee Colony. Thirdly, younger ones were put in schools. A programme for adult education was also started and arrangements were also made to ensure that adult refugees could earn something on their own. School certificates issued by schools and colleges in East Bengal had to be revalidated in India and many new schools needed to be set up.

In West Bengal, a number of refugees started living in slum areas of Beleghata. They did not have any employment opportunities. So, the AIWC started a centre in the Miyabagan slum of Beleghata where refugees were given training in making \textit{papad}, spinning wool etc. Adult education programme was also conducted here. There was also a school for the children. Those who visited the centre often contributed some money with which a feast was organised for the children.\textsuperscript{153} Ashoka along with Karuna Gupta, Phulrenu Guha, Maya Dutta Gupta, Renu Sarbadhikari and

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\textsuperscript{152} In the Path of Service, p.136.
\textsuperscript{153} Ashoka Gupta, “Joys of Social Service,” A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta, p.28.
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many other committed social activists worked hard for the AIWC. In North Calcutta, they looked after the vocational training centre where refugee women were trained as nurse aids, housekeepers, social workers, primary school teachers and canteen workers. At the request of the Bengal government, the AIWC also started vocational training for the refugee women at Titagarh. On behalf of the AIWC, Ashoka also ran the Nirasroy Abasan i.e. home for the homeless. She recounted that once a girl had fallen ill while receiving training in a centre and had to be admitted to the hospital. After she recovered, the centre refused to take her back. Nowhere to go and no source of livelihood, she wrote to Ashoka about her plight. Ashoka after much effort brought the girl back and provided shelter at Nirasroy Abasan. The girl she noted with satisfaction, completed her B.A through sheer hard work, and even secured a job later on. Such incidents convinced Ashoka that, ‘In the field of social service, just as one cannot ignore the social problems in general, ignoring individual, personal problems does not really lead to much progress.’

Engaged in relief work she came to realise that there was vast inequality in the rehabilitation policy with regard to Bengal and Punjab. ‘. . . What they [the East Bengalee refugees] got from the government were like crumbs when compared with what the refugees from West Punjab received.’ With regard to monetary compensation, she pointed out that the Government of India had given 26 crores of rupees by way of compensation to the West Punjabi refugees, Rs.7.28 crores

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156 In the Path of Service, p. 137.
as business and trade loans, 190, 00 persons had been housed in evacuee houses left by Muslim migrants.\textsuperscript{157} All their houses and the compensation money had been given according to the statements made by the refugees themselves.\textsuperscript{158} But on the eastern side of the border, the refugees were given a loan of Rs.250 for house-building, not a grant. Moreover, she pointed out, that since the loan was disbursed in three instalments (Rs. 50 in each instalment), the refugees were unable to meet their requirements needed to raise a hut, at one time. Consequently the hut could not be raised. This was something she herself witnessed. While new townships like Faridabad came up for the Punjabi refugees, in Bengal there was no system at all. In Punjab the Ministry for Rehabilitation had set up a committee for rehabilitation, headed by Mrs. John Mathai. Witnessing such inequalities in the policy towards Punjabi and Bengali refugees, social workers like her demanded that a similar committee should also be set up for the Bengali refugees. Such a committee known as the Committee for the Resettlement of the East Bengal Refugees was established under the leadership of Central Rehabilitation Minister, Sri Meher Chand Khanna. Ashoka was made a member of the committee. Other members included Purabi Mukherjee, Deputy Minister, Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department West Bengal, Seeta Chowdhury, Romola Sinha and others. Representatives from West Bengal, Tripura and Bihar attended the committee meetings.

The committee discussed and compared the situations in West Bengal and Punjab and attempted to indicate the reasons behind such inequities in the two provinces. The members desired to review the comments of an eyewitness who

\textsuperscript{157} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), \textit{A Note on Refugee Rehabilitation from East Pakistan}, Sub: File no. 1.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
might have the first hand experience of the different measures undertaken for the Punjabi refugees. It was largely due to their insistence, that Sri Meher Chand Khanna was forced to set up a body of non-official women social workers of West Bengal which was to visit several Homes and training centres for refugees, women and children in the states of East Punjab, Pepsu, Delhi and to make a detailed study of the steps taken to rehabilitate them in those states. Ashoka headed the team and Bina Das, Sheila Davar, Sudha Sen of the AIWC, Amar Kumari Verma and Suniti Pakrashi, Deputy Director of the Women’s Cell, Government of West Bengal were the other members.

The report they submitted was titled as the Report of a Tour of Inspection of Some of the Refugee Homes in North-Western India. The team in March, 1955, visited a number of institutions to study their way of work. Some of the institutions they visited were Bapu Industrial Training Institute (Dehradun), Gandhi Banita Ashram and Lady Kusum Trivedi Sevasram in Jalandhar, Widow’s Home (Hoshiarpur), Kasturba Sevasram (Rajpura), Kasturba Niketan (New Delhi), Kingsway Colony Work Centre, Women’s Home in Faridabad, Central Infirmary (Rewari) and others. After visiting these institutions they made a detailed comparative analysis of what the refugees got on both sides. Some of the key points they highlighted were:

1) In Punjab, the problem was promptly recognised and therefore early construction of new townships like Faridabad with all facilities led to the permanent rehabilitation of the refugees. In Bengal, with the exception of Fulia no such townships were set up which could permanently rehabilitate the refugees.

2) The reception camps, homes, training-cum-work centres and infirmaries were of better quality. Most of them were permanent buildings with running water, separate
kitchen and proper sanitation. In West Bengal most were bamboo huts with CI roofs which needed frequent repair. Such was the deplorable condition that even jute godowns and aluminium huts for storing grains were used as reception camps. The Permanent Liability camps, the team noticed lacked basic amenities like kitchen space, adequate water supply etc.\textsuperscript{159}

After witnessing these differences, Ashoka felt that the inability to provide homes was the main fault of the rehabilitation policy here. She wrote: ‘Everything remained at the level of camps, . . . it was like living on a platform.’\textsuperscript{160} She felt that if a policy of giving a family a house was followed, it would have yielded better results.

3) In Punjab each person received a cash allowance for food together with an amount of Rs.2 per month for clothing. In the work centres like the Kasturba Trust the workers received wages for their work without any reduction in their maintenance dole. In West Bengal cash dole for food was not paid at uniform rates for an adult and a child. The scale of doles was also low, compared to what was given to the Punjabi refugees. Also in West Bengal there was no regular work centres in any P-L camps and homes for the aged. Such work centres came up in some camps, only for a short period and no wages were paid for the goods produced by the trainees on the ground that expenses for their food and clothing were borne by the government. This was one of the reasons, the team noted, why women were reluctant to come to the work centres. Moreover, the refugees instead of a cloth allowance were given clothes supplied by

\textsuperscript{159} Ashoka Gupta, Bina Das, Amar Kumari Varma, Sudha Sen and Sheila Davar, \textit{East Is East, West Is West}, published in \textit{Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India}, pp. 244-245.

\textsuperscript{160} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.141
the Department without considering the requirements of the refugees. The team also found that the bedding provided was unsuitable for humid weather in Bengal.\textsuperscript{161}

4) In Punjab, Homes were a complete unit with all facilities like hospital, crèche, pre-basic schools, and middle schools. Arrangements were also made with outside institutions for those who wished to study further. In case of West Bengal, no Home or P.L. Women’s camp had pre-primary schools or crèches.\textsuperscript{162} Ashoka noted that except for a primary school, there was no school. Therefore, girls were sent to organisations like Ananda Ashram or NSS while the boys to Ramkrishna Mission for their education. This way the family members got separated.\textsuperscript{163} In Punjab the team noted that the trainees received grant for equipment, raw materials other than stipend. But in West Bengal, grants for women were very meagre. While on average per capita Rs.25 was spent in Punjab for P.L. category Homes to cover all expenses, in Bengal it was only Rs.14 per capita.\textsuperscript{164}

After a detailed study, the team suggested some corrective measures:

1) All the Permanent Liability Camps and Infirmaries should be given the status of “Home” and “Work Centres.”

2) There should be permanent structures, instead of present huts with kitchen and bathrooms. Each Home should have nursery schools and arrangements should also be there to send grown up children to general public schools to complete their education.

\textsuperscript{161} \textit{East Is East, West Is West}, published in \textit{Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India}, pp.245-246.

\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Ibid}, p.247.

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.141.

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{East Is East, West Is West}, published in \textit{Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India}, pp.248-249.
3) The superintendent of the Homes should have powers similar to that of Punjab of drawing and disbursing, sanctioning leave and making purchases.

4) The scale of doles should be given in the same way as that of Punjab. The cloth allowance should be paid in cash. Inmates should be allowed to take temporary job outside, for which leave should be granted.

5) New arrivals should be admitted after enquiry, but for old hard cases, there should be non-official committee to scrutinise their genuineness.

Lastly, they reminded the government that the refugee problem in West Bengal was not likely to be a closed case as that of Punjab. It would be unwise on the part of the government to fix any date and to declare all arrivals after that date illegal. They suggested that doors of India should be kept open for any Hindus coming to India permanently from East Pakistan due to political turmoil.\(^{165}\)

The Committee from time to time, suggested the Union Ministry, various measures, regarding the different aspects of rehabilitation. On 25\(^{th}\) November, 1955, at a meeting, the Committee opined that Tripura should have a separate Home-Cum-Training centre, an Infirmary and a camp for unattached displaced women or/and old and infirm persons. In the same meeting the Committee approved West Bengal Government’s proposal to enhance the scale of clothing for the inmates of Homes and Infirmaries on condition that expenditure should not exclude Rs.24/-per annum. But the Committee felt that the cost of blankets and winter garments should be excluded from this amount, as it was not possible to provide the same with this amount.

\(^{165}\) East Is East, West Is West, published in *Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, pp.250-251.
Moreover, the scale within the stipulated amount might vary according to individual requirements.\textsuperscript{166} The committee recommended that the scale of expenditure for funeral and \textit{sradh} should be raised from Rs.25/head to Rs. 40/head. Similarly, the Committee recommended that the amount of marriage grant should be increased from Rs.200/- to Rs.300/- for women living in Homes, Infirmaries or camps for unattached women. At Titagarh Camp II, the Committee recommended the setting up of a Boys’ Home, while Titagarh Camp-I was to be reserved for expansion of the Titagarh Training-Cum Work Centre.\textsuperscript{167}

The Advisory Committee at its meeting on 9\textsuperscript{th} April, 1956 also recommended certain steps regarding the training and production centres for refugee women. The meeting was chaired by Ashoka Gupta. The Committee suggested the following measures:

The post-trainee workers should be given a maintenance allowance per month to meet the expenditures on food, clothing, medical charges etc. during their advanced training in Production Centre. The money for meeting the expenditure on food should be paid to them in cash in the first week of every month. The dependents of the post-trainees should get cash dole at the usual rate (Rs. 12/-per adult, Rs.8/- per minor). In order to keep up the good incentive of the good workers, 25% of the wages, earned by the workers should be given to them, while 75% of the wages should be deposited in their Postal Savings Bank Account. For uninterrupted production and prompt execution of order, the Production Centres should have a Revolving Capital for purchasing raw

\textsuperscript{166} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), \textit{Sub: File no.2}.

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Ibid.}
materials and payment of wages to the workers. There should be separate fund to meet other expenses so that the Revolving Capital did not get affected. The Committee also suggested that training in administrative principles, principles of co-operation, procurement and timely execution of orders should be imparted to the trainees. Also each production centre, after the period of advanced training, should be converted into a co-operative with the same post-trainees. The production centres should also be located near the rehabilitation sites where transport facilities were available. Lastly, the Committee suggested that the post-trainees should be given rent free accommodation for two years over and above the house-building grant and loan. \(^{168}\)

The Committee also observed that in many cases, both male and female inmates of different age groups in Homes/Infirmaries found it difficult to get gainful employment after their training. Such difficulty led to a delay in their dispersal from homes. So, the Committee suggested that a course of intensive training for ‘Domestic Service and Attendance’ could be undertaken. The duration of the course would be roughly for a year. Fifteen to twenty trainees would be selected by each Home or Infirmary. Such trainees would comprise boys between 14 and 18 years of age who had failed or were reluctant to pursue academic studies or lacked interest in vocational training or widows aged around twenty five to forty-five years. In case of widows it was also indicated as to who would undertake this training, the custody of their children while in the Homes, or when they reached the prescribed age or qualified to be released from the Home where would they move to in future. After their training, the trainees would be on a three months’ apprenticeship in first grade

\(^{168}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Sub: File no2.
hotels/restaurants. The Committee felt that if implemented, the scheme would ensure good employment prospects. The Central Advisory Committee also recommended a fixation of Rs.32/- per child per month including Rs.2/- for education plus actual house rent paid by an institution.\textsuperscript{169}

At another meeting on 21\textsuperscript{st} February, 1956, the Committee recommended that the ban on the admission of children of working mothers into the Homes should have to be removed in view of the peculiar circumstances that some working mothers had to face. The Committee also made some recommendations:

1) A working mother earning not more than Rs.60/- per month would be exempted from making any contributions for the maintenance of her children. The government should bear all the cost.

2) A separate home was to be established for the maintenance and care of the children of the working mothers earning around Rs.60/- to Rs.100/- per month. Suitable contribution would be made by the working mothers. The children of working mothers earning more than Rs. 100/- per month would not be admitted into these homes, except in exceptional cases.\textsuperscript{170} These recommendations did not find much favour with the Union Rehabilitation Ministry on the ground that this sort of scheme would attach additional liability on the government as the latter was already committed to the maintenance and care of a large number of persons. The Union Minister, therefore, urged that only children of widows who were eligible for admission to homes, but

\textsuperscript{169} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), \textit{Sub: File no2.}

\textsuperscript{170} Ib\textit{id.}
were living outside and were unable to maintain their children, might be considered for maintenance by the Government.  

Gradually, Ashoka and her co-workers started taking classes in Titagarh, Chamta and other camps for young children as well as elderly people. Every Thursday they visited the camps, arranged for textbooks, taught them and assigned homework to the pupils. They also selected suitable persons to take charge on other days. Ashoka noted that in their endeavour, government help was negligible. The government absolved its responsibility by providing them with a vehicle. Expenses for books and materials and other necessary things were borne by different welfare organisations.

Nevertheless, two milestones were reached by Ashoka and her colleagues with regard to rehabilitation - one was the establishment of the Mahila Seva Samity-a voluntary welfare organisation for women and Adi Buniyadi Vidyapith, dedicated to the spread of education among girls belonging to the downtrodden section of the society. Mahila Seva Samity was established in 1947. Dr. Prafulla Ghosh had appealed to all the voluntary organisations to come together and set up a committee, to help the unfortunate people coming from East Bengal, especially extending a helping hand to the women and the children. Thus was formed the West Bengal Emergency Relief Committee. The Samity started operating from the Raj Bhavan garage and continues to do so till date. Subsequently, under the guidance and patronage of West Bengal Governor, Dr. Rajagopalachari, the committee was registered as a Society in 1956, in the name of Mahila Seva Samity in order to function

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171 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Sub: File no2.
as a full-time organisation. Apart from Ashoka, some of the other founding members were Amar Kumari Varma, Charushila Dhar, Labanyaprabha Dutt, Maitreyi Dhar, Sushila Singhi and others. Ashoka became the President of the Samity. At the initial stage, the Samity set up a number of Weaving Centres in Refugee camps and trained over 3000 weavers and spinners. Gradually, a Handloom Unit was set up in the out-house premises at Raj Bhavan and at Chowhati Camp, Sonarpur to train women in weaving. After the training, the Samity also used to make arrangements for suitable employment for the trainees. The main production centre of the handloom unit started operating in 1956 and was located in Rajpur, in the vicinity of Kolkata, where many refugees who were weavers by profession, came to settle after the Partition. The handloom shed-cum-community hall was started in 1963 and was completed in 1978 with a grant from Central Social Welfare Board as well as public donations. The equipment was also provided by the Board. The unit produced items like swabs, dusters, Khesh and table mats. The weaving unit gradually expanded and according to the Annual Report, 2013-14, it had 100 looms with an ability to take in 5 more. Gradually the Samiti introduced other activities like child care centre (crèche), a children’s park and a Balwadi at Chowhati, Sonarpur, in South 24-Parganas in 1954, in a rented house. In 1960, the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation, allotted the organisation a plot of land measuring 0.92 acres in Rajpur in the village of Gajipur. A monetary grant was sanctioned in 1961 by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation for constructing the boundary wall to facilitate the starting of Pre-basic school and Vocational Training centre for women. To make the women financially self-sufficient,

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173 Ibid.
the Samity imparted vocational training of different sorts. The Samity also started a Spice Unit in the 1960s with the aim of rehabilitating destitute women in the locality who did not have any other skills. Later a food processing unit was also started. Other programmes included Short Stay homes (providing shelter for a short period) and Swadhar Shelter Home for destitute women and girls abandoned by families, providing vocational training like weaving, tailoring, knitting, craft, crèche-mother training, fruit-processing and preservation, mushroom training, helper at old age home for the inmates, crèches for children of under privileged families, old age home, legal aid and family counselling. Currently the Samity has six crèches and receives grant from Central Social Welfare Board. Even after the death of Asoka, the Samity carries forward her legacy and is still continuing to do so.

Another key achievement in her kitty was the establishment of the AIWC Buniyadi Bidyapith in 1954. About the genesis of the school, Ashoka recollected that in the post partition years, the AIWC used to run a work centre in Miyabagan slum. As there was shortage of place there, they were looking for a bigger place in Beliaghata, Calcutta. In that area the Improvement Trust had encroached upon a number of houses for the purpose of widening the roads. Many such houses were vacant awaiting demolition. So, someone suggested, that till the time of demolition, the AIWC workers could hire such a house. So Monorama Gupta and Mira Dutta Gupta made an appeal to the trust for starting pre-primary, primary school and a work centre. They received on rent a garden house with a pond in the Marwari Bagan area of Beliaghata on a monthly rental of Rs.100/- According to the deal, they were to vacate the place within a month’s notice by the Improvement Trust. This was the
beginning of the school. At that time there were no primary or nursery schools for children in the surrounding areas, although settlements were slowly coming up in the region. While canteen and tailoring training was going on in the Miyabagan area, Ashoka also felt the need for crèche facilities for children. The Subhash Sarovar was being excavated around the area during this time. They, somehow managed to get hold of a small plot. So, a society was registered with Mira Dutta Gupta as the President and Monorama Gupta as Secretary and Ashoka as the treasurer. Later on Ashoka became the President. Other members were Ayesha Ahmed, Mira Sen, Charulata Mukherjee, Usha Halder, Sushama Basu and others. With public donations, infrastructures were slowly built up. But as the child population kept on increasing, a solitary unit of education became insufficient. So three Pre-basic and two Basic Education units were established. At present the school has Primary Unit 1 and 2, Secondary Section, the Higher Secondary Section, Kindergarten Section called Happy Home, Adult Literary Centre, Vocational Training Unit and Non-formal Education Centre. At present the school receives a grant from the state government and has a student strength of 1500.

Ashoka always felt that the rehabilitation policy suffered from gender-bias. She observed that while in Punjab, both boys and girls were going to schools, in Bengal the girls remained behind with their mothers. Older girls were sent away to various training centres. So, mothers were left only with their infants and

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175 In the Path of Service, p.142.
a general feeling arose that these women were not fit for rehabilitation.176

About the gender bias in rehabilitation policy she wrote:

Boys and men were given opportunities, they received plots, but not the girl. If an eighteen year old boy could be regarded as a suitable candidate for receiving a plot of land, why not a girl, who could then support her mother?177

Women workers had to fight a difficult battle against such a discriminatory policy and their efforts bore fruit when twenty plots were given to women in Bauria, Howrah district and in another place near Bauria women were given plots as the head of the family.178 Many women living in camps were not taken back into the family when their sons settled in the plots given to them. So, schemes had to be devised so that these women could earn a livelihood. Gender inequality existed even in the training programme. Training in farming was an exclusive one for boys; girls were not allowed here. The girls were trained in canteen management, stitching, embroidery and fruit preservation, which were seasonal. The Union Rehabilitation Minister, tried to link up Ramkrishna Mission and Ananda Ashram at a subsequent period, when land was allotted for the training of both boys and girls. Ashoka explained: ‘... these large technical training institutes we see nowadays had their genesis at this time.’179

From 1957 squatters’ colonies started coming up in and around Calcutta. As the government was reluctant to arrange shelter for them, the refugees located space for themselves in vacant lands. As at that time many army camps or runways or airstrips, were lying empty; the refugees began to build small homes in

176 In the Path of Service, p.142.

177 Ibid, p.142.

178 Ibid, p.142.

179 Ibid, p.142.
these areas through sheer determination and hard work. This was how squatters’ colonies came up. Ashoka admired the fighting spirit of these refugees. She wrote: ‘The refugees had got hold of bamboo and other materials, cut them to size and somehow managed to raise their huts practically overnight.’ During this time a delegation from Punjab visited West Bengal and Rameshwari Nehru as a member of this delegation expressed her desire to visit these colonies. Ashoka took her to Bijoygarh colony, previously an enormous airstrip. They saw that refugees, on their own, had built temporary houses with earth foundations and walls of bamboo matting. They had systematically divided the plots into two cottahs for each occupant, a school, a hospital, a clinic and shops had also come up. Rameshwari Nehru was quite impressed with the efforts of the refugees, though she was unaware of the fact that these were actually cases of forcible occupation. Ashoka’s personal opinion regarding such forcible occupation was that:

. . . if the government could provide no help, then this was the only way out. Either the voluntary organisations should step in to provide people these facilities, or they should take such steps themselves. Moreover, she pointed out that as most of these colonies came up on empty lands, this was the best solution to the problem. She wholeheartedly praised these refugees and wrote:

They[the refugees] were hard working, they had initiative, skill and the ability to plan. . . .These small colonies that came up almost overnight were a testimony to their courage and resourcefulness.

Ashoka pointed out that if enough land had been available, then with proper planning, the outcome would have been different. She pointed out that in places like Dhubulia,
Jhargram and beyond, vacant land belonging to the erstwhile Zamindars and British companies, could have easily been allotted to the refugees.\textsuperscript{184} She accused the Central government for overlooking the humane side of the rehabilitation policy. She wrote: ‘They were only concerned with saving expenditure. Only about 1/3 of the amount spent for the West Pakistani refugees was allotted to us.’\textsuperscript{185}

5.11. The Dandakaranya Experience

In 1957 the Government of India announced that refugees could no longer stay in camps. All camps, with the exception of Dhubulia, Rupasree and Cooper’s Camps, which housed old people, were gradually closed down, by 1958. In 1959 doles were also stopped and Government of India decided to rehabilitate some 45,000 families living basically on cultivation, who were still in camps, or on lands provided by the government. Of these 10,000 refugees were to be rehabilitated in West Bengal, and the rest, were to be sent outside the state. The Dandakaranya forest area was selected for this purpose. Ashoka has given a detailed description of this area. The area of Dandakaranya area was approximately 77,670 sq.km. spreading over the districts of Koraput and Kalahandi in Orissa and the district of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. Out of this area, the respective states had given the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA), around 155,236 acres of land. This according to her was able to rehabilitate around 32,000 people.\textsuperscript{186} Dandakaranya was a sparsely populated area and was not a very empty tract of land and the population consisted of tribals and

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{184} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.145.
\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Ibid}, p.146.
local people. Moreover, the Dandakaranya forest was infested with wild animals. Ashoka pointed out that though the Godavari River flowed within the region, but none of the camps were situated on the banks. Some of the areas of Dandakaranya, like the Malkangiri area was so dry that the possibility of a human settlement in that arid land was very remote. The refugees who left for Dandakaranya were treated shabbily. Each family consisted of an adult male, wife and minor children, the older children were not allowed to go with them. Each family received a lantern, a plough and a cow, and a tent along with a ration of three months’. In each village thirty families were rehabilitated. Their condition was deplorable. She wrote:

If the women sat to cook with the help of the lantern, the old people was left in the dark. If the men folk took his plough, there was no one to take his cow to the fields. Moreover, as she pointed out, while in Punjab, the refugees were given readymade houses to resettle, the refugees in Dandakaranya were given only tents. But as the Dandakaranya forest was infested with all kinds of animals, therefore, a tent was not enough to protect the people from an attack of wild animals, especially the women who were forced to live alone when their men folk were out on some work. There was also acute shortage of water and no steps were taken beforehand to excavate ponds to meet the water crisis. Only one tube well existed in a camp. Ashoka found the shortage of water most pathetic for the refugees as they were inhabitants of a land full of rivers and water. The mismanagement of the scheme was manifested by the fact that on their arrival day, the refugees were served khichdi but from the second day they had to make their own arrangements. But Ashoka pointed out:

187 In the Path of Service, p.198.
188 Ibid, p.147.
189 Ibid, p.147.
There were no plates or bowls or buckets. There was no water, no cooking utensils or arrangements, so how was one to cook? I have never seen such a terrible lack of infrastructure before.\textsuperscript{190}

Initially, it was decided that 7,000 families, i.e. a population of approximately 32,000 people would be rehabilitated in the Dandakaranya area. But in 1962, during the Indo-Chinese war, a new influx began. Around this time Ashoka's husband Saibal Kumar Gupta was offered the post of Chairman of the DDA. He joined his new position in November, 1963. Ashoka accompanied her husband and gained first-hand knowledge of the situation. Dandakaranya had three main centres-Malkangiri, and Amarkote in Orissa and Paralkote in M.P. The headquarters of Dandakaranya was at Koraput and the camps were situated at a distance of not less than 90 miles from there. She also pointed out that her husband was assigned two South Indian assistants who did not know the Bengali language and were therefore unable to interact with the refugees. The other staff members also lacked a sense of compassion for the refugees.\textsuperscript{191} In 1963, the refugees were sent to Dandakaranya, and it was decided that all the refugees would be settled there. But Ashoka pointed out that it was no longer possible as Dandakaranya had come to a point of saturation by accommodating 6,874 families up to the end of October, 1963.\textsuperscript{192} The refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya were at first kept at Mana transit camp, 9 miles off Raipur, M.P, presently the capital of Chhattisgarh and 150 miles away from Dandakaranya. Mana was an abandoned army camp. The condition in Mana was rather difficult. Ashoka wrote that Mana was a large treeless stretch of bone-dry land, unfit for

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.148.

\textsuperscript{191} \textit{Ibid}, p.200.

\textsuperscript{192} \textit{Dandakaranya: The New Home, A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta}, p.100.
agricultural purposes and extremely hot in summer. It was subjected to occasional outbreaks of cholera which she thought would in all probability increase with the crowding of many people. The wind velocity was strong too. It had electricity and power, but subterranean water resources were not yet explored.\(^{193}\) When streams of refugees were coming to Mana, the arrangement for accommodation was far from adequate. It had only two big open halls and about twenty work centres, whose normal capacity was only 1000. Half of these were pre-occupied by refugees, awaiting rehabilitation in villages. The capacity of the work centres, however, was increased to double by constructing small unit huts in between the old huts and in open spaces in and around.\(^{194}\) Ashoka further pointed out that refugees were arriving at a rate of 200 to 300 families, per day. To accommodate such a large population, two small families were accommodated in single fly tents and four families in each of the big Army tents, nearly 600 families were accommodated in the Industrial Estate Barracks in Bilaspur Road, two miles from Raipur, the rest were put under Shamianas (a canopy) at Mana and at Kurud, ten miles from Raipur.\(^{195}\)

She pointed out that under the existing system, the incoming refugee families were brought to Mana Transit camp from Raipur Railway Station. After their arrival, their names and family details were registered and medical check-up was done. Then they were provided with basic necessities like buckets, mug, hurricane, lantern etc. They were accommodated either in tents or under shamianas.

\(^{193}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Library and Museum (New Delhi), Present Position at Mana and the Gravity of the Situation, Sub: File no.3.

\(^{194}\) Ibid.

\(^{195}\) Ibid.
They were supplied with one cooked meal in the community-kitchen and were provided with dry rations or maintenance grant to make their own arrangements.\textsuperscript{196} Ashoka also highlighted the fact that the refugees were subjected to health hazards as they were living in a congested state in tents and directly under the sun in primitive conditions. Moreover, the children and even the elderly people defecated anywhere they liked. As kitchen blocks were yet to be constructed, the women cooked their food in open air, throwing dirty water or garbage everywhere. As a result flies were buzzing around the area. Therefore she felt that it was the foremost duty of the authorities to take urgent steps to tackle the situation and also to train people to improve their sanitary habits.\textsuperscript{197} She also observed that there was only one hospital with 16 beds and sick diet was not up to the expectation. Also there was daily one child-birth and many cases of advanced pregnancies. There was also a dearth of children’s clothing and baby sheets.\textsuperscript{198}

The refugees belonged to different walks of life. There were old and lone women, helpless widows, teenagers and orphaned children, as well as truncated families who had some of their members missing.\textsuperscript{199} Ashoka was particularly concerned with this problem and felt that the government because of lack of adequate staff or a body to guide them had not taken up the problem in right earnest.\textsuperscript{200} She felt

\textsuperscript{196} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Library and Museum (New Delhi), Present Position at Mana and the Gravity of the Situation, Sub: File no.3.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{200} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Ashoka Gupta’s letter dated 16.3.1964 to Mrs. Mathai, Chairman, Central Social Welfare Board, Sub: File no. 3.
that as the problem was growing, it would be better to make arrangements to take care of this vulnerable group in one particular area, before a scheme could be devised. She came up with the following suggestions:

1. Appointing one Lady Welfare Officer for each group of 100 families, 2. Appointment of three Welfare workers fluent in Bengali to the status of Mukhya Sevika (chief attendant) and one Welfare Officer to lead them for 300 families. She suggested that the Welfare Officer and the Mukhya Sevikas could be deputed either from the Central Board or from West Bengal or from Orissa or M.P. Board. Their duration of work would be for a minimum period of three months.  

Meanwhile, on Saibal Gupta’s insistence two Lady Welfare Officers were sent to assess the situation in this regard. According to the report prepared by the Lady Officers of the West Bengal Government, there were 229 unattached women and nearly 1000 orphans who had to be taken care of. There were also lone old men who needed to be looked after. To improve the situation, she recommended the following measures:

1. Due to a large refugee influx at Mana and the neighbourhood, it was necessary to post at least one Sevika per 100 families for social work instead of one to look after all,

2. A “Home” for the old, aged and infirm as also for lone and unattached women and children should be started,

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202 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Present Position at Mana and the Gravity of the Situation, Sub: File no.3.
3. Family Planning work had to take shape immediately in these camps. Some recreation centres and Balwadis (play schools) also needed to be opened where Sevikas could explain family welfare programmes,

4. In view of the sweltering summer there, she indicated a need for immediate construction of basha quarters. She also noted that at the Mana camp young girls from the age of twelve were eager to take training in crafts. But the women after standing in a queue for a long time for water, medical facilities or rations, had hardly any time for such training. Therefore she suggested that for a sizeable group of families there should be one craft centre. She also surveyed all the work centres and opined that all the work centres were to be put in one place where there was a strong Mahila Samity or a Committee which would take care of their personal needs and would have their aptitude tested for arranging future programmes. She felt that an immediate sanction of a condensed course, Balwadi and a craft centre for these women would be helpful.

Gradually, different non-official agencies came forward to serve the refugees. Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Indian Red Cross, Ramkrishna Mission, Missionaries of Charity, Calcutta Marwari Relief Society, AIWC, Calcutta Branch, Bharat Scouts and Guides, Gandhi Smarak Nidhi were some of the organisations engaged in relief work. The Central Social Welfare Board and M.P. State Board were responsible for coordinating the welfare work at Mana. Ashoka also gave a vivid description of the

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203 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Present Position at Mana and the Gravity of the Situation, Sub: File no.3.


205 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mrs. Mathai, dated 16.3.64, Sub: File no.3.
welfare work done by the voluntary organisations at Mana. With a view to meeting the urgent need for schools, both primary schools, consisting 1200 children and secondary schools consisting 78 children were started. The nuns of Missionaries of Charity, who were trained teachers, taught there. Mukhya Sevika of the West Bengal Welfare Advisory Board deputed by the Central Social Welfare Board instituted Balwadis consisting of 150 children that were run with the help of refugee girls.\textsuperscript{206}

The Indian Red Cross Society took charge of health care, by setting up a hospital for convalescent children with 65 beds. Nursing training for refugee girls was also organised by the same organisations where twenty-four girls successfully completed their training. Dr. Miss Gertrude of Missionaries of Charity took up the cause of children suffering from broncho-pneumonia, dysentery and diarrhoea. The Mukhya Sevika of the Central Social Welfare Board did the night duties and was also responsible for cooking and supplying the diet for the children. The refugee girls contributed their mite by cleaning the dormitory of the hospital, fetching water, washing clothes etc. Miss Paul of Indian Red Cross Society along with doctors and health visitors organised the Maternity and Child Welfare Centres.\textsuperscript{207}

To engage the displaced girls a volunteer corps was formed with 32 displaced girls. They were trained as Girl Guides and were engaged in distribution of clothes and gifts received through various donors, took patients to hospitals etc. Over fifty refugee girls who took training in craft classes were engaged in sewing uniforms

\textsuperscript{206}“Dandakaranya: The New Home,” A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta, p.103.

\textsuperscript{207}Ibid, pp.104-106.
for Balwadi children, girl guides and the volunteer corps. Some refugee girls were recruited as nurses and Balwadi attendants.\textsuperscript{208}

Ashoka also listed the items like buckets to carry and store water, washing soap, lanterns at night, sewing machines, yarn and materials for craft classes as urgently required commodities at Mana. She appreciated the fact that the refugees despite their sufferings had not lost their initiatives. Ashoka noticed that the refugees with a cultivating spirit, had carried bundles of seeds of all kinds with them and wherever they had gone, be it in tents or bamboo shacks or hutments, they had dug up a patch in no time and sown some of these seeds. They were always eager for land where they could sow these seeds,- that being their only asset from their ancestral land.\textsuperscript{209} She wrote: ‘I have seen women work day and night for their families and for their tiny little households in tents and then for their little kitchen garden.’\textsuperscript{210}

The refugee traders, she observed, were able to set up bazars with whatever little they had, but could not expand because of want of money. Similarly, professional people had registered themselves in employment exchanges, but available jobs were not enough.\textsuperscript{211}

In Dandakaranya where she had accompanied her husband, her job was both official and non-official. When her husband was on his official visits to the camps, she went with him and saw the conditions prevailing in the camps. She also interacted with the people to find out their problems and needs and sometimes read


\textsuperscript{209} \textit{Ibid}, p.108.

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Ibid}, p.108.

out the letters written by the women. She found the conditions of the refugees pathetic. She wrote: ‘Their daily struggle for survival was so awful that they did not even have the power to express themselves clearly.’\textsuperscript{212} The central government while transporting them had not even cared to provide them minimum basic amenities. \textsuperscript{(1)} They lived in tents, with only one lantern. As the Dandakaranya forest was infested with wild animals, they ran the risk of attack by the wild animals. She wrote: ‘Large sheets of tin had been dumped in the camps, but how were the settlers to make fences, walls, houses?’\textsuperscript{213} \textsuperscript{(2)} They were provided with only one lantern which was largely insufficient for a family of five or more. There were no provisions for kerosene, required for the lantern. There were only two tube-wells in an area. Ashoka wondered what would happen if one of the tube-wells went dry.\textsuperscript{214} \textsuperscript{(3)} The Dandakaranya scheme was so mismanaged that for finding tools like spade (needed for cultivation) or thread for weaving nets, one had to travel almost 95 miles, to the headquarters to get them. The result of such cumbersome process was that they often failed to obtain the necessary tools when required which hampered their work. \textsuperscript{(4)} Even the government failed to supply day to day articles like cup, saucer or pots. The refugees lacked necessary clothes as well – a fact particularly discernable for women. For a family of five or more, one blanket was not enough; moreover things assigned for the refugees were of the poorest quality. They had to do without their staple food i.e. rice and fish, and what was still more pathetic was that many refugees survived only on boiled

\textsuperscript{212} In the Path of Service, p.200.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid, p.200.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid, p.200.
barley.\textsuperscript{215} Medical facilities were also very poor. Accompanying Dr. Shankar Ghosh Dastidar, the local doctor, in his visits to the camps, she wrote: ‘He attended to the patients as best as he could under those primitive conditions.’\textsuperscript{216} She also observed that the government took no steps for the refugees’ education or entertainment. She wrote: ‘...the government never understood their need for learning, for recreation and took no steps to foster such development.\textsuperscript{217} The officials selected for DDA were the wrong persons as ‘They neither understood the language of the refugees, nor their needs and worse, had not the slightest compassion or sympathy for them’.\textsuperscript{218}

In 1964 Saibal Gupta resigned from his post dissatisfied with the government’s policy of not providing him with, necessary powers. But Ashoka continued her work even after that. She started organising Girl Guide camps in Dandakaranya. Many educative and entertaining programmes were organised which were a huge success. While working there, she realised that the government had absolutely no plans for generating employment for the refugees. The government washed off its hands in this regard, by providing them with some land and plough. This prompted Ashoka to write that Dandakaranya was:

. . . just like a concentration camp at that time. Or like the tea garden in olden times, where the children of the workers never went to school unless it was in the estate itself, and where they had no employment avenues except on the estate.\textsuperscript{219}

She felt that there was ample possibility of developing handicrafts amongst the refugees in Dandakaranya. She observed that raw materials for handicrafts like

\textsuperscript{215}\textit{In the Path of Service}, pp. 201-202.
\textsuperscript{216} \textit{Ibid}, p.203.
\textsuperscript{217} \textit{Ibid}, p.204.
\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Ibid}, p.205.
\textsuperscript{219} \textit{Ibid}, p.206.
bamboo, wood both soft and hard, fibres and grasses, bidi leaves, clay and crude metals were available in different patches, while jute, mesta, golden grass were grown in the refugee settlements. Cotton could also be grown in some parts. Secondly, hardworking cultivators both men and women could be trained in handicrafts which would stand them in good stead for six-seven months when they were forced to sit idle because of the arid lands. Skilled carpenters, weavers, bamboo workers, potters were to be provided with some kind of opportunities such as the weaving of fishing nets or poultry keeping, vegetable gardening, weaving, spinning, basket making, handmade paper making, file board making, and bidi making etc. Ashoka also suggested to Mrs. Mathai, Chairman, of Central Social Welfare Board that schemes mentioned above would be suitable for the work centres in Dandakaranya. For women she felt that stitching Katha and clay modelling could be a good option. For their training she suggested two options: (1) A group of ten to fifteen trainees could be sent to the Central Institute at Bangalore and (2) A training institute in the area would be of immense help in developing the handicraft programmes. For Transit camps she felt that bigger industrial programmes with larger employment potential would be advisable. She suggested that like Faridabad, the private sector should be approached to start up workshops.

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220 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Library and Museum (New Delhi), Letter written by Ashoka Gupta (recipient not mentioned), dated 17.2.65, Sub: File no.4.

221 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mrs. Mathai, dated 26.5.64, Sub: File no.3.

222 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Letter written by Ashoka Gupta, dated 17.2.65, Sub: File no.4.

223 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Letter written by Ashoka Gupta to Mrs. Mathai, dated, 26.5.64, Sub: File no.3.
Ashoka along with Kalyani Bhattacharya, set up the first *Mahila Mandal* in Kondagaon with a view to generating avenues of employment for the women. Here young girls were given vocational training, Girl-Guide training and the condensed course of study. The Kondagaon Mahila Mandal also undertook a scheme to train adult women in a course of studies up to class 8 so as to enable them to get jobs as nurses, mid-wife, teachers and Gramsevikas.\(^{224}\) Some of the women deserted by their families opted for this course. In an undated letter to Madhabi, Secretary of the Kondagaon Mahila Mandal, Ashoka informed her that the Central Social Welfare Board had verbally sanctioned the course approved by her. Regarding the course Ashoka suggested that if candidates were all from Bengali medium, then the course should have only Bengali medium. The syllabus of the DDA for Class 6, 7 and 8 should be followed. Moreover, the course should have full strength and that girls from Malkangiri and Paralkote should be included in the course.\(^{225}\) Ashoka was also instrumental in establishing the Pakhanjore Mahila Samity in March, 1964. The main objectives of the Samity was to inculcate a spirit of self-dependence and co-operation among the people especially women, so that they could set up vocational training institutes, and organise education and vocational cottage industry training especially for the poor. Orphans and illiterate women, were directed to set up child welfare units for the welfare of children and women of that area.\(^{226}\)

Some of the functions carried out by this Samity were:

\(^{224}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, *Ashoka Gupta’s undated letter written to Dr. R.C. Majumder*, Sub: File no.4.


\(^{226}\) Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), *Sub: File no. 4.*
1. Within a year, the Samity was able to start a crèche, attached to the Industrial Centre where both men and women worked. Female workers kept their children in the crèche, while they worked in the Centre. Clothes, milk and biscuits were supplied to the children by the Samity.

2. A nursery school called Bal Niketan was also started by the Samity for the children aged between 4 to 8 years. The school at that time had 30 students.

3. A handicraft exhibition was organised on 12.3.65 at Pakhanjore which was inaugurated by Ashoka herself. Garments, embroidery works were exhibited and sold.

4. The Samity from time to time also organised children’s functions as well as general functions.

5. To help women to become self-sufficient, the Samity used to give practical training to women for preparing pickles, sweets etc.

6. To raise funds in some occasions the members of the Samity used to sell tea, snacks and sweets to officers and employees of the Project in the zone.

7. The family planning programme was also undertaken and about twelve people of either sex had undertaken operation so far.\textsuperscript{227}

Ashoka was instrumental in collecting money and materials and sending them to Dandakaranya. Several voluntary organisations donated relief materials in different forms. The Women’s Co-ordinating Council, West Bengal, on her special appeal donated baby sets, frock (small and big), winter Punjabi, coat, vests,

\textsuperscript{227} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, \textit{Report given by Pratima Dutta Majumdar}, President, Pakhanjore Mahila Samity, dated 5.4.65, \textit{Sub: File no.4}.
blankets, half shirts etc. She also managed individual donations and utilised them in purchasing essential items like sewing machines, equipments for nursery and crèche, trunks for storing goods, play equipments for children, diet for sick children, bed sheet for children etc. They also received aid from international organisations like the Red Cross, and World Headquarters of the Girl Guides. She found that the task of distribution was not an easy job. While private organisations did it with perfection, the government agencies did it haphazardly. While distributing clothes, she felt that every member needed to be addressed and women and children should be given an extra attention, simply because a man could go around in just a lungi but a woman needed a petticoat and a blouse along with a sari. She also distributed “baby packets” comprising two large kanthas (a cotton wrapper or patched cloth), some small sheets and six set of clothes to the mothers with new-born babies. She personally visited the distribution centres in order to check whether everyone had got their share of clothes. Often the refugees in order to have a little bit of extra money, resorted to the selling of foreign materials which were of far superior quality.

But, alas! The efforts of the different voluntary organisations were not enough. She lamented the fact that the refugees never had enough for their needs and that they never had a satisfactory life. But the only consolation was:

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228 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Letter dated 6.12.63, Sub; File no.3.

229 In the Path of Service, p.207.

230 Ibid, p.207.

231 Ibid, p.207.
the next generation of the original settlers seem to have built a better life for themselves. Many refugees who settled elsewhere got citizenship certificates and made something of their new lives. Some even became Members of Legislative Assemblies.232

During those chaotic times Ashoka also chalked out a plan for refugee rehabilitation. She argued that rehabilitation primarily meant economic rehabilitation. Economic rehabilitation, according to her, meant a homestead more or less permanent. Refugees were to be put in a position to stand on their own feet, as early as possible instead of depending on doles (a point also highlighted by Renuka Ray). The homestead she observed had to be near the place of work in order to minimise journey. Secondly, work could be provided to the refugees in agriculture, industries, trade, professions or services. Thirdly, regarding availability of land, which was a major obstacle in the way of rehabilitation in West Bengal, she argued that a quick survey of all surplus land should take place. She suggested that the Sundarbans could be an option for refugee resettlement without reducing the area under forest. The Andamans should be reserved for East Bengalee refugees. Arrangements should also be made to release the lands, requisitioned by the Military during the last war. Regarding agricultural settlement she argued that it should be done within a very short time as a long period of idleness could destroy both the skill and the capacity for hard work. Regarding livelihood options for the refugees she argued that cottage industries could be a supplement to other sources of income. Moreover, refugee handicrafts require a marketing organisation which was costly unless the government was ready to bear the cost. Small trade could be a source of minimum sustenance, but it was precarious and uncertain. She argued that honest and deserving refugees could be given ration shops for their livelihood. A fair proportion of other trading enterprises

232 In the Path of Service, p.208.
run under Government auspices could also probably be made available to the refugees.\textsuperscript{233}

5.12. Ashoka on social issues: status of women and elderly persons

As a woman Ashoka was aware that women in India, generally enjoyed an inferior position. After independence, social attitudes towards women did not change much despite the constitution granting equal rights to women. The most significant right the women achieved after independence, was their right to vote. Still, Ashoka felt that women were handicapped by a number of factors. In an article named \textit{Nari O Shasontantro} (Women and Governance), first published in 1954, she pointed out:

(1) All sorts of work were not open to women. In spheres, where women had gradually earned their rights, did not enjoy equal status with men. Even after doing the same work, women were not paid equal wages with that of the men. (2) Women did not have the right to inherit their father’s property. (3) While framing the constitution, the opinions of the women were hardly countable.\textsuperscript{234} Though women were given the right to contest elections, the elected representatives too suffered from gender bias. She pointed out that when women were given portfolios, they were mostly given health or social welfare, implying that women were incapable of any other job.\textsuperscript{235}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{233} Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), \textit{Sub: File no.3}.


\textsuperscript{235} In the Path of Service, p.232.
\end{footnotesize}
argued that to enjoy all the benefits granted by the constitution, it was necessary to bring about a change in the mind-set of the people. In her own words: ‘... unless the prevalent discriminatory and oppressive social practices and legal disabilities are redressed, women will not be able to make full use of these rights.’

She suggested two urgent steps: (1) primary education should be made compulsory as girls lacked opportunities, (2) under-age marriages should be stopped altogether as it led to a malnourished life both for the mother and the child and (3) a daughter’s right to inheritance should be granted.

She was also concerned with the problem of violence against married women which was on the rise during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Violence took different forms - dowry deaths, wife –battering and intra-familial murders. She pointed out that the patriarchal set up of our society was responsible for such violence against married women. She wrote:

It is socially accepted that within the family the man is the “master” the “superior” and “dominant” person and the woman is inferior. She has to be submissive. Women themselves accept the subordinate role within marriage unquestioningly.

As women was generally considered to be the property of her husband, a husband’s use of force to make his wife submissive had some sort of social sanction. She wrote: ‘Aggression and violence are considered to be male qualities and the man who is not assertive in marriage becomes an object of ridicule.’

Women, subjected to domestic violence, found themselves in a helpless situation, as society in general hesitated to

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238 Ibid, p120.
interfere in what was considered to be a private affair. There was also reluctance on the part of the police to take any action. That is why, Ashoka felt that the women movement had to take up the issue of family violence, both physical and mental.\textsuperscript{239} Dowry was one of the factors behind violence against women. Though women from all sections of the society were subjected to violence, unfortunately women in most cases, she found, bore silently such torture, because from their very childhood they were brought up with such notions that marriage was the ultimate goal of her life and that broken marriage would bring dishonour to the family. Lack of education and economic dependence were important reasons why women could not walk out of an abusive marriage. She suggested some remedial measures for these social problems. First, it was necessary to change the notion that man was the head of the family and therefore he was superior. Instead husband and wife were to be treated as equal partners and they had to share all the responsibilities within the family. Other measures included giving women opportunities for education and employment oriented courses, short-stay homes and free legal aid for the victims.\textsuperscript{240} As women’s lack of economic independence was one of the reasons why women remained within an abusive marriage, Ashoka strongly championed their cause. In her whole life countless people came to her seeking for a job. She wrote: ‘On principle, I gave jobs to girls, not boys or men . . . I believed that many will help boys, but very few would help the girls.’\textsuperscript{241} Moreover, she argued that men were much more free and mobile. On the contrary, women were in a vulnerable position. Women according to her were also


\textsuperscript{240}Ibid, p.125.

\textsuperscript{241}In the Path of Service, p.215.
much more dedicated towards their family than men. If women earned, then it would save her family. But she observed boys in general tended to drift away, after they started earning. This trend was visible even in refugee camps as well. Women could be given training in knitting, weaving, spinning or embroidery, so that they could earn on their own. Her personal experience also made her realise the importance of financial independence for women. As has been mentioned earlier that she never held any paid job throughout her life and that was one of her greatest regrets in life. She firmly believed that for gaining selfhood, confidence and to lead her life on her own terms, a woman had to be financially independent. That is why she always encouraged her daughters to become independent. She recalled that when her youngest daughter Apala was going abroad for her studies, a Punjabi lady asked Ashoka how she would sum up courage to send her daughter to an unknown land. She replied: ‘. . .if we had the courage to loosen the ties and give our daughters some independence, they would prove themselves to be the equal of our boys.’

She regarded the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971(later amended in 2001) significant for women, considering the social and economic realities of our country. The Act was beneficial for women as the Act gave them the right to get rid of unwanted pregnancy. Before promulgating the law, women as well as men were asked about their opinion. She observed that men were generally against such a law as they were apprehensive that such law would give rise to the number of abortions. But Ashoka felt that since women had to bear the child, it should be the prerogative of the women to decide whether to proceed with the pregnancy or

242In the Path of Service, p.218.
not. But she lamented the fact that when the Act was passed no one thought that it would be an instrument in the hands of a section of the people to abort female foetuses. ‘This is an example of the social injustice leading to the misuse of legislation that was framed to help women.’

She considered the setting up of the Women’s Commission in 1975—the International Year of Women, an achievement for the women’s movement in India. Women activists had been demanding for a long time a Commission for Women similar to that of Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission. As a result the government invited different women’s organisations to share their opinion. Ashoka in her interview stressed the need for women’s financial independence which was essential for improving her status at home and to make their opinion count in decision-making. They also had to be given the right of free movement and work outside home. After a lot of debate and discussion, a Status of Women’s Commission Report was published which stressed on the fact that both men and women were to enjoy equal rights in every sphere, and equal opportunities for education and work. Though the Women’s Commission was set up, it did not have similar powers like that of Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission. The Women’s Commission was not given the power to exercise its authority on its own. But Ashoka felt that the most vital issue regarding women were rights. Women from all classes, communities, castes were subjected to discrimination. Especially appalling was the condition of S.C and S.T women as they were subjected to double-edged exploitation, one because of their low caste and another because of their gender.

\[243\] In the Path of Service, p.229.

\[244\] Ibid, p.230.
only change if men accept women as equal members of human race, but she doubted whether men had acquired this awareness as yet.

Ashoka was a staunch supporter of Common Civil Code for women. She felt that women were oppressed under the personal laws and only a common equitable civil code could bring gender justice. She argued that was the responsibility of the women's movement to persuade the minorities that such a code would not be forced upon them by the majority, but instead this was something based on justice and applicable to all women. Ashoka was opposed to caste based reservation because she believed that reservation brought no real benefit to the community. She argued that those who benefitted usually did little for those at the bottom of the social ladder. She however, was a staunch supporter of reservation for women as men were generally reluctant to grant women equal rights. She felt that in a party based democracy, where party tickets were necessary to enter the parliament there should be 50% reservation for women because here too the women faced discrimination. She wrote: ‘... show me one political party which has more than 10% of women on its rolls! This is true of all parties-leftist or rightist.’ This made her wholeheartedly support the reservation of seats in Parliament. On reflection she felt that though society had changed a lot for women, but that was not enough. As girls had been educated in the meanwhile, they could opt for various career options. But

245 In the Path of Service, p.231.


she argued: ‘They take up career options the men do not choose or want.’ She also felt that arranged marriages for girls’ also signified their inferior position. The immoral traffic in women and children was another source of exploitation, common to all communities. She commented: ‘. . .till such time as this exploitation continues, we will have to fight for gender equality.’ She advised that the women who had moved ahead in the road to emancipation, should think about their fellow sisters who were still lagging behind.

Ashoka also addressed the problem of aged parents in the modern world. Earlier aged parents were regarded as dependent members of a family and were therefore taken care of. But with the breakdown of the old joint family structure in urban areas and emergence of nuclear families, the aged people were forced to take care of themselves. Often the children did not support their parents financially. The question was whether law could force unwilling children to provide maintenance to their parents. Ashoka believed that there was indeed a need for such a law; but the enforcement would not be an easy one. If the obligation towards one’s elders was outlined at an early age, she felt, it would enable the children to learn and share responsibilities with others in a common household. A “Caring Law” was important for those who would ask for a remedy, but it would not change the attitude of the family if they had no regard for traditional values. The government could also

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248 In the Path of Service, p.239.


250 Ashoka Gupta, “Can the Law Give Elderly Persons the Status they Deserve?” Published in A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings of Ashoka Gupta, pp.118-119.

251 Ibid, p.119.
come forward to give these elderly people economic support in the form of old age pensions, and health insurance.

5.13 Spreading her horizon: her tour abroad and her stint as member of the social welfare board

As a social worker, Ashoka had several occasions to visit different foreign countries; for example, as the State Commissioner of the Girl-guides with which she was associated from her school days she had the opportunity to travel abroad. She was keen to introduce Girl-Guide in refugee camps as arrangements for their education or vocational training was very poor. She appealed to the International Headquarters of the Girl-Guides to impart training to at least one person who would later on be able to train others. Ashoka was invited to the U.S.A to study their system of work. So in 1956 she left for the U.S.A. In course of her training she learnt valuable things like how to pack, how to set up a camp, how to dig the ground, and to serve a large number of people in an orderly fashion. She also noticed that in the U.S.A. boys and girls were not segregated. But she suggested that in adolescence, requirements of boys and girls were different and she was also doubtful whether it would be feasible to allow free mixing in the camps. But her suggestion was ignored on the ground that it was old fashioned. At that point she wrote:

I certainly feel that there is need for boys and girls to mix with each other at a certain age, but I also feel that there is a need for privacy as well, which we usually fulfil in our daily lives.  

Later on she reflected:

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252 In the Path of Service, p.174.
Today the world has changed and I feel now that certainly boys and girls should study together, they should understand each other, they should also understand that they have equal rights.\textsuperscript{253}

In 1957 she visited USSR as one of the delegates, representing the AIWC. After touring she got the impression that the country had progressed at the cost of her liberty. The authorities did not care much for human sentiments and every person was bound to put eight to twelve hours of duty mandatorily.\textsuperscript{254} Crèche facilities were available to provide care for children of working mothers but Ashoka felt that the babies though looked after efficiently received a rather mechanical treatment from the caregivers. In June, 1962 as a part of the non-official delegation to an international conference on social work, held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, she had the opportunity to review the working of the 44 Youth Club programme to study their programmes for girls, and to study their projects as well. At the conference, Ashoka learnt that there were indeed common problems, but the method of solution varied from country to country. She also observed that the countries, she visited, had community centres where community programmes were held. Moreover, the adolescent groups were also included through clubs like 4H Club. But this had no equivalent in India.

In Japan she noticed that the society was very indifferent towards the women. The women were treated as inferiors. They did not receive equal pay for equal work. Though the women were fortunate to receive education, they were always in a subordinate position. The working women had to shoulder the family responsibilities as well. So, Ashoka wrote:

\begin{quote}
Compared to their Indian sisters, they might have more exposure, more freedom to venture into the outside world, whereas Indian women were far more cloistered. But
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{253} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.174.

\textsuperscript{254} \textit{Ibid}, p.184.
where attitudes were concerned, the treatment they received from society was no different from us.\textsuperscript{255}

In 1969 she visited Germany as a part of a six member delegation to get a first-hand knowledge about the measures implemented by the German government for the welfare of the youth. She saw that girls were given training to enable them to become financially independent. She was very much impressed with their structured education system where children were given the opportunity to choose their path according to their aptitude.

Ashoka was also active as a member of the Social Welfare Board. The Board was set up in 1955 with the aim of making women independent. It focussed on constructive work. It divided its work according to areas. Ashoka enlisted a number of officers’ wives into the Board. Initially she was associated with the Board at the state level. But in 1960, she became part of the Central Board. As its member, she was assigned to tour Rajasthan, Tripura and Orissa and supervise the work done by the Board. In Tripura she noticed that the rehabilitation work had progressed well under the Government of India, while in Orissa there was an undercurrent of tension between the local people and the refugees. While projects concerning local people progressed well, the schemes undertaken for the refugees were unnecessarily delayed. In Rajasthan, under the guidance of Mrs. Sukhadia, the Chief Minister’s wife, handicraft centres sprang up in vacant mansions teaching the girls the art of making bangles and different kinds of costume jewellery. Kasturba Trust also gave training to rural women and even took the responsibility of marketing their products. In 1969, Renu Chakraborty, Minister of Social Welfare, West Bengal, appointed a commission

\textsuperscript{255} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.194.
to survey the social welfare projects that were going on in West Bengal. Ashoka was one of its three members. She made an extensive tour of the state and considered the Girl Guide training programme as one of the most successful projects.\textsuperscript{256}

In 1969, however, a conflict arose between the government and a section of the senior members of the Board. The government wanted to set up the Board as a registered society or as a company. But the members wanted the Board to be constituted as a statutory body. Members like Ashoka felt that the government proposal would make the Board ineffective and it would lose all its powers. After a lot of debate, when the Board was reconstituted under the Company’s Act, with a salaried Chairman, Ashoka resigned from the Board. She recalled later: ‘The Board continues to work, its policies remain the same, but it has no powers.’\textsuperscript{257} But even after her resignation, she remained a member of the advisory committee of the Bengal Board.

She was also a member on the Board of Life insurance Corporation. This gave her an opportunity to serve the cause of women as gross gender bias existed in the policies of the LIC. Ashoka felt that there was absolute gender discrimination since girls below the age of 18 or over it could not be insured; what was still more striking was that, one had to pay a hefty sum against the risks involved on child birth in order to insure for one’s daughter. She wrote:

\textsuperscript{256} \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.212.

\textsuperscript{257} \textit{Ibid}, p.223.
Boys who dashed around on their scooters were not perceived as prone to accident risk, whereas, girls were seen as being at risk for what was the most primary natural function, childbirth.\textsuperscript{258}

After fighting tooth and nail against such a discriminatory policy, she was able to convince the other members to change the rules. She considered this a very significant victory.

In 1970-71, on Lakshmi Menon’s insistence, she joined the Kasturba trust, dedicated to serve the rural population with various welfare programmes with particular emphasis on women and children. As its member, she attended two meetings annually and toured their state centres. In Bengal the Kasturba Trust used to run welfare programmes like Balwadi, crèche, health programme, handloom training, knitting training, primary school, adult education etc. Around this time, a new stream of refugees started arriving in Calcutta in the wake of Bangladesh War of Liberation. A fact finding committee known as the Bangladesh Anusandhan Committee was set up in her house. Her husband was its secretary and eminent persons like Ramesh Chandra Majumder, Mahasweta Devi were its members. The committee tried to help the refugees in every way. A data base about all the refugees was also maintained. She recalled that during this time, both governmental and voluntary organisations worked together to bring the situation under control.\textsuperscript{259}


In 1986 she became the President of the AIWC. Under her president ship a short-stay home for the women who were the victims of domestic

\textsuperscript{258} In the Path of Service, p.224.

\textsuperscript{259} Ibid p.226.
violence was started. At khirpai a short stay home was opened which gave shelter to
destitute women An old age home in Vrindaban was also set up during her tenure.
Under her patronage Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu compiled the history of the AIWC in
the book named *Women’s Struggle: A History of the All India Women’s Struggle*. She
along with her husband was also a member of the Karma Samiti of the Viswa-Bharati
and a fellow of the Calcutta University Senate as well. In 1992 when the Babri Mosque
was demolished, and communal riots and looting started in some localities of Calcutta
and slums were burnt down as a sequel; the Mahila Seva Samity under the guidance of
Ashoka sought permission from the local police station to carry out relief work among
the victims. Essential goods like milk powder, rice flakes, jiggery, clothes, medicines
and ORS were collected and distributed among the victims who had taken shelter at
Bengal Potteries on Convent Road and in some school buildings. As it was the winter
season, 100 blankets were purchased from Burrabazar to distribute among women
and children.  

From the 1990s, she was more involved in policy making and
consultation, instead of actual field work. She was particularly, interested in children’s
right and was the President of SOS Children’s Homes and the Society for Adoption and
Sponsorship. With regard to adoption, she felt that the discrimination meted out to
foreigners who adopted Indian children showed our narrow-mindedness. She was of
the view that if the foreign parents were in a position to give them a far better life,
then nothing should come in that way. Moreover, with regard to children who were
mentally or physically challenged, a home abroad would be much more convenient, as

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in India, parents wanting to adopt such children were rare and the facilities for taking care of such children were much more easily available in abroad. But she regretted the fact that ‘. . ., officialdom does not always regard these things as simply, and so I often have a battle on my hands!’261 Another cause which was dear to her heart was to separate a child’s identity from his/her parents if the latter were convicts, so that these children could move ahead in life without any stigma attached to them. For her lifelong social service she was bestowed with the Jamanalal Bajaj Award in November, 2007. The money she received from this award was donated to build an additional floor for Buniyadi Vidyapith and to the Mahila Seva Samity for constructing additional bathrooms for an Old Age Home for women.

5.15. Conclusion

Ashoka Gupta sincerely believed that social work was a full time job. She always stood for selfless social service. She felt that it was her duty to serve the less fortunate and to find solutions to their problems. In her own words: ‘At the AIWC, we met our travel expenses ourselves, we got no “perks.”’262 Unlike many other contemporary political activists, raising slogans or leading processions had no value for her: her only concern was finding out solutions for individuals saddled with problems. That is why she never accepted MARS’ mode of operation, although they had almost similar goals in mind with regard to women, like equal status of men and women, equal wage for equal work, protection of women from domestic violence etc. Their paths were very different. MARS wanted to make its workers politically conscious, but

261 In the Path of Service, p.245.
for Ashoka it was purely helping out the unfortunate and the needy. Politics had no place in her scheme of work. She wrote: ‘I always believed that to help a single individual makes more sense than to mouth slogans and engage in politics.’

She also regretted the fact that when a social worker gets a salary for his/her job, he/she works like any other officer and when the office hour is over he/she does not meet the needy or the distressed. But she firmly believed that social work should never be a time bound job. During her time she recalled: ‘We would attend to a person in need, whatever the hour, whatever the place.’ She regretted that ‘... our generation has failed to create another generation to take over our commitments.’ She also lamented that even the AIWC had lost touch with the grass roots. But Sharmistha Dutta Gupta disagreed with the way Ashoka glorified unpaid social work. She explained her viewpoint with an example. Suppose a woman whose husband runs a small grocery shop finds it extremely difficult to fund the education of two of her daughters’, if that woman works for a welfare organisation which counsels and provides legal aid to women subjected to various kinds of violence, in return for a salary, then that modest salary may help her daughters’ education. She felt that Ashoka’s class position was different from women from the poorer section of society. But the latter’s paid social work does not make her any less equal.

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263 In the Path of Service, p.245.


265 Ibid, p.245.


267 Ibid, p.171.
Gupta also argued that the voluntary organisations should include all sorts of women in order to have an egalitarian character. She wrote:

If you have to have as members/decision makers only people who can afford to fully volunteer their services and pay for their travel etc., your organisation is bound to be an elitist one.  

A noteworthy feature in her life was that she successfully combined philanthropy with domesticity. That was possible because her domestic world never came in the way of her service outside. Her mother was always supportive. Her husband, too, was accommodating and never raised any objection about her long absence from home. But this sort of attitude was not at all common as was manifested by a letter written by Mrs. Rebecca Ghosh from Dacca who was engaged in relief work in Chandpur in 1946-47. On 21.3.47 she wrote to Ashoka that she was forced to leave her camp because her husband was increasingly becoming adamant about her working away from Dacca because he believed that she was wasting her time in the villages. Perhaps this was the predominant attitude prevalent in the society. Ashoka was also fortunate in getting the unconditional support of her mother-in-law who never raised any objection to her daughter-in-law’s decision to choose an unconventional path or her absence from home. In fact, in Ashoka’s absence she often took charge of the household and looked after the children, which helped Ashoka to focus on her work without bothering about her domestic front. About her mother-in-law’s contribution, Ashoka wrote: ‘She has been more than a support. She has been an inspiration for

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270 Private Papers of Ashoka Gupta, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), Sub: File no.1.
After Apala, the youngest daughter of Ashoka was born in 1953, Ashoka admitted that she would have been forced to stop for the time being any outdoor activity, if her mother-in-law and her two sister-in-laws did not come forward to take charge of the daily running of the household. ‘It was because she provided unstinted support that I was able to spend long hours away from home. She was unfailingly supportive in my work as well.’

As a woman she strongly believed that financial freedom was the key to women’s emancipation. Her personal experience also taught her that women must be financially self-reliant. In reality, however, financial freedom does not always guarantee equal rights to women within the family. Still she believed that without financial freedom women would be nowhere. Alongside there should also be a change in the behavioural patterns of the society. The women’s movement, she believed, should aim for greater economic participation by women, liberating women from age-old social as well as religious constraints and challenging the traditional cult of domesticity and the implied inferiority of women. She also urged the women’s organisations to work unitedly because that would avoid duplication of efforts and would produce better results. Till her last days she kept her zeal for doing something constructive for the needy and all through her life she championed the cause of women.

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271 In the Path of Service, p.73.