Chapter: 1

1.1 1943 Bengal famine and relief and rehabilitation work of women social activists

A devastating famine erupted in undivided Bengal during British rule in 1943. Scholars are almost unanimous in their view that the terrible famine was a man-made famine. It killed over two million people out of a population of around 60 million.¹ The famine was primarily a rural phenomenon as it affected almost every district of Bengal. Calcutta witnessed the famine when destitutes from the villagers started trekking into the city in search of food and dying on the streets in consequence. The official Famine Inquiry Commission diagnosed that the primary cause of the famine was “a serious shortage in the total supply of rice available for consumption in Bengal.”² But scholars like Amartya Sen and Paul Greenough have rejected this standard explanation. They have argued on the contrary that the famine was caused primarily by the negligence of the government, and its administrative inefficiency and more importantly due to the implementation of wrong policies.

In 1939 when the Second World War spread to India, she too as part of the British Empire, became involved in the war. From the early 1940s


the British government started diverting administrative personnel, troops, foodstuff, rolling stock etc from India to war zones in Europe and Africa. With a view to curbing the political opposition to its policies within India, the British took back the powers granted by the Government of India (1935) Act on provincial legislatures. By then all the Congress ministries had resigned. But in Bengal the Muslim League ministry still continued. As the Japanese advanced towards Bengal it became necessary for the British to suppress all opposing voices within the province. So by 1942 most of the nationalist leaders in Bengal were either in jail or in exile. The food crisis occurred precisely at this point of time. Though for ages Bengal had been self sufficient in rice, from the 1930s Bengal had become a food deficit province mainly due to increased population and decline in production. So Bengal had to import rice regularly from Burma. Paul Greenough argued that only 4% of the annual consumption was imported from Burma. Interestingly the politicians or the bureaucracy had no inkling of this fact and Bengal continued its export of rice as usual. But when Rangoon fell to the Japanese forces in March, 1942 Bengal was deprived of the imported Burma rice. The situation aggravated in mid-October when a devastating cyclone hit Midnapore and 24Parganas (both were fertile regions producing surplus rice) affecting the winter (aman) crops to be harvested in December, 1942. On military advice the government removed all the surplus paddy and rice from coastal districts. As a defensive measure against the Japanese, the government also adopted a ‘boat denial’ policy by which they requisitioned and destroyed boats capable of carrying 10 or more passengers.

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to prevent their use by Japanese soldiers. Moreover, inter province movements of grain were also prohibited around this time. Amartya Sen argues that though 1943 was not a good year as far as crop availability was concerned, ‘it was not by any means a disastrous year either.’\(^4\) Paul Greenough also argued that overall shortage of rice in Bengal in 1943 was 10% of the average annual consumption over the preceding five years which was hardly a major shortage.\(^5\) According to Sen:

> the trigger that set off the crisis was the increase in demand caused by war related public expenditure. The crisis was then compounded by bureaucratic bungling and political infighting, and by speculation and panic hoarding.\(^6\)

In spite of having no remarkable over all shortage in food grains, war induced expectations led producers and grain merchants to convert a “moderate shortfall in production . . . into an exceptional shortfall in market release.”\(^7\) So in Sen’s view the famine was largely due to “speculative withdrawal and panic purchase of rice stocks . . . encouraged by administrative chaos.”\(^8\) Entry of speculators and traders led to the pushing up of the price of rice in all major markets. Rajani Palme Dutta has shown that the price of rice in Calcutta which was Rs.6 per maund in January, 1942 rose to Rs.11 in November, 1942, Rs.24 in

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\(^7\) *Ibid*, p.21.

\(^8\) *Ibid*, p. 21.
February-April, 1943, Rs.30 in May, Rs.35 in July, Rs.38 in August and Rs.40 in October, 1943.⁹ The price rose to as high as Rs.50 to Rs.100 per maund in the mofussil districts.⁰

The British government itself was a major hoarder of food grains, purchasing large quantities of food grains from the Calcutta market in 1943 for its own employees, railway workers, officials, the army and other privileged groups. They even encouraged large industrial concerns around Calcutta to pay their workers with grain allotments as early as July, 1942. Paul Greenough has shown that when price of coarse rice was almost Rs 30/ a maund in Calcutta’s wholesale market, then the government’s buying agents, big grain merchants and speculators ventured into rural Bengal and started buying rice from the cultivators at a higher price. This way ‘a much larger proportion than usual of the stored rice supply fell into the hands of outsiders.’¹¹ Like in cities in villages also black marketing in rice began. Paul Greenough gives two reasons as to why the cultivators agreed to part with unusually large amount of rice. One was ‘the offering of very high prices, never less than twice and sometimes ten times the pre-famine rates.’¹² This must have been very enticing for the farmers as they suffered heavily due to the preceding depression years and the collapse of the jute industry due to the war. The other

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⁰Ibid, p. 92.


reason was that the buying agents ‘circulated rumours that the government was going to confiscate stored and growing rice without compensation.’ This undoubtedly terrified many cultivators to sell their grains. As a result gradually rice became totally unavailable in rural areas.

Even when famine conditions reached a climax the attitude of the government both in Delhi and London remained insouciant, as if nothing serious had happened. As late as July 1943, when famine deaths were occurring regularly, Leo Amrey, Secretary of State informed the House of Commons that there was no serious shortage of food grains and the ‘present difficult situation’ was due to ‘mal-distribution.’ H.S. Suhrawardy, then minister for Civil Supplies felt that the problem was ‘psychological’ and even asked newspaper editors to preach the doctrine of sufficiency. Although the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow had been warned of the situation, he refused to pay any heed to it. It was only in mid-July, 1943 after the Bengal Governor Sir John Herbert conveyed him the seriousness of the situation, that he changed his official position and demanded food imports into Bengal as a matter of extreme urgency. By then Leo Amrey, Secretary of State in India had also changed his tune and the head of British forces in India pleaded with London that ‘so far as shipping is concerned, the import of food is to my mind just as if not more important than the import of munitions. But Winston Churchill’s reaction to the plea

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for more shipping was ‘a preliminary flourish on Indians breeding like rabbits and being paid a million a day by us for doing nothing about the war.’\textsuperscript{15} The Bengal Government abandoned all embargoes and price controls in March, 1943 and thereby encouraged traders and speculators to maintain a steady supply of grain in Calcutta.

In Bengal alone, according to a survey conducted by Prof. K.P. Chattopadhyaya three and a half million people died as a result of the famine.\textsuperscript{16} Epidemics followed and it claimed 1,200,000 lives in Bengal by September, 1944. According to the survey conducted by the Indian Statistical Institute under Professor P.C. Mahalanabis 1.076 million persons, out of Bengal’s estimated 55.2 million rural inhabitants, were destitute after the famine year.\textsuperscript{17} The famine being primarily a rural one led to the disruption of rural life. It led to further impoverishment of the peasantry and an increased concentration of lands into the hands of moneylenders and the richer landlords. In rural Bengal a system of landlord patronage existed. There were different categories of patron-client relationship. Paul Greenough argues that an ideology of the patron as a ‘destined provider of subsistence’ (i.e. \textit{annadatta} or rice giver) guided this relationship.\textsuperscript{18} They were expected to nurture and protect their clients. As has been mentioned earlier the cultivators and the landlords parted with their stored grains in unusual amount. Therefore during the famine the patrons found it difficult to maintain their dependents

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\textsuperscript{16} Rajani Palme Dutt, \textit{India Today and Tomorrow}, p.92.

\textsuperscript{17} Paul Greenough, “Indian Famines and Peasant Victims,” \textit{Modern Asian Studies}, p.216.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid}, p.220.
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who were in the habit of turning to their patrons when there was scarcity of food. As a result the cash earning clients like the fishermen, agricultural labourers, huskers of raw paddy, carters and boatman and certain artisans were either no longer employed or employed at a much lower rate. These sections of people were the first to migrate to the cities. The condition of the fishermen was particularly deplorable due to a number of facts. First, cotton which was a basic ingredient for the fishermen for making their nets was rationed like other cloth products between 1942 and 1943. Long distance transport to the Calcutta markets also became uncertain during this period. As the price of rice became sky-high the demand for fish declined as fish was considered a luxury rather than a necessity in the Bengali diet. The fishermen also ate rice and therefore their failure to sell their fish ultimately led to their starvation. They also failed to renew their rental right of fishing in landlords’ estates for want of money. Finally due to the ‘Boat Denial Policy’ the fishermen suffered heavily because they had no other means to access their fishing grounds. Next in the ladder were the landless agricultural wage labourers. In 1943 due to the cyclone and flooding in provinces like Midnapore, 24 Parganas and Burdwan agricultural activity almost collapsed. Elsewhere landlords and cultivators started to employ fewer labourers as the prices of non-food items escalated considerably. Therefore a sizeable portion of wage labourers became jobless. In a similar way share croppers, artisans like carpenters, smiths, domestic and non-agricultural labourers were abandoned in gradual stages. Paul Greenough argues that comparably least affected people were
priests, barbers, washer men, garland-makers, musicians etc. because these people were associated with rituals necessary in Hindu society.  

Familial disintegration also occurred as a result of the famine. Normally a Bengali family was headed by a single male adult called master (i.e. Karta). He was responsible for distribution of food among the family members. During the famine according to Greenough the master favoured more valued members than the less favoured in terms of food consumption. Generally the adults and the males were favoured over children and females. That is why families started disintegrating when least fortunate members started migrating in search of alternative sources of food.

The most vulnerable victims of the famine were the women and the children. In the height of the famine husbands and wives began to separate, either the husband leaving the wife in search of work or the woman was asked to leave to make her own arrangement. Women who previously earned a living by husking paddy or trading in the local market were deprived of their incomes. Professor Tarakchandra Das and his colleagues from the Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University carried out a survey among the destitutes of Calcutta. According to the survey the overall sex ratio among the destitutes was 47.3% male and 52.7% female, the same

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ratio among the married destitutes (excluding the divorced and the widowed) was 36.4 male and 63.6% female.\textsuperscript{22} Abandoned women became an easy prey to sexual exploitation. That is why a grave consequence of the famine was women turning to prostitution. Reports of boatloads of women and girls for sale in the ports of East Bengal surfaced in late 1943.\textsuperscript{23} Bhowani Sen, the Communist activist noted that:

In Chittagong women from the families of fishermen, scavengers and others were forced by the distress in the wake of the famine to join the Military Labour Corps in large numbers. From there many have come back infected with venereal diseases. . . A section of the contractors has made a profession of selling girls to the military. There are places in Chittagong, Comilla and Noakhali where women sell themselves literally in hordes, and young boys act as pimps for the military.\textsuperscript{24}

According to an estimate of the one lakh twenty five thousand destitutes who crowded Calcutta, about thirty thousand young women had entered the brothels for a livelihood.\textsuperscript{25} More than one thousand new brothels sprang up only in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{26} According to Sourin Ghosh, the government doctor in the department of venereal diseases, the number of brothel inmates increased from 20,000 to over 45,000.\textsuperscript{27} In return for a sari or a day’s ration women started selling their dignity.

\textsuperscript{22} Paul Greenough in “Indian Famines and Peasant Victims,” Modern Asian Studies, p.229.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p.229.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p.230.


\textsuperscript{26} Jasodhara Bagchi edited, Chabi Basur Rachana Sankalan, p.347.

The famine practically washed away prevalent moral values, social and humane bindings. This was evident from the sale and abuse of children during the famine. No longer able to withstand the pain of hunger women started selling their own children. Greenough argues that the dominant motive behind such sales was to obtain cash for buying food and the secondary motive was to free themselves of the nearly intolerable clamouring of their children for food.  

Kali Charan Ghosh wrote:

At Khulna a woman sold her daughter for Rs.15 only on October 20, 1943. . . girl of only three months was offered for sale for Rs.5 at Burdwan at the end of October, but was prevented from being sold by local people. On November 15, 1943, reports of destitute mothers selling their children or abandoning them on the roadside, husbands deserting their wives were received from Dacca. Rev. Mother Superior Aimee and Sister Dolores of the St. Francis Xavier’s Convent of Dacca reported on the same date that many destitute mothers had come to their Convent and offered their babies for sale at a price of Rs.4 or Rs.5. . . . Apart from this, many a morning they had found babies abandoned before the very gate of their Convent.

_Biplabi_, the weekly underground news-letter of the rebel Tamluk ‘National Government’ also reported sales of children. It noted that in 1943 in Midnapore girls and boys were sold in return for rice or paddy (ranging from one and half maund or two maund or merely 1 kg. of rice) or money (prices varied between Rs.20 to Rs. 5).  

In fact the attention of the House of Commons in Britain was drawn to an incident reported to have occurred in an unspecified ‘famine area’ of Bengal. It was said that a British Officer bought a little girl

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who was being offered for sale for one rupee and took her to a welfare centre.\(^{31}\) The District Magistrate of Chittagong reported two cases of sale of destitute children in 1944 while the District Magistrate of Bogra reported on 23.2.44 that a minor girl was sold by her mother to a public woman for Rupee one only.\(^{32}\) A rumour also spread that Bhola women and children were sold within Babuphal and Patuakhali P.S area in the Patuakhali subdivision during September, 1943.\(^{33}\) Khan Bahadur Abdul Wahed Khan, a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly confirmed this at the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 13\(^{th}\) July, 1943.\(^{34}\) A sinister motive behind the purchase of the children especially girl child was that they could be exploited not only for the present, but in the future as well. A United Press Despatch of November 1, 1943 noted that the Netrokona Relief Committee in Mymensingh at the instance of the sub divisional officer had rescued a dozen girls from the clutches of the prostitutes.\(^{35}\) The District Magistrate of Tripura suggested that an inquiry be made into all brothels throughout the province with a view to rescuing any such unfortunate girl who might have found her way into the brothels as a result of the famine.\(^{36}\) The Provincial Secretary, Mahila Atma Raksha Samity, Calcutta, in a press release issued on 22\(^{nd}\) December 1943 observed that trafficking in minor girls brought to Chandpur by boat for sale and other parts of East Bengal had recorded a spate during this

31 Home Political File, No: 98/44, 1944, Bengal, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Kali Charan Ghosh, Famines in Bengal, p.82.
35 Ibid, p.82.
36 Home Political File no. 98/44, 1944, Bengal.
time.\textsuperscript{37} After conducting a raid in the brothels of Chandpur it was found that 23 girls aged between fourteen and fifteen had recently taken shelter in the quarters and sixteen other minor girls had also suffered a similar fate as an aftermath of the famine.\textsuperscript{38} Social degeneration started among the destitute children. They became involved in smoking, theft, brokering in flesh trade and other mean activities. Parents killing their children were also rampant. The \textit{Biplabi} reported on 5\textsuperscript{th} August, 1943 that a desperate mother had thrown away her son into the Kansai River and was about to bury alive her other child when fortunately a passer-by rescued him.\textsuperscript{39} On 19\textsuperscript{th} October, 1943 The Hindustan Standard reported from Adamdighi (Bogra) that a Muslim brother while on his way to a local puja where he was supposed to get \textit{prasad} or food, had pushed his younger brother into a ditch, causing him such injury that he was on the verge of death.\textsuperscript{40} Such cases of killing of the near and dear ones demonstrated what hunger and starvation could lead people to do.

Paul Greenough argued: ‘The abandonment or exclusion of women and of children constituted the greatest social cost of the famine, excepting excess deaths.’\textsuperscript{41} The issue of gender assumes significance at this point. Greenough argued that if a married adult died without a male heir the family was

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\textsuperscript{37} Kali Charan Ghosh in \textit{Famines in Bengal}, p.82.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Home Political File} no. 98/44, 1944, Bengal.

\textsuperscript{39} Paul Greenough in “Indian Famines and Peasant Victims”, \textit{Modern Asian Studies}, p.231.

\textsuperscript{40} Comrac O Grada, “Revisiting The Bengal Famine of 1943-4,” \textit{History of Ireland}, vol.18, no.4, \textit{The Elephant and Partition: Ireland and India} p.38.

\textsuperscript{41} Kali Charan Ghosh, \textit{Indian Famines and Peasant Victims}, p232.
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deprived of descendants. But if he survived the crisis then later on he could remarry and produce off springs. That is why when the famine condition deepened the wives were easily abandoned. But the case with an abandoned female was altogether different. Even if she managed to survive there was no assurance that she would be accepted in her husband’s family. ‘It was for this reason that in the aftermath of the famine shelters for abandoned women sprang up with the help of charity and government aid.’

Calcutta witnessed the abominableness of the famine when the villagers started coming towards the city in search of food. Losing all hopes of obtaining even a handful of rice they started begging door to door for the rice water which was normally thrown away. Their cry Phen Dao (give us rice water) was heart wrenching. Calcutta saw the horrible sight of humans and dogs searching for food from the same dustbin or a mother snatching morsel of food from her own child. ‘Women were just skin and bone and their children gasping for their last breath.’ Homeless and bereft of any shelter in the city they made the pavements their dwelling place. Manikuntala Sen, an eye witness of those days, commented that the life of squatters began from that date. Mrs. Vijaylaxmi Pandit in a statement to the Press on 26th October, 1943 revealed that there were cases of poor women being raped at night while lying on the roads. Unfortunately the relief provided by the government was not up to

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43 Renu Chakraborty, *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p.27.


45 Kali Charan Ghosh in *Famines in Bengal*, p.179.
the mark. Poor villagers were in the hope that in Calcutta they would get proper
government relief. ‘They did not know, however, how ill-organised official relief was, nor
did they realize it took the form of a watery, unfaithful gruel of grains other than rice,
their habitual fare.' Eventually they were driven to camps on the outskirts or were sent
back to their villages as they were considered a ‘nuisance.’ The failure of proper relief led
to excess deaths. H.S. Suhrawardy, the then minister of Civil Supplies, Bengal claimed in a
statement in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 15th September, 1943

... relief operations have been undertaken on a colossal scale in the various recognized
forms- gratuitous relief, test relief works and agricultural loan. To these forms has also been
added the cheap food grain shop.  
He further stressed that

Bengal has also been organised on a famine basis and relief organisations are being set up in
every nook and corner ... We are taking steps to remove them (destitutes), house them,
feed them, and ultimately to repatriate them after relief kitchens have been opened up in
their own areas.

He also stressed that:

Various steps are being taken to ration Calcutta; more and more shops are being opened
pending complete rationing and I hope that the next month will see the scheme in full
operation.

But these steps were not enough to save people from the
jaws of death. So the women came forward. During the famine years women were visible
both as victims and activists. The activities of the women included organizing hunger


1-9, p.48.

48 Ibid, p.49.

49 Ibid, p.50.

50 Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern India, p.209.
march to draw the attention of the government, pressing the government to bring down the prices and introduce rationing system, organizing gruel kitchen, opening milk centres, establishing homes for children, saving women from prostitution, providing shelter and rehabilitating destitute women by giving them vocational training etc.

Meanwhile, when the war was going on, the women in Bengal have already started organizing themselves. Communist workers convened an anti-fascist women’s conference at the University Institute library on 13th April, 1942. Here it was decided that a women’s organization, viz, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) or a Women’s Self Defence League would be set up to protect women from war crimes, starvation, destitution and prostitution. Ela Reid was its organizing secretary while Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakraborty, Sakina Begum, Sudha Rai, Phulrenu Guha and others were its working committee members. Its main objectives were self-defence, self-reliance and self-confidence. Gradually MARS spread its wings throughout Bengal. Interestingly MARS included as its members both middle class as also the slum women in Calcutta and the peasant women of rural areas. Sharmistha Dutta Gupta argued that the secular character of the organisation attracted both Hindu as well as Muslim women. Sharmistha Dutta Gupta argued that the secular character of the organisation attracted both Hindu as well as Muslim women.51 The Muslim Mahila Atmaraksha Samity used to take part in rallies and campaigns organized by the MARS.

At the onset of the famine, MARS started pressurising the government to establish control shops and to introduce rationing. In Calcutta MARS submitted a charter of demands, signed by 10,000 persons to the government demanding separate subsidized shops for women.\textsuperscript{52} As a result of their pressure a subsidized shop was opened in the Gariahat market. The villagers used to come by the 3 A.M train. There used to be long lines and traders often misbehaved with them. So the MARS workers helped them to stand in queues, quarrelling with the traders on their behalf so that each one of them could obtain some amount of rice. Manikuntala Sen recalled that working in shifts she and her co-workers used to stay near the queues, they used to protect the young women so the latter did not fall a prey to the procurers of sex trade. Sometimes women gave birth while standing in the line, sometimes a woman would remain in the queue with a dead child in her lap, refusing to go out of the line. The MARS made arrangements for such situations also.\textsuperscript{53} Many generous men and women helped the workers with cash or kind. On 24\textsuperscript{th} January, 1943 in the Town Hall of Calcutta, middle class as well as slum women of Calcutta attended a food conference organized by the Janaraksha Samiti (this samiti was formed by the male members of the C.P.I. to provide food and relief to the people in Bengal). There for the first time a demand for rationing food was put forward.

But such measures were not adequate to save people from death. To put further pressure on the government the Calcutta MARS and the Muslim

\textsuperscript{52} Kanak Mukhopadhyay, \textit{Nari Mukti Andolon O Amra} (Women’s Emancipation Movement and Us), (Kolkata: Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti, 2003), pp.45-46.

\textsuperscript{53} Manikuntala Sen, \textit{In Search of Freedom}, p.71.
Women’s Self Defence League organized the first ever hunger march to the Assembly on 17th March, 1943.

The demonstrators in their tattered rags and with babies in arms, famished and emaciated, marched before the eyes of Calcutta’s public, telling them what words failed to do, of their pitiful plight.\(^5\)

Their demand was for more shops, proper supply especially in slums and bringing down the price of rice to the control rate of Rs.13.25 per maund. It is interesting to note that the demonstrating women pointing to the coins tied to the end of their saris told the members of the Assembly that they had come not to beg but to demand rice at pre-famine rate. At first, the Bengal premier, Fazlul Haque pleaded helplessness but as the women were adamant he ordered 100 bags of rice to be distributed amongst the demonstrators on the spot. ‘It was one of the first militant actions of women which stirred the city of Calcutta and the government had to sit up.’\(^5\) Manikuntala Sen who was herself a part of the demonstration lamented that this novel event neither found any mention in any of the morning newspapers nor were any photographs published in the Indian dailies, although the news appeared with photographs in foreign newspapers.\(^5\) The districts were not lagging behind in this regard. Even before the hunger march to the Assembly, around 400 peasant women in Bankura had organized a hunger march and submitted a deputation to the District Magistrate demanding the reopening of the closed control shops on 13th March, 1943. When nothing happened a procession of peasant and working

\(^5\) Renu Chakraborty, *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p.29.


\(^5\) Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom*, p.73.
women went to the District Magistrate and pressurized him to open five shops and
distribute cards for their quota. In Pabna in March 1943, a hunger march to the D.M’s
office took place. Here the majority was constituted of Muslim women. In Mymensingh
too Muslim women joined hands with their Hindu counterparts. On 25th March, 1943, two
thousand women in Madaripur in the district of Faridpur forced the D.M to order that all
stocks of rice should be seized with the help of the food committees and be sold at Rs.15 a
maund. In Kaliagung in the district of Jalpaiguri, the peasant women forced the traders to
sell paddy for Rs.8 a maund. In April, 1943 in Sherpur in Mymensingh women appealed to
traders to stop profiteering. Hearing their plea, some of the women members of the
hoarders’ families promised to help them by bringing out hoarded food grains. In Barisal
on 26th March, 1943 wives and mothers of prominent citizens as well as poor housewives
marched to the municipal office demanding the opening up of cheap grain shops for
women. At Daspur in Midnapore a procession to the district kisan conference was led by
eight peasant women on 9th February, 1943. About 100 women joined the kisan samiti.
Renu Chakraborty actively involved with MARS activities considered this as a landmark.
She wrote, ‘It was the first step they took in turning away from feudal backwardness.’

When five hundred women went on a hunger march to the district magistrate of Faridpur
town on 1st April, 1943 demanding food and cloth, the District Magistrate fled out of fear.
Renu Chakraborty argued that through these direct actions women in the villages and the

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57 Renu Chakraborty, <i>Communists in Indian Women’s Movement</i>, p.33.
urban poor realized that only through collective movements and organisation could they survive the crisis.\(^{58}\)

Towards the end of 1943 the condition of famine became acute and critical in the entire province. On 20\(^{th}\) December, 1943 MARS made an appeal for relief both in India and abroad through the publication of an English booklet entitled ‘Call to Women’. This booklet provided a vivid description of the famine, documenting it with relevant pictures and also presented a brief idea of the work done by the MARS. The whole of India responded to this call overwhelmingly. Different women’s organisations like Gujarat Mahila Sangha and others contributed generously. Around this time fourteen different women’s organisations came together to form the Bengal Women’s Food Committee with a view to enhancing effective relief work. Within a few days the committee could collect a sum of Rs. 75,000 for relief work.\(^{59}\)

The women also started organizing gruel kitchens and milk centres for the children. The All India Women’s Conference, the oldest women’s organisation in India started opening milk and barley centres in about 1015 places in Bankura where about 50150 persons were fed daily.\(^{60}\) Asoka Gupta, member of the AIWC and a civil servant’s wife was then in Bankura. Witnessing the plight of the people, she along with Usha Halder, wife of the District Commissioner, other officers’ wives and local...

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\(^{58}\) Renu Chakraborty, *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, pp.33-34.


ladies formed a Relief Committee. They started a big kitchen from where *khichdi* (a mixture of rice and pulses) was cooked and served to at least a hundred women and children every day. Usha Halder had already established the Bankura Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic in 1940 which had a resident Health Visitor and a trained nurse. During the famine when starving people started coming towards the Bankura town some of them came to the clinic. Here the mothers along with their children and the abandoned children were provided with food and shelter. Asoka Gupta recalled:

> Ushadi took the lead in collecting rations, milk and medicines, and procured the services of doctors, nurses and volunteers to help and revive the mothers and children who were on the verge of death.  

The AIWC also set up relief centres in Calcutta, Bhola, Rajbari, Tamluk and Mymensingh. The AIWC used to collect funds through a door to door campaigning as also by organizing concerts, fêtes and charity sales. An All India Milk campaign was initiated by all the AIWC branches and constituencies to stress ‘the importance of milk as part of the diet of expectant mothers and children.’ Apart from pressurising the government to open centres for distribution of milk either free or at cheaper rate, they also ‘opened centres subsidized from private collections for the free distribution of milk to the needy.’

The MARS also started organizing “khichdi” distribution and milk centres for the children. Its Calcutta branch opened 17 centres for distribution of

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62 *Special Branch File*, No.PY-600/45, 1945, Bengal, West Bengal Police Archive, Kolkata.

Khichdi in North, Central and South Calcutta. The centres in North Calcutta were Balaram Ghosh Street, Gopal Mitra Lane, Panchanan Ghosh Lane, Harinath Dey Road, Banamali Sarker Street, while the centres in Central Calcutta were Dickson Lane, Akhil Mistry Lane, Williams Lane and Patari Road. The centres in South Calcutta were Garcha slum, kankulia slum, Charu Avenue, Indra Ray Road, Ramanath Pal Street, New Road, Raja Basanta Ray Road and Saha-Nagar. The MARS workers either procured “Khichdi” from other places or collected money locally to run these centres. For the children and the expectant mothers MARS opened eight milk centres in Calcutta. These were Nabakrishna Street, Harinath Dey Road, Durgacharan Doctor’s Lane, Bowbazar Street, Gariahat Road, Indra Ray Road, Hazra Lane and Raja Basanta Ray Road. Gradually these centres started distributing clothes collected for relief and blankets, procured from the government during winter. Different organisations like the Bengal Relief Society, Marwari Relief Society, Bengal Women’s food Committee helped MARS in the relief work. Centres for free distribution of food and milk were also opened in the districts of Bengal such as Barisal, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Khulna, Noakhali, Kumilla, Jalpaiguri, Rajsahi, Pabna, Midnapore, Burdwan, Howrah, Nadia, Hooghly and the 24 Parganas.

The AIWC continued its All India Milk campaign. In a Bengali leaflet entitled Nikhil Bharat Nari Sammilan (intercepted at the Ballygunj P.O. on 1.2 45) under the signature of Charulata Mukhopadhyay, Mrs. Ayesha Ahmed and Brahma Kumari

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64 Kanak Mukhopadhyay, Nari Mukti Andolon O Amra, p.61.

65 Ibid, p.61.

Ray stated that thousands of people of Bengal comprising male, female and children lost their lives in the year before on account of famine and epidemic diseases.\textsuperscript{67} It further stated:

On one hand as there is want of food, clothes and medicine etc. so on the other hand there is also want of milk for the children and the sick. Milk should therefore be supplied in all possible quantity. The mass should be awakened for this purpose and the government shall also have to cooperate with them in this connection.\textsuperscript{68}

It was decided that All India Milk Day would be observed on 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} February, 1945 in cooperation with the Calcutta Cooperation.

Accordingly on 4.2.45 a meeting was held at the Wellington Square. Phulrenu Guha and Renu Chakraborty attended the meeting amongst others. A resolution was moved demanding that all available supplies of milk should be reserved for children, nursing and expectant mothers and the sick. To this end, government should introduce rationing.\textsuperscript{69} On the next day (i.e. on 5.2. 45) two successive meetings were held, one at Deshbandhu Park and another at the Commercial Museum Hall. At both the meetings the speakers dwelt upon the present shortage of milk in Bengal and particularly in Calcutta and urged the government and the Corporation to take up the matter immediately and to introduce rationing in order to ensure equitable distribution.\textsuperscript{70} At the Deshbandhu Park meeting the resolution adopted on the previous day was passed.

\textsuperscript{67}Special Branch File No. PY-660/45, West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid.
Phulenu Datta and Manikuntala Sen attended the meeting. Those who attended the meeting urged the government ‘to stop by legislation the preparation of milk products and to import cattle.’ A poster and a picture exhibition on the subject was also organized in the Museum Hall. Simultaneously MARS too organized meetings where the demand for milk for babies was raised. On 25th February, 1945 at Dinajpur women of both Congress and Communist following marched to the Magistrate and demanded that a milk canteen and a milk cooperative should be opened, from where there should be a regular supply of milk. The magistrate agreed to call a meeting of representatives to arrange for this.

But providing immediate relief to the victims was not enough. The pressing need of the hour was to rebuild social life by opening child care homes, rehabilitating the helpless women by giving them some sort of vocational training so that in future they could become self-sufficient. Organizing exhibition of the handicraft items made by these women was also part of this programme. Government effort in this regard was inadequate. In Chittagong five government centres served only 150. In Dacca spinning centres were almost closed down due to the scarcity of cotton. In Rajsahi a centre for boys and girls was also closed down due to financial crunch and the government did not help.

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71 Special Branch File No. PY-660/45, West Bengal Police Archive.

72 Renu Chakraborty, Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.77.
By 1943-1944, on the initiative of the MARS at least 100 handicraft centres were opened in Calcutta and other districts. In these centres training was imparted for sewing, manufacturing different items with bamboo and jute, weaving clothes by loom and spinning wheel, doll making, jam and jelly manufacturing etc. Paper manufacturing units were also opened in one or two places. One such centre was opened at 13, Wellington Square by the MARS with government help. Another centre was at the Bowbazar MARS office. Sarojini Naidu visited this centre and was delighted to see these programmes for women’s self-sufficiency.

In the districts the women started organizing destitute homes and child care centres. Several work centres were on the verge of closure due to scarcity of funds. In Tanti bazar of Dacca city the MARS started collecting alms in the form of handful of rice kept aside every day in each family kitchen and selling it to pay wages to the destitute women working at the centre there. In Kumilla the MARS through its effort opened a work centre. They were able to get Rs. 1000 as grant and cotton for spinning and a house for setting up this centre. In Chittagong the Nari Samiti ran three work centres in Satkania teaching the women to spin yarn, weave fishing nets and cloth. In Rangpur MARS started work centres where production of arrowroot powder (which could be used as a substitute for milk) was taught and a cottage industry centre was inaugurated from where women received training in handicrafts. In Rangpur town, at Nilphamari and Domaray, government agreed to open three destitute homes with the help of the MARS.

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74 Renu Chakraborty, *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p.58.
In Khulna the MARS workers served as nurses in the newly opened government hospital. Here the AIWC also opened a children’s centre. In Jessore the MARS opened nine handicrafts centres. Dr. Jiban Ratan Dhar, a well-known Congressman, with the help of MARS workers, opened a children’s hospital.75 In 24Parganas a destitute home was opened in Jainagar through the efforts of the Joint Food Committee. Different women’s organisations, the Janaraksha Samiti, Friends Ambulance Unit and other bodies helped in this task. Here ten women got shelter. At Barasat a centre was opened with seventy destitute women. The Friends Ambulance Unit opened two centres, one at Falta and another at Basirhat. Labanyalata Chanda, the well-known Gandhian worker started a handicraft centre at Bankura.

Unfortunately, on 7th July, 1944, when acute destitution and starvation reached a point of no returns, the callous and indifferent British government announced that by the month of August, only sixty out of the 500 odd work houses, would remain. It was against this irresponsible government policy that women’s effort at rebuilding social life continued. In Dacca the AIWC, the Muslim League women and the MARS worked in close collaboration. In Jessore too, Hindu and Muslim women from well-known families joined hands. In July 8th, 1944 Barisal Nari Kalyan Bhavan was opened for destitute women by the MARS. The Bhavan had a work centre and a destitute home. A self-help stall to sell different articles made by the various centres was also opened. At the Bhavan’s work centre about thirty women worked on the handloom, did bamboo work, spun yarn and made brooms. Children also received education here. After

75 Renu Chakraborty, *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p.60.
much effort it was able to receive Rs.3000 from the government for six months. Monorama Bose earlier associated with the Congress was the guiding light behind this institution. Work centres on the initiative of the MARS were started at Terchar, Ichli, Gaduria, Patuakhali, Birpasha, Lakutia and Gobindapur villages. Renu Chakraborty recalled that in the task of social reconstruction the Congress, the Muslim League and even the Hindu Mahasabha women came forward and signed a joint leaflet for this work.\textsuperscript{76}

In order to sell the articles made in these work centres, the MARS organized handicraft fairs from time to time. One such handicraft fair was organized at the Corporation school in Wellington Square in Calcutta from 17\textsuperscript{th}-19\textsuperscript{th} September, 1944. Different items produced in the work centres like handloom sarees, towels, mats, baskets, leather handbags, pickles, jam were displayed. There was also a stall where paper making was being demonstrated. Women on their own managed a tea stall preparing the foodstuffs and tea and serving them as well. The exhibition was inaugurated by Mrs. Shamsunnahar Mahmud of the AIWC. On the second day a cultural programme was organized which was presided over by the well-known literary figure, Prof. Amiya Chakraborty. On the last day, Dr. B.C. Roy, the legendary doctor and a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, presided over a women’s meeting. He praised this effort by saying ‘If we have to save Bengal, we need 40,000 women volunteers who will work like this.’\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76}Renu Chakraborty,\textit{Communists in Indian Women’s Movement}, p.65.

\textsuperscript{77}\textit{Ibid}, p.65.
The AIWC formed the All India Save the Children Committee to save those children who were rendered destitute and homeless due to the famine. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, the then president of the AIWC and Urmila Mehta, the Honorary General Secretary, toured the famine-stricken areas of Bengal and found a very grave situation. Mrs. Pandit appealed for funds to provide shelter for the homeless and the starving children, and in response to her appeal a sum of Rs.2,50,000 was collected.\textsuperscript{78} A ten-year scheme was undertaken to start children’s homes where they were to receive basic education and at least 50 children were to be accommodated in each home. There were five such centres in Bengal and 338 children were taken care of.\textsuperscript{79} Spinning, weaving, gardening, carpentry, cane and bamboo basket making were the main crafts taught in these centres. At the centre in Bhola 113 children resided and later on Bhola succeeded in acquiring a plot for the inmates and built thatched huts to house them. In Bankura, Mrs. Pandit entrusted Asoka Gupta to start a home for the orphaned children. So Mrs. Gupta hired a house and started an institution called Sishu Sadan which was inaugurated by Mrs. Pandit. The institution took care of 63 children. The Sadan received five hundred rupees a month. The wife of the editor of the newspaper “Bankura Darpan” publicized the Sadan’s activities by publishing articles in the newspaper. Mohanlal Gupta, a local man donated one lakh rupees for this noble cause. The children studied, learnt spinning, looked after the cows and poultry and did gardening as part of their ‘basic’ education programme. The children were quite fond of Mrs. Gupta and used to call her ‘Ranga-Ma.’ In her own words

\textsuperscript{78} Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, \textit{Women’s Struggle: A History of the All India Women’s Conference}, p.78.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid}, p. 78.
‘...if my children’s schools needed anything my girls could supply, I could request the authorities to take the articles from them.’

Dr. Maitreyi Bose, the honorary secretary of the provincial committee visited this home. Though she was pleased with its activities, she complained about the lack of bathrooms in the home. So under her instructions Mrs. Gupta made arrangements for the same.

Around this time Bengal was engulfed with epidemics (malaria and cholera). Moreover, during the middle of 1943, the rivers namely Damodar and Ajay were flooded causing flood situations in Burdwan, Howrah, Hooghly and Midnapore. To save people from this crisis, several organisations and eminent people came forward to form the People’s Relief Committee (PRC) in September, 1943. Ela Reid, Manikuntala Sen, Kamala Chatterjee, and Kanak Mukherjee represented the MARS within this committee. Vijaylaxmi Pandit in a statement issued on 26th October declared that the subsidized medical practitioners sent by the government into some areas were not equipped with quinine and that in some cases they were not even interested in relieving human suffering. She reiterated that the hospitals were badly equipped and organized, and practically had no arrangements for segregating cholera cases. Thus to save people from epidemics, PRC along with other 18 welfare organizations formed the Bengal Medical Relief Committee (BMRC) with Dr. B. C. Roy as the president. From within this committee Mars made arrangements for medical relief as well. In some districts, with the help of

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local doctors MARS opened clinics for women and children. Women volunteers were trained to administer vaccines for typhoid and pox in the slums of Calcutta. The Calcutta branch of the AIWC sent a fully equipped medical unit to Pagladanga in the eastern suburbs of Calcutta under the direct guidance of the Bengal Medical Relief Coordination Committee.  

The Calcutta branch of the AIWC issued an appeal for further funds and voluntary help for the adoption of destitute, orphaned and abandoned children. Sarojini Naidu endorsed this appeal and said:

The tragedy of Bengal has evoked universal sympathy and gifts of various kinds are fast pouring in for relief to the stricken through many unofficial organisations that are so heroically trying to cope with this supreme calamity.  

She also praised the work done by the relief committee set up by the Calcutta branch of the AIWC. People from the film industry donated generously to the AIWC fund. A number of women, involved in the revolutionary movement in the early 1930s came forward. Kalyani Das Bhattacharya, organizer of Chatri Sangha was one of such women. She ‘toured the famine stricken regions of the province and set up 200 medical relief centres run by women.’

The culminating point of women’s activism was the formation of the Nari Seva Sangha (NSS). ‘At the instance of the MARS it was first formed

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83 Special Branch File no.PY-600/45, West Bengal Police Archive.

84 Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, Women’s Struggle: A History of the All India Women’s Conference, p.75.

85 Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern India, p.211.
in March, 1944 with a provincial committee at a conference of all the Relief organisations in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{86} Apart from MARS those who supported this committee were The Bengal Presidency Council of Women, Bengal Women’s Food Committee, Young Women’s Christian Association, Calcutta Relief Committee, Hindu Mission, People’s Relief Committee, Ramakrishna Mission, Friends Ambulance Unit, Maharashtra Bhagini Samaj etc. It was decided that the NSS would be a representative central co-coordinating body to focus attention on the entire problem of relief and rehabilitation of the women afflicted during the last famine and afterwards in Bengal.\textsuperscript{87} ‘The main task of this organisation was to open homes and handicraft centres in different districts.’\textsuperscript{88}

In the initial stages the NSS functioned with funds provided by charitable organisations. Kamala Mukherjee and Renu Chakraborty as representatives of the MARS were involved in its functioning while Renu Chakraborty’s mother Brahmakumari Ray until her death was a pillar of support. Mars members worked hard to collect funds for the NSS even resorting to box collection in trams, buses, offices and streets. The Calcutta MARS also organized a cultural show and raised Rs.1, 500 for rehabilitation work.\textsuperscript{89} Later the government gave a grant of Rs.18 per head, which was increased later. During the summer of 1944 a small home was started in Noakhali and a

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Special Branch File no. PY- 661/45, West Bengal Police Archive.}

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{88} Renu Chakraborty, \textit{Communists in Indian Women’s Movement}, p.67.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Ibid}, p.68.
centre was opened in Bhola and Tamluk. By the end of 1944 the NSS was able to start a home in Lake Road, Calcutta. The Bengal Food Committee opened a home and handicraft centre in Barasat and Joynagar while the Friends Ambulance Unit started a handicrafts unit at Falta and Basirhat. Homes with work centres were also opened in Howrah and 24parganas. In the work centres run by the NSS, women were taught to make sheets, bedcovers, dusters and print sarees, dye threads, weave stoles with raw silk thread and embroidery. Indusudha Ghosh imparted training in handicrafts. Women even received their wages at the time of their departure from the centre. Moreover they were imparted education up to the sixth standard. Those who excelled in studies were either sent to schools or trained in nursing. There was also a provision for adult education and even marriages were arranged.

With a view to stopping prostitution the women’s organizations like MARS, AIWC, NSS and other organisations convened a meeting at Calcutta University Institute Hall on 6th January, 1945. Its objective was ‘to organize a widespread campaign to stop prostitution of women due to famine conditions.’ Sarojini Naidu presided over the conference. Addressing the youth she urged them to come forward in saving women’s honour. Manikuntala Sen commented that since the famine had killed the ideas of social morality, men did not feel guilty of engaging in flesh trade of the poor, destitute women.

90 Renu Chakraborty, Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.69.
91 Ibid, p.69.
The NSS took a leading role in organizing handicrafts exhibitions from time to time the NSS used to showcase the handicraft items prepared by its inhabitants. Such an exhibition was organized between 27th and 30th December, 1944 at the Presidency College grounds. Hemlata Mitra in her capacity as Vice President of the NSS requested Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, to visit the exhibition on any of the scheduled days which would serve as an encouragement to the organizers.92 Nehru however was unable to come, and Sarojini Naidu inaugurated the exhibition. Products from NSS and its units were exhibited. Different women’s organisations like AIWC, MARS, Bengal Women’s Food Committee, Friends Ambulance Unit and others also sent their exhibits. Handicraft items came from all over Bengal. Hajang tribal women sent handloom products, women of Midnapore brought mats and dried lentil paste (bori) shaped as flowers and ornaments. From Darjeeling came thick woolen clothes. The different paper manufacturing units sent paper, AIWC sent fine embroidery works. Bengal Women’s Food Committee sent different clay items while the peasant women of Joynagar and Barasat home sent beautiful clay models of peasant families. The famous artist Janab Jainal Abedin prepared a series of paintings on the famine of Bengal. Sarojini Naidu was very impressed with the paintings and requested for copies. Mrs. Naidu in her speech appreciated the work done by the NSS and said:

... The helplessness of women led them often to sell their honour, so that they might get some food. We heard of little girls left to the mercy of the world. We heard of women disappearing by some mysterious midnight processes...The silver lining in this cloud is the light divine that emerged from the hidden springs of Bengal’s womanhood. They immediately created a sisterhood of service for those who had

92Special Branch File No. PY- 661/45, West Bengal Police Archive.
fallen, for those who had been betrayed by hunger and destitution. Today we witness in some small measure the first fruits of this vast responsive sympathy...\textsuperscript{93}

On 16.5.45 the NSS issued a circular to the Secretary, Peoples’ Relief Committee informing the latter that a scheme had already been drawn up to open a room for displaying and sale of the products of the Sangha and its coordinated bodies from 1\textsuperscript{st} June 1945.\textsuperscript{94} The showroom was free of any rental charge and that the salary of the salesman would be contributed by the coordinating bodies participating in the scheme.

As the NSS felt the need for technically trained workers for its relief and rehabilitation programme, it drew up a scheme for imparting a course of training to women social workers. The first such training camp was opened at 15, Dover Road by Prof. Kshitish Prosad Chattopadhyaya in February, 1945. The government agreed to bear half the cost of the camp and to provide all facilities.\textsuperscript{95} The content of the programme included training on organisation and management of homes and work centres, rural and social economy, human problem with regard to rehabilitation and rescue work, personal and social hygiene, elements of adult education and literacy.\textsuperscript{96} Practical training included attendance at clinics, medical centres, training in crafts like spinning, weaving, cane-work etc.\textsuperscript{97} Anupama Bagchi was one such participant. She recounted ‘...we learnt a lot by visiting such places as the Lady Dufferin Hospital and the

\textsuperscript{93}Renu Chakraborty, Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, pg.71.

\textsuperscript{94}Special Branch File No. PY- 661/45, West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{95}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{96}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{97}Ibid.
They also visited the Child and Mother Care centre at Singur and according to Anupama Bagchi it was an invaluable experience. The trained women often received government employment or else were recruited by other relief organisations. Seeta Chaudhuri, Honorary Secretary of the NSS, issued a press statement following one such camp on 8th June, 1945 at Maha Bodhi Society Hall, Calcutta. She informed that the first batch of trainees numbering about thirty had received training in the rural surrounding of Barisal (for survey work) and at Singur (for maternity and rural sanitation). Mrs. Kamala Mukherjee, on the other hand reported that the entire cost of the four months’ training programme amounted to Rs. 6, 500. Seeta Chaudhuri was happy to note that almost all the women who had received training, were already employed by different organizations with salaries not less than Rs.50/p.m. She also informed that the training of the second batch was scheduled to start in August. Prof. Kshitish Chattopadhyaya asserted the fact that the system of training of the workers had been revised taking into consideration the experiences of the actual field of work which had definitely enhanced the quality of the training. NSS also opened industrial centres at Pabna, Manikgunj, Bhola, Faridpur, Sonarang and other places.

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98 Renu Chakraborty, *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p.76.
100 *Special Branch File No: PY-661/45*.
101 *Ibid*.
102 *Ibid*.
103 *Ibid*. 
About this time scarcity of clothes along with other essential items became a crying problem. Scarcity of clothes was particularly embarrassing for women. In rural Bengal poor women were forced to cover their shame with root leaf or banana leaf.\footnote{Kanak Mukhopadhyay, \textit{Nari Mukti Andolon O Amra}, p.41.} Once again MARS took up the leadership. It began a movement with an objective to attract people’s attention to this pressing problem. In different areas the workers of MARS organized control shops for clothes, taking out bales of clothes and distributing them among the people.

It is interesting to note that both MARS and the AIWC had women’s welfare as their objective. During the famine they worked hand in hand. But serious ideological differences cropped up between the two. The AIWC was essentially an elitist organisation. In the words of Asoka Gupta:

\begin{quote}
Those who worked for the AIWC, never took any money from the organisation for our travel or any work related activity. It meant that only upper middle class women, who had the means, would work for AIWC. We also had a four anna membership charge.\footnote{Ashoka Gupta, \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.84.}
\end{quote}

On the other hand, reflecting on the role of MARS Manikuntala Sen wrote:

\begin{quote}
Our membership fee was 1 anna, but even this tiny fee was difficult for many. It was our policy to keep the subscription low to enable the maximum number of women to participate.\footnote{Manikuntala Sen, \textit{In Search of Freedom}, p.119.}
\end{quote}

Interestingly Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakraborty and some other Communist leading women had initially joined the AIWC. They had also raised a demand to lower the fees of
the ordinary members to four annas ‘to bring about some interaction between the average woman and the upper class woman.’\textsuperscript{107} The leaders of the AIWC suspected this as an attempt by the communist women to reign supreme in the organisation. The four anna membership was not centrally rejected, but in the Bengal Conference the number of Rs. 3 members were increased and the 3 anna membership proposal was defeated. In fact the fear that the communists might take control of the organisation was even expressed by Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, the then President of the AIWC in a letter dated 4.4.45 addressed to Phulrenu Datta (Guha). In this letter she wrote:

Strings are being pulled to hold it (the annual session) in Lahore and push Perin Barucha of C.P.I. into general secretary ship . . . All our work of these 18 months will be done and the entire machinery will get into the party control.\textsuperscript{108}

She also expressed her desire to change the venue to some other place.\textsuperscript{109} MARS’ mode of working was also disapproved by the AIWC. During the freedom struggle, when women participated in large numbers especially in Gandhian movements, even then the stress was always on the respectable image of the women. AIWC was not free from such notions. But MARS broke all class barriers and started adopting both middle class as well as working class, peasant and slum women as its members, organized rallies and demonstrations with them. They thought of ‘inclusive programmes that would let women of lower social orders represent themselves.’\textsuperscript{110} As middle class communist women

\textsuperscript{107} Manikuntala Sen, \textit{In Search of Freedom}, p.119.

\textsuperscript{108} Letter dated 4.4.45 intercepted at Rashbehari P.O. on 7.4.45, \textit{S.B File No.PY-660/45}, West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Ibid}.

organized protest movements with ordinary women, they were ‘often perceived by
members of their own class as bazar women.’\textsuperscript{111} Asoka Gupta stressed on the fact that the
AIWC focussed entirely on welfare work where politics had no place in the organisation.
‘The Atmaraksha Samiti, however, was much more political in its approach. They were
training the women to be politically conscious and to agitate on various issues.’\textsuperscript{112} AIWC
was reluctant to admit such women into their fold. Sharmistha Dutta Gupta argued that
the divide in the AIWC between members and beneficiaries was threatened by MARS.\textsuperscript{113}
As a result despite working closely, even managing milk and relief centres jointly, serious
differences cropped up between the two. At one time it was proposed that the MARS
would merge with the AIWC to make a large mass organisation for women. But Kanak
Mukherjee, a Communist activist argued that the AIWC was an aristocratic women’s
organisation with an ideal of social welfare on a limited scale.\textsuperscript{114} In special situations they
did join hands with others. But that was not enough to change its class character. So any
merger between the two was ruled out.

1.2 The communal riot of Noakhali in 1946

Noakhali was a small coastal Muslim majority district of erstwhile
East Bengal, within the greater Chittagong Division. In the autumn of 1946 a devastating
communal riot had erupted; the perpetrators belonging mostly from the Muslim

\textsuperscript{111} Sharmistha Datta Gupta, \textit{Identities and Histories}, p.180.

\textsuperscript{112} Ashoka Gupta, \textit{In the Path of Service}, p.84.

\textsuperscript{113} Sharmistha Datta Gupta, \textit{Identities and Histories}, p.181.

\textsuperscript{114} Kanak Mukhopadhyay, \textit{Nari Mukti Andolon O Amra}, p.82.
community. The violence had first blown up in the northern part of Noakhali on the 10th of October and had thereafter spread to the neighbouring district of Tipperah. The violence reached its extreme point on the 14th of October. The terrible riots and violence were spearheaded by Ghulam Sarwar, a prominent Muslim League leader of the district and a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly between 1937 and 1945. What made matters worse was the fact that his actions, received complete support from the Muslim Ministry of the province.

Before 1946 there was never any major outbreak of communal violence in Noakhali. Like other parts of Eastern Bengal, the minority Hindu community of Noakhali was economically dominant in commerce, money-lending and landownership. The shops were mostly owned by the Hindu community. The Muslims worked as subordinates under the Hindus. From the 1940s the Muslim peasantry faced an economic crisis which led to their impoverishment. A severe flood caused considerable damage to crops in Noakhali. On the one hand, low jute prices depleted their purchasing power, the scarcity and high prices of grain drove them to the brink of starvation.\footnote{Suranjan Das, \textit{Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947}, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.195.} Noakhali's food supplies used to come from the neighbouring areas of Dinajpur, Bakarganj, Chittagong, Sylhet and Burma. But from the mid-1946 the supply areas were in shortage of rice and it was also becoming difficult to import rice from Burma because of ongoing war. The Supply Department of the Bengal Government also failed to meet this demand and from September the modified system of rationing broke down and the price of rice rose to a level which was almost out of the reach of ordinary Muslim peasantry. Many Hindu
shopkeepers had made fortunes at the expense of the Muslim peasantry.\textsuperscript{116} This fuelled their resentment against the Hindu economic supremacy.\textsuperscript{117}

It has also been argued that Noakhali riots were a direct outcome of the Great Calcutta Killings of the 16\textsuperscript{th} of August, 1946. Exactly seven weeks after the Calcutta disturbances riots erupted in Noakhali. Both the communities had suffered badly during the Calcutta Killings and a considerable section of both the communities were eager to take revenge on each other. In such an explosive situation Ghulam Sarwar started delivering provocative speeches thereby exciting the Muslims to avenge the Calcutta massacre, and join the National Guard – that ultimately led to the boycotting of the Hindus economically. Sarwar’s endeavors received full support from local school masters, maulavis and the Union President. On the 10\textsuperscript{th} of October Ghulam Sarwar addressing 15,000 Muslims at the Sahapur English High School in Ramganj police station gave a direct call to action. Suranjan Das has argued:

> It is significant that on the day selected for the raid the Hindu notables were worshipping their goddess of wealth (Lakshmi). Perhaps in popular Muslim perceptions the event probably represented an attack on Hindu money-lenders and landlords at the moment when they were praying for the maintenance of their wealth and greater prosperity.\textsuperscript{118}

The main targets of attack were Hindu property and Hindu influential people, some of whom were brutally murdered such as the zamindar of Narayanpur, Surendra Babu or the


\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Ibid}, p.195.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ibid}, p. 196.
leading lawyer Rajendra Lal Chowdhury. These brutalities partly reflected Muslim discontent at Hindu economic domination. On the other hand, low caste Hindus were spared after conversion.

Conversion of the Hindus was undertaken in an organised manner and on a larger scale than in the earlier riots. Hindus were to perform acts which were forbidden in their religion and perform Islamic practices like reciting the *Kalma*, eating beef, wearing *lungi* and women had to wipe off the vermillion mark on their forehead and to break their conch bangles- all symbols of Hindu marriage. Converted Hindus were compelled to marry their daughters to the Muslims. Hindu temples were also desecrated and idols were also damaged by the mob. Assaults and molestation of women formed a significant feature of the riots. Women were abducted and were forcibly married to Muslims. To the Muslim crowd, violation of the honour of Hindu women meant the exposure of the most protected aspect of Hindu identity and religion.  

Rioters acted in such an organised way so as to keep the outside world completely in darkness when the terrible happenings were taking place. This was done in the following way:

The exit and entrance of the Hindus from and to the riot-stricken areas were cut off. This was possible in an area where one could move only either by boat or on foot. There were no motorable or vehicular roads. All the boatmen were Muslims. They refused to ferry the

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120 Ibid, p.198.
Hindus. The narrow paths (there were no roads) were dug up by the rioters. The few Hindus who tried to get into the interior had to turn back seriously wounded.\footnote{K.N. Vaswani, \textit{Sucheta: An Unfinished Autobiography}, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1978) p.43.}

Muslim employees in Post and Telegraph offices held up Hindu telegrams asking for urgent help.\footnote{Suranjan Das, \textit{Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947}, p.199.} As a result Calcutta heard about the riots only after three days had elapsed. After the news was communicated to the outside world, all entries and exits were carefully checked and perpetrators did not even hesitate to employ Muslim boys to report the arrival of anyone outside their locality.

The involvement of the Muslim League in the riots and indifference of the British government was beyond doubt. Though the Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the Chief Minister himself condemned and dissociated the League from the violence, the Bengal Governor admitted that religious animosity was so high between the two communities that individual Muslim leaders while paying lip service to the party’s policy, may be unwilling in practice to implement it.\footnote{Ibid. p.200.} Many League leaders’ speeches and statements amounted to an incitement of violence against the Hindus. Muslim crowds carried League flags and wore Pakistan caps. The rioters shouted slogans like ‘Pakistan Zindabad’ or ‘Muslim Zindabad.’ The Hindus were forced to offer subscriptions to the League with the assurance that their life and property would be spared, though the promise was not always kept. The Hindus were also made to wear caps similar to the Gandhi cap, with a map of India and the word ‘Pakistan’ stamped over
The League even pressurized the government to release a number of accused persons. When reports of the happenings started coming out then Gandhiji asked Acharya Kripalini to proceed to Noakhali to examine the situation in person. Sucheta Kripalini decided to accompany her husband. After reaching Calcutta they were informed that as all means of communication had been disrupted, they could only reach Noakhali with government support. So the couple decided to meet the Governor, Sir Frederick Burrows who was then in Chittagong. Sucheta later on recalled:

Governor appeared to be very complacent. The Chief Minister [Suhrawardy] had assured him that the riots were over and the situation was under control. He, the Chief Minister, appeared to be very pleased with himself.

We had an hour’s futile talk with the Governor. We could not convince him of the seriousness of the situation, that the rioting had not yet stopped. He chose to believe the assurances given to him by the League Chief Minister. When we spoke of the kidnapping of Hindu women, the representative of the Labour Government . . . said that “that was because the Hindu women were more beautiful than Muslim women”! . . . Neither the Governor nor the Chief Minister gave us any guidance about how to reach Noakhali. Rather, they told us that now that there was quiet in the riot-stricken area, we had better give up the idea of going to Noakhali. Under the circumstances, we decided to fly back to Calcutta.125

Receiving no help from any official quarter the Kripalini couple decided to go on their own.

After reaching Comilla they had to traverse the entire way to Noakhali by jeep, boat and on foot. Their experience clearly manifested the indifferent and reluctant attitude of the British government.

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124 K.N. Vaswani, Sucheta: An Unfinished Autobiography, p.44.

125 Ibid, pp. 44-45.
It was in those days of gloom and darkness that Gandhiji became the sole person to show the world the right path to bring back peace and normalcy. Suranjan Das wrote:

At a time when all political groups blamed each other for the troubles and tried to reinforce their hold in their constituencies without addressing themselves to the task of combatting the problem of communalism, Gandhi turned his back on institutional politics and embarked on a peace mission to Noakhali for restoring communal harmony.\footnote{Suranj Das, \textit{Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947}, p.202.}

Gandhiji was very upset by the targeting of violence against women, who were the worst victims.\footnote{Rakesh Batabyal, \textit{Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943-47}. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005) p. 350.} He was equally aghast at the religious intolerance shown by the local populace.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.337.} On the 5th of December, 1946 he said: ‘My own doctrine was failing. I don’t want to die a failure.’\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.200.} During his tour he visited twenty-nine villages and in many places he succeeded in winning the support of the Muslims. But more importantly he succeeded in inspiring a large number of women to come to Noakhali and work for the riot-affected people. Taking Gandhiji’s advice women penetrated into the remote parts of Noakhali and established their camps with the aim of restoring communal harmony and instilling confidence in the minds of the terrified Hindus who had stayed back. Even house-wives who had no experience of a public life came forward.

Gandhi’s peace mission, however, brought only temporary peace. Soon Partition was to become a reality. As argued by Suranjan Das,
Sectarian politics ultimately won the day and Gandhiji’s aim to make Hindus and Muslims live in peace with one another, be it in Pakistan or Hindusthan, gave way to division and regrouping of Hindus and Muslims behind new boundaries.\(^{130}\)

1.3 Partition and the refugee problem in West Bengal

By the end of 1946 communal violence had spread its tentacles in different parts of India. In Calcutta sporadic communal clashes continued to occur notwithstanding communal clashes that were taking place in different parts of Bengal as a whole. In retaliation of the Noakhali carnage, a worst communal riot erupted where the Hindus were the perpetrators. In March, 1947 communal riots exploded in Punjab. In face of such animosity Congress leaders increasingly felt that partition of the country could be an alternative to the mounting communal tensions. The Hindu mercantile community particularly of Bengal extended their full support to the Congress stance. The communal clashes also helped Jinnah to convince the Muslims that partition was the only way out available. On the 15\(^{th}\) of August, 1947 India achieved its independence after two of its provinces Bengal and Punjab were partitioned. The Radcliffe line divided the two provinces.

Though the two provinces faced partition, its effects were not similar. In Punjab partition was accompanied by tremendous violence. Women were abducted and raped on a massive scale. In case of Bengal, though there was considerable tension between the two communities, partition did not immediately spark off communal violence on a scale that Punjab witnessed. Violence in Bengal was much more sporadic and localized. The diverse nature of reactions that were ushered in as a result of the

partition actually determined the movement of the refugees and the attitude and policies of the Government of India towards the problem. In face of widespread violence there was complete exchange of population on the western frontier of India; Hindus and Sikhs were leaving West Pakistan and similarly Muslims in North India were moving into West Pakistan. Between August and December 1947 almost fifteen million, mostly Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India on the western side and roughly the same number of Muslims went to West Pakistan. In contrast refugees from East Pakistan never came to India at one go. They came in different stages spreading over a period of many years. The total number of refugees who crossed the border was almost 4.26 million by 1962.

The different nature of migration on two frontiers ultimately determined the difference in Government of India’s policy towards the refugees of East and West Pakistan. On the western side the Government accepted the inevitability of partition and resultant migration. A Military Evacuation Organisation was set up to organize the movement of refugees across the border and was also responsible for their protection en route. The evacuee property left by the Muslims also helped the cause of resettlement of the refugees in the west.

However, the refugee problem in West Bengal was seen in a different light. Nehru at first insisted that Bengal had no refugee problem. He reiterated

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132 *Ibid*, p.999

133 *Ibid*, p.999.
that conditions in East Bengal did not constitute a grave danger for its Hindu minorities.\textsuperscript{134} Even after the communal disturbances began in East Pakistan and Hindu exodus started, he maintained this stance and felt that some ‘psychological measures’ were needed to restore confidence among the Hindus. The Inter-dominion Agreement of April, 1948 was signed between India and Pakistan which provided for the setting up of Minorities Boards and Evacuee Property Management Boards in East and West Bengal with members from the minority communities.\textsuperscript{135} So Government of India was clearly against any major migration from East Pakistan. Also from West Bengal very few Muslims went to East Pakistan. The Government too, was against any redistribution of Muslim evacuee property among the refugees in West Bengal. The Government adopted the policy that migrants would have to be convinced of the necessity of returning back. Joya Chatterjee argued that even after it had become obvious that refugees had come to stay, Delhi clung to a stance where expediency triumphed over experience.\textsuperscript{136} As a result the Centre did little to solve the refugee problem in West Bengal.

However, the West Bengal government could not ignore the refugee problem. West Bengal after partition was reduced to half of its original size. It was already densely populated and migrations became an added burden for it. The province also did not grow enough food to meet the needs of its inhabitants. The West Bengal government at first tried to keep down the numbers of refugees by denying the status of

\textsuperscript{134} Joya Chatterjee, “Dispersal and Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal,”\textit{Modern Asian Studies}, p.1000.

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid}, p.1000.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Ibid}, p.1000.
refugees to the newcomers as far as practicable. Though the camp facilities provided to the refugees were of a sub standard quality, yet these measures failed to stop the influx of the refugees. The government subsequently realized that refugees living in small clusters in Calcutta were gradually becoming politically conscious to fight for their rights. Therefore the Government decided to re settle the refugees either in empty tracts far away from Calcutta, or else outside West Bengal. Thus efforts were made to settle the refugees in Andaman and Nicobar islands, in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. There was also reluctance on the part of the refugees to settle outside West Bengal. This was partly because of the fact that projects outside West Bengal were undertaken in half-hearted manner. A section of the refugees, however, showed their enterprising skills when they forcibly occupied vacant lands and with their own efforts established settlements for themselves. Thus the squatters’ colonies were established in different parts of Calcutta. The government tried to oust them on different occasions, but the refugees organised themselves well and in course of time the Government had to recognize these colonies.

However, the partition and the refugee problem brought some positive changes in the lives of the refugee women. The exigencies of the situation forced women to come out of their domestic spheres to take on public duties. In many cases the women became the breadwinners for their families. Archit Basu Guha-Choudhury argued that when women came out to work in the public domain, their primary concern was to supplement the financial provisions of their families; self-liberation was arguably
consequential to the process, although not instant. Nevertheless it can safely be argued that the impact of partition on the migrant women was positive, in the light of the increasing roles that women took up in the political, social and economic spheres. Lastly the Communist Party started garnering the support of the refugees in face of the indifference of the state government. MARS vigorously championed the cause of the employment opportunities of the refugee women.

The prominent women activists of that era were all aware of the fact that the refugees from East Pakistan had received a raw deal in India. This explains why the refugee problem became such a dominant issue when such women leaders addressed it. Similarly the government was also indifferent towards women’s employment problems and equal opportunities in workplaces. Therefore, this was also an issue that they took up vigorously.

1.4 The journey begins: Leela Ray (Nag) and communal riots of 1946 and refugee problem in West Bengal

Leela Ray (Nag) was a political activist, social reformer, journalist and a philanthropist. A nationalist and a believer in women’s equal rights she contributed immensely towards different social causes.

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She participated extensively in the relief work in the communal riots ravaged Noakhali. In the post-independence years she whole-heartedly devoted herself to the cause of refugees from East Pakistan.

When the news of the Noakhali riots reached Calcutta, Leela formed the National Service Institute (NSI) to be on the side of the helpless Hindus who were the subjects of heinous crime. Within a few days a group of workers of the NSI went to Noakhali. The workers observed that law and order was almost non-existent. But more alarming were the reports of cases of molestation, abduction and forcible marriage of women on a large scale. The government’s inaction in this matter prompted Leela to write an open letter to the Governor of Bengal. She wrote:

Both the unofficial and official versions prove beyond a shadow of doubt that along with murders, lootings, arsons and mass-conversions, forcible marriage and abductions of women have occurred. It does not matter what the actual number of such cases is. But Leela found that the Government’s attitude towards this problem was rather indifferent. As the government was solely responsible for the maintenance of the safety and security of the women, Leela decided to vent the following questions to the government relating to the suffering women:

1. What steps have you taken to rescue these women?
2. How many women have so far been rescued?
3. What has been done with these rescued women?
4. Are you prepared to arrange immediate military escort and let batches of voluntary workers, men and women, to tour Noakhali and penetrate into the interior to find out things for themselves and start rescue work immediately?

Leela Ray’s open letter to the Governor of Bengal (undated), Intelligence Branch File no.250-B/47, West Bengal State Archive.
5. Are you to place necessary Government resources at the disposal of such rescue parties?¹⁴⁰

Highlighting the Government’s indifference on the issue of molestation of women she wrote:

All this does not touch you in the least that women of this land live in daily and hourly dishonour and disgrace does not call forth one note of indignation from you. With calculated complacency you have dilated upon the difficulties of communication which, you ask us to believe, the military are finding insurmountable.¹⁴¹

She accused the Government of following double standards. She wrote:

On the pretext of avenging the indignity on one English woman the entire Governmental machinery could be marshalled and medieval horrors let loose on unarmed people, but you do not miss beat in your heart on hearing of the gruesome atrocities committed district after district of Bengal on a people whom your Government have rendered emasculate by depriving them of the means of self-defence.¹⁴²

Therefore she demanded that Government should make necessary arrangements without any further delay to rescue women from the state of indignity, and permit unofficial organisations to proceed unhampered to the affected areas thereby providing rescue work on their own. She also demanded the repeal of the Arms Act on the ground that:

Recent occurrences have proved that the hooligan elements never lack deadly weapons for their anti-social activities whereas the decent people alone are deprived of all elementary means of defending life and honour. The Government have miserably failed in their duty of protecting the people. They must now let the people defend themselves.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Leela Ray’s open letter to the Governor of Bengal (undated), Intelligence Branch File no.250-B/47, West Bengal State Archive.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.
Leela reached Ramgunj - a riot affected area on 7th November along with five female and a few male workers. They found out that many villagers were still living in a state of terror, as nothing had been done to rescue these terrified people to safer places. On 9th November Leela established NSI’s camp in Madhupur village, situated in the north of Ramgunj police station. The first task of NSI was to bring the helpless villagers to the relief camps. Uma Devi, an associate of Leela wrote that the condition of the Hindus who had been forced to stay back at the village after the riot was insulting and disgraceful. But still more painful and heart-breaking was the condition of the girls belonging to the converted families. She wrote that whenever rescue workers entered a village, women requested the workers to save them from the life of indignity. Leela demonstrated her indomitable spirit when at this point she covered nearly a distance of 90 miles to rescue over four hundred men and women within a span of six days. The Hindu families in a village named Kasinagar were still living in a state of impasse even after one and a half months of communal riots. They were rescued by NSI workers. In this way the NSI unit of Madhupur rescued almost 1307 people from 27 villages. In this context it must be remembered that NSI workers both male and female, more often than not, rescued the Hindus from Muslim majority villages without any military or police support.


146 Ibid, p.143

147 Ibid, p.143.
Gradually NSI picked up relief and rehabilitation work among the riot affected people after the situation had been normalised to a certain extent. This task required huge human and monetary resources. Leela issued an appeal on behalf of the NSI requesting people to come forward and contribute towards the cause in any manner. She wrote:

The forces of re-action and disruption are out to sabotage progress and National solidarity. This challenge must be faced with total mobilisation of men and resources. I appeal to young men and women to come forward and forge an organisation which would be able to take up this challenge immediately and effectively. The National Service Institute would undertake to give the necessary advice and instruction.

I appeal to the rich: the welfare of organised society is at stake and they must open their purse-strings wide. If they fail us at the present moment, they will do disservice not to us but to themselves most of all. Huge sums of money and all possible resources are required for helping our stricken brothers and sisters specially for rescuing and rehabilitating our women who have been the worst victims and for setting up a network of organisation which can cope with this crisis.148

Uma Devi recalled that NSI workers visited 55 villages within Ramgunj police station and collected statistics regarding the population of the two communities, the number of people who were converted, number of houses that were burnt down, loot, arson, forcible marriage, torture on women etc.149 These statistics demonstrated how on the one hand the majority community ran havoc in villages in a pre-planned way even in broad daylight, on the other hand, in contrast, those who were responsible for maintaining law and order remained a silent spectator to such barbaric happenings.150

148 *Intelligence Branch File no.250-B/47.* West Bengal State Archive.


The workers soon realised that unless communal harmony was restored between the two communities the Hindus would not be able to gather enough courage to return to their villages. Therefore from the month of December, 1946 NSI workers decided that their prime task would be to work for communal harmony and win the confidence of the Hindus. With this aim in mind several sub-camps or outposts were also established under the Madhupur camp. Such outposts were set up in places like kanchanpur, Sondara, Narayanpur, Noagaon, Hotatia and Sahapur which covered about thirty villages. In each outpost two workers were posted, who were entrusted with the task of convincing the villagers about their urgency to get back to their villages and to start normal life as early as possible. This would entail the starting of local market, schools etc. Apart from distributing clothes and blankets among distressed villagers irrespective of their religion, making arrangements for the treatment of the sick, education for the children of both the communities, forming a village-vigilant volunteer crops and introducing handicrafts as a source of living were the other tasks of the outposts. The NSI workers also ensured that the refugees received government assistance that was due to them and were able to buy necessary items in controlled price.

Uma Devi provides a detailed account of the activities of different outposts. The outposts ran schools which were attended by students belonging to both communities. Apart from customary education, lessons to enhance their level of general knowledge were imparted.

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152 Ibid, p.145.
knowledge were also imparted. In the evening discussions with adult members took place on varied topics ranging from history, geography, to geometry, and science. The students were supplied with books, slates, and pencils from the camps. A batch of volunteers were also formed comprising the youth from both the communities who were given training to combat any sort of criminal activities.\textsuperscript{154} Care was taken to enable people to earn something, by the use of handlooms and charkhas that had been installed and the thread was supplied by different outposts. It was estimated, that until the month of Chaitra, 1353 B.S. (April 1946) the NSI had been successful in offering assistance to at least eight thousand people. Cotton and woollen clothes, blankets, puffed rice, food and medicine for the sick and children were distributed among the distressed. Later on, it was decided that if the distressed person was found to be fit and fine, he would be employed in activities necessitating physical labour such as the clearing of roads or the ponds with a view to utilising the relief measures offered from the camps. In every outpost there would be a small dispensary where local doctors would attend patients at a fixed time.\textsuperscript{155} Besides these, the NSI workers worked hard to win the confidence of the majority community. In some cases they succeeded; and a number of Muslims spontaneously agreed to extend help in rebuilding houses or returning looted goods.\textsuperscript{156} Even Gandhiji appreciated their work and wholeheartedly supported their endeavour.


\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Ibid}, p. 148.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Ibid}, p. 145.
The riots of Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar hastened the process of partition. Leela was dead against the partition of her country. She presided over a meeting of the women of South Calcutta where a resolution demanding the removal of the communal ministry was arrived at. At the same time they attested to the fact that the abolition of the Arms Act should be carried out so as to enable women to defend themselves in the absence of Governmental protection towards women which had miserably failed.\footnote{157} Leela also launched a strong anti-Partition agitation through schools, colleges and factories.\footnote{158} Along with her husband she also rushed to Patna to meet Gandhi so that something could be done to avert the partition. However, Partition became a reality. Leela remained in East Pakistan initially and took an initiative to stir up a sense of service and secular mentality among women. With this aim in mind she formed the East Pakistan Mahila Sanhati. The uniqueness of this organisation was that many well-established Muslim women also joined this organisation to work for communal harmony. However, such solidarity between the two communities of women was not favourably disposed by the government of East Pakistan. It made every effort to curtail the activities of the organisation. But Leela continued her activities and went on to form the Dacca District Minority Committee to protect the Hindus against governmental and non-governmental communal violence. Following this in other districts of erstwhile East Bengal similar minority communities were formed. But these activities were too much for the East Pakistan government to bear. At the end of the year 1948 the East Pakistan

\footnote{157 Special Branch File no. T.P-513/47, West Bengal Police Archive.}

\footnote{158 Ibid.}
government issued an arrest warrant against Leela and her husband. With no other option in hand the couple had to leave East Pakistan forever.

Leela perfectly understood the pain and feeling of loss that the refugees had to undergo from her personal experience – when she was compelled to leave her homeland forever. Added to this was the indifferent attitude of the Government of India towards the refugees who were facing an uncertain future in West Bengal. She described the plight of the refugees in an article *Bastutyagi O Sankhalaghu* (Homeless and Minority), published in *Jayasree*. She wrote that the refugees were that class of people who did not have any rights whatsoever over any country, either on the country from which he was forced to leave or the country in which he had taken refuge. He was unwanted in both the places. The inhabitants of the new country were irritated because the refugees were an added burden to the population and had made the unemployment problem worse. Leela along with her husband took up the responsibility of warranting that the refugees should not be deprived of what was due to them. In the meantime in West Bengal, the East Bengal Minority Welfare Central Committee had been formed with Sri Akhilchandra Dutta as the president to work for the refugees. Its aims were to draw public sympathies towards the seriousness and complexities of the refugee problem in West Bengal and to pressurise the government to take proper action towards the rehabilitation of the refugees; and more importantly, to grant citizenship rights to the refugees. The Committee established its branches in different parts of refugee inhabited

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areas in West Bengal. A number of refugee organisations also started working with the Committee. Under the Committee’s pressure the government opened up temporary camps in Calcutta and its adjacent areas.

The East Bengal Minority Welfare Central Committee observed a refugee week in the month of May, 1948 which was followed by a conference in Calcutta. It submitted a memorandum to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, president of the Constituent Assembly, demanding citizenship rights to the East Bengalee refugees. Dr. Rajendra Prasad had moral support for the refugees’ claims to citizenship rights. Accordingly, the West Bengal government issued a statement to announce that any refugee who expressed a desire to live in India would be granted citizenship rights. In January, 1949, when the Committee was working in full swing, Sri Dutta resigned from the post of president of the Committee on personal grounds. It was at this juncture that Leela came into the picture and she was appointed as the Secretary of the Committee with Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar as the president of the Committee.

Leela at once started working in full earnest. She tried to draw the attention of the government towards the refugee problem, reminding them of their duties towards the helpless refugees. She met the Chief Minister of West Bengal as well as the Prime Minister from time to time to find out a redressal for the refugees. At a meeting of the Committee on 2 May 1948 she regretted the indifferent attitude of the West Bengal government towards the East Bengalee refugee problem and urged the refugees to appeal to the government in a concerted manner so that they could secure an immediate
redressal of their grievances. This was necessary in view of the fact that only under such circumstances; they would be in a position to earn their living in West Bengal by taking to some profession or the other.\textsuperscript{160} She demanded that the West Bengal government should withdraw the time-limit imposed on the registration of the evacuees from West Bengal.\textsuperscript{161} In support of the refugees’ demand the committee observed 30 May 1948 as the ‘Bengal Evacuee day.’ On this day resolutions were passed demanding immediate rehabilitation of the East Bengal evacuees, facilities for employment, education, and citizenship rights of the refugees in the Indian Union.\textsuperscript{162} The spirit of provincialism displayed by the people of West Bengal towards the refugees was also condemned.

Leela strongly championed the cause of citizenship right of the refugees. In a statement published in the Hindustan Standard dated 23 August 1948, titled as ‘Citizenship in Indian Union,’ she lashed out at the Bengal Government for issuing instructions, which she feared would create a distinction between citizens and citizens with unfortunate consequences, if they were implemented.\textsuperscript{163} She pointed out that governmental instructions manifested that the government did not want the refugees to be absorbed into the general body of citizens. Such a policy would add to the suffering of the citizens and would perpetuate the stigma of the refugees. She felt that under the circumstances the most logical course would be to extend the right of citizenship and

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\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Special Branch File} no.T.P-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.
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enfranchise all those who were born in British India or within the Indian states; and thereafter intended to reside in the Indian Union and were otherwise eligible. She criticised certain political leaders who proposed to de-franchise East Bengalee evacuees in India. She considered such an effort as a ‘death-blow’ aimed at the East Bengalee refugees and urged the refugees to stand united against this.

Leela was also in favour of treating the refugee problem as a national problem. On 14th July, 1949 she met the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and placed the following memorandum of demands for his consideration:

1. As the refugee problem was a national problem it should be kept above party-politics and should be tackled on an emergency basis,

2. The conditions in East Pakistan was increasingly becoming unbearable for the Hindus to stay there. Therefore, they were forced to leave their ancestral homes and jump into the unknown; as such all those who came to the Indian Dominion either before June 25th, 1948 or after must be registered as refugees on an equal footing,

3. Instead of perpetuating gratuitous doles in the camps and colonies the refugees should be rehabilitated from the very beginning by settling them in their own homes or lands and affording means of earning,

4. Inordinate delay in giving loans, whether business or otherwise the object of relief gets frustrated,

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164 Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.

165 Ibid.
5. Without an industrial and social development scheme no large-scale rehabilitation was possible,

6. The machinery for relief and rehabilitation work should be such as could take quick decisions and execute promptly the decisions taken.\textsuperscript{166}

Leela also started visiting different refugee camps. During the month of March, 1949 she made an extensive tour of Assam. After meeting the refugees there, she felt that the issue of rehabilitation of Bengalee refugees was not also favourably looked after by the Assam government.\textsuperscript{167} Not only that in Ichapur, in North 24-Parganas she requested the government to acquire the land owned by a private company with a view to setting up a colony there. It was due to her hard work, perseverance and supervision that a colony developed in the land - the first colony to be developed on a private initiative. The colony was later renamed as Ananda Math. She also visited refugee camps in different districts and on their behalf submitted many applications and petitions to the government.

It was largely on Leela’s initiative, that an All East Bengal Refugee Conference could take place on the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} September, 1949 where delegates from West Bengal, Assam, Sylhet, Tipperah, East Punjab and other places assembled to discuss the grievances of the refugees. Seventeen resolutions were adopted here:

\textsuperscript{166} Jayasree, Baisakh-Chaitra, 1377 (B.S), 1970, p.161.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid, p.161.
1. Strong disapproval was ventilated against the dilatoriness and carelessness of the government in dealing with rehabilitation schemes, loans etc.

2. Speedy execution of rehabilitation schemes by an autonomous body of responsible persons,

3. Raising a group of refugee young men to devise ways and means to solve the problems calmly,

4. Urging the government to reconsider the order of closing the refugee camps from 31.10.49 without providing shelter for the refugees,

5. Expressing dissatisfaction for not adopting any effective measure to procure lands for them,

6. Expressing satisfaction for their eligibility to vote in the ensuing general election,

7. Requesting the government to take steps for the exchange of properties,

8. Employment of refugees in all government departments and allowing a separate quota for them in all future requirements,

9. Requisition of vacant houses and plots of land for them.\(^{168}\)

Leela put forward her major arguments in this conference indicating what the Committee proposed to achieve for the refugees. She suggested:

\(^{168}\) Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47, 1947. West Bengal Police Archive.
The Committee suggests that land should be acquired and developed by the Government within a period of two months from now and land be given to the refugees for housing purpose and to the cultivators for agriculture and a consolidated amount given to each refugee family at one time and building and other materials necessary be made available at controlled rate in proper quantities...

... Along with these rehabilitation schemes small traders’ technical centres should be opened both for production and for trading and schemes of education, sanitation and medical aid taken up simultaneously. If all these different aspects of rehabilitation do not go hand in hand no rehabilitation can be possible. The Committee feels that if the government seek the co-operation of the non-official agencies practically doing refugee rehabilitation work without making invidious distinctions to serve ulterior political ends rehabilitation can only be possible but also will be very much accelerated and not only the misery and the sense of frustration of lakhs will come to an end but also the government be relieved of a huge burden.169

Explaining in detail why refugee influx had become a continuous process, Leela argued that there were genuine reasons for the minorities to leave East Pakistan and unless these problems were tackled the influx would not stop. Leela pointed out that in East Pakistan no Hindus were appointed either in administration or governance. In the sphere of education Hindus were not inducted either in universities or in the posts of principal in the colleges. The aforesaid factors notwithstanding, only the majority community were entrusted in the setting of the curriculum as well. Therefore, Hindus were hesitant to educate their children in such an environment. The chances of getting a job whether in public or private sector also became an uncertainty to the extent of none for the Hindus.170 The Pakistani government had also refused to accord Bengali language the status of mother tongue. Besides, Pakistan had been declared as an Islamic state. Therefore, Leela questioned the very logic of embracing such a state by the non-Muslims

169 Jayasree, Baisakh-Chaitra, 1377(B.S), 1970, p.163.

as their own.\textsuperscript{171} Financially too, the Hindus were in a back foot. Income tax on the Hindus was fixed in such a way so as to cripple them financially. The majority community was also non-cooperating in some areas. This was the reason why many Hindus were leaving East Pakistan.\textsuperscript{172} The houses of the Hindus were forcibly occupied by the Muslims. The former were not allowed to have any political existence. So, to cut a long story short, Hindus in East Pakistan had practically no rights and they were subjected to discrimination. Added to this was the continuous harassment and humiliation of the Hindus who were seeking refuge in India. Their goods were being confiscated and no receipt was issued to them.\textsuperscript{173} Leela felt that under the circumstances rules and regulations regarding citizenship in both India and Pakistan should be flexible.\textsuperscript{174}

Leela reiterated that solutions to such problems were largely dependent on the pursuance of the following steps:

1. Both India and Pakistan would have to follow a unified policy with regard to their foreign policy; otherwise the minorities in both countries would suffer endlessly,

2. Both countries would have to bear the responsibility of the refugees by making necessary arrangements for their livelihood and offering provisions for a dignified life,


\textsuperscript{172}Ibid, p.181.

\textsuperscript{173}Ibid, p.183.

\textsuperscript{174}Ibid, p.184.
3. Persons who had lost their jobs due to partition would have to be taken care of,

4. Both the countries should follow a policy, by which any person could become a citizen of either of the two countries as per their desire,

5. In every sphere the only yardstick for appointment would be his/her capability and nothing else,

6. The refugees should not be harassed in any way, while migrating from one country to another,

7. The authorities must also see to it that refugees on both sides were allowed to bring the goods, necessary for their own use,

8. The two states should also start separate departments to deal with the refugee problem and for its speedy solution.\textsuperscript{175}

On 15\textsuperscript{th} October, 1949 the Pakistan government by promulgating the Ordinance on Refugees’ Property tried to encroach upon the properties of the minorities in East Pakistan. The Committee strongly protested against such a discriminatory policy and appealed to the government to intervene in this matter. The committee also organised a number of meetings to put pressure on the government to expedite the issue of the relocation of the refugees in West Bengal. In one such meeting held on 19.2.50 the committee passed resolutions urging the government to make

immediate arrangements for the evacuation of the suffering and displaced Hindus from
East Bengal, free of charge and to arrange for total exchange of population between the
two countries.\textsuperscript{176} In this meeting Leela issued a Bengali booklet titled \textit{East Bengal Minority}
Welfare Central Committee-A Report. It dilated on the various problems confronting the
displaced persons, the origin of the committee, its objects and its activities.\textsuperscript{177}

Towards the end of 1949 there started a tussle over encroachment of vacant land between the refugees and the landlords on the one hand and between the refugees and the government on the other. The situation became more complex when the government issued a press note on 16\textsuperscript{th} November announcing that it would be not be able to shoulder the responsibility of 15 lakhs refugees; whatever assistance was provided to them, was done only on humanitarian grounds. Following this the government ordered the closing down of camps. On the other hand, the influx of refugees increased from the late 1940s. Receiving no assistance from the government the refugees started forcible occupation of waste lands and then with their own labour started converting them into a place, suited for dwelling. But the government in the name of protecting private property treated it as a problem of law and order and announced the following in strong words:

\textsuperscript{176} \textit{Special Branch File} no. T.P-513/47.

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Ibid.}
. . . the Government will not tolerate such unauthorised and wrongful possession . . . and wherever the rightful owners of such properties can satisfy Government of their ownership. . . Government will not hesitate to use all means at its disposal. 178

Taking advantage of such an announcement a section of the landowners forcibly tried to evict the refugees. At that time since the largest number of refugees had concentrated in forcibly occupied lands in Barrackpore, therefore, some of the most dogged scenes of conflict occurred in that area. Leela visited these colonies on 11 and 12 December, 1949 to assess the problems of the refugees. She also visited several other colonies that sprang up in the outskirts of Calcutta. After talking to the refugees she noticed that in most cases refugees were ready to pay the price for the land and wanted the government to fix a just price after discussion with the owners of the land. Leela on behalf of the Committee appealed to the government to arrive at an understanding and to issue legal recognition to the colonies.

In February, 1950 devastating riots erupted in Dacca followed by other districts in East Pakistan. She immediately sent a telegram to Nehru to intervene in this matter:

Grave situation at Dacca and West Bengal. We strongly urge upon your immediate presence at Calcutta and quick personal handling at All India level. Unless immediately tackled crisis will overwhelm whole country. 179

She also alerted both the State and the Central governments to get ready for a massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan. Leela immediately plunged into relief work. Through the Amrita Bazar Patrika dated 23.2.50 Leela appealed to the public at large to come up as

178 Jayasree, Baisakh-Chaitra, 1377(B.S), 1970, p.163.
volunteers in order to help the East Bengal Minority Welfare Central Committee for receiving destitutes of East Pakistan, who were flocking to Calcutta in large numbers every day. She also appealed to the generous public for liberal contributions in money, clothes etc. and requested the owners of cars and jeeps to kindly lend them conveyance for the unfortunate sufferers.\textsuperscript{180} Leela also opened zonal offices to facilitate relief work. One of the direct outcomes of such a measure was the opening up of an office at 89, Bechu Chatterji Street to serve the Northern Calcutta area.\textsuperscript{181} Leela also criticised Nehru when the latter condemned the minorities in East Pakistan of committing plunder, arson, murder and rape.\textsuperscript{182} She argued that the Nehru government should rather completely forget the minorities in East Pakistan than kindle false hopes of their protection and security. She added that the idea of issuing a joint statement from India and Pakistan was monstrous at this stage and that the situation demanded either strong action or absolute silence on the tragic fate of an entire population.\textsuperscript{183}

On behalf of the East Bengal Minority Welfare Central Committee Leela started helping the refugees in places like the Sealdah station, Ranaghat, Burnpur, Joynagar, Bongaon. On Leela’s appeal students of Campbell Hospital Relief Association came forward. This association along with the Committee took responsibility of 25000

\textsuperscript{180} Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{181} Amrita Bazar Patrika dated 26.2.50, Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47.

\textsuperscript{182} Hindustan Standard, dt.19.3.50, Ibid.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
refugees in Coopers’ Camp, Ranaghat.\textsuperscript{184} Besides this, she also started three temporary camps in Kasba, Vivekananda Road and Barisha in Calcutta. Such private initiatives for the refugees in fact had no precedent before. Refugees were brought in these camps from the Sealdah station and in the Kasba camp nearly 30,000 people were provided one meal a day. Leela also published and circulated a printed English leaflet titled \textit{Save East Bengal, Save India}, stressing the need to tackle the current problems of the East Bengal Hindus with utmost speed and energy.

On 7\textsuperscript{th} March, 1950 Leela with representatives of the Committee went on a deputation to meet Nehru. They submitted a memorandum to Nehru, expressing their concerns over the atrocities committed on the minorities in East Pakistan. The memorandum urged:

\ldots The minorities in Pakistan have no basis or a single plank on which they can work and build up a rightful place in the socio-political structure of Pakistan. Pakistan is born out of the distrust of the Hindus and naturally its existence depends on keeping up the hatred of the Hindus. So the efforts at Hindu-Muslim unity are positively distrusted and opposed by Pakistan. The agitation for Bengali language in East Pakistan and proposal for joint electorate by the minorities were not only discouraged but rejected forthright. So unless the Moslem masses in Pakistan reject the two-nation theory, there is no future for the minorities there and whether the India Government wants or not the minorities would be coming in lakhs from East Pakistan as soon as communication opens.\textsuperscript{185}

\ldots delay is becoming extremely dangerous for the minorities in East Pakistan and the planned evacuation under armed protection be started without delay. If, however, the Pakistan Government rejects the proposal of mass evacuation and refuses to co-operate or come to an agreement with the Government of India, we feel very strongly that as a civilised state and as a party to the act of partition, India cannot remain a silent spectator to the mass killings, lootings, conversions, brutalities and most of all to the dishonour of women but must do everything to liberate the minorities of East Pakistan and discharge her

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Jayasree}, Baisakh-Chaitra, 1377(B.S), 1970, p.167.

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Ibid}, p.170.
responsibilities by them by taking strong and effective measures against Pakistan immediately.186

Meanwhile the Government of India started changing its policy towards the minority community in East Pakistan. Earlier Nehru had stated that ‘The minorities of East Bengal are our concern.’187 Leela at that time had cautioned Nehru by saying:

We strongly feel that gulf between India and Pakistan is too wide to be bridged by joint conferences. No assurance of Pakistan can inspire any sense of security in minorities of East Bengal and prevent evacuation unless character of Pakistan is radically changed. We feel tinkering with the colossal problem will do more harm than good.188

On 17 March, 1950 however, Nehru issued a statement declaring that the Government of India would no longer be able to take any further responsibilities of the minorities in East Pakistan. This prompted Leela to send a telegram to Nehru stating that the Prime Minister’s statement was not only deplorable but in effect, condemned the minorities in East Bengal to plunder, arson, murder and rape.189 Therefore, she urged Nehru to forget the minorities rather than raising false hopes of protection and security.190 The Committee organised a protest meeting on 23 March, 1950 at the University Institute Hall to express its dissatisfaction over Nehru’s policy of shrugging his responsibilities towards the minorities. In this meeting Leela stated that the Prime Minister’s latest statement had . . . dashed to pieces all hopes built upon his earlier assurances and appeals. This statement which smacks of an attempt more to please the rulers of Pakistan than to protect the

188 Ibid, p.171.
190 Hindustan Standard dated 19.3.50, Special Branch File no. T.P.-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.
victims of their wretched rule, betrays a lamentable lack of appreciation of the colossal misfortune which has enveloped the fate of an entire population.  

She further said:

He has given an incorrect picture of the tragic events and thus done a positive harm to the cause of India while all the promises of standing by the minorities of East Bengal advanced during the days of 1947 by the leaders, have been thrown to the winds.

Pointing towards the misery of the East Bengalee refugees she observed:

The Pakistan Government instead of facilitating the evacuation of those willing to come to India is skilfully obstructing evacuation and even now the oppressive and illegal extortionist activities of Ansars and the police as well as the humiliations and insults meted out to the Hindu evacuees during journey within Pakistan are standing proofs of the intransigence and unrepentant attitude of the reactionary leaders of Pakistan.

She felt that the statement of the Prime Minister made on 17th March witnessed

. . . a prelude to surrender-surrender to the forces of medieval barbarism and thereby condemning the minorities in East Bengal to perpetual arson, plunder, murder and rape.

His vacillation and indecisiveness are landing the country into disastrous consequences and has become a source of grave danger to the future of India. In view of this, this meeting demands that if he feels unequal to the task of protecting the minorities of East Bengal he should forthwith resign from the position he occupies as the Prime Minister of India and leave the responsibility to more competent hands.

Leela with a view to getting firsthand information about the refugees often visited the border areas herself. After visiting the Bongaon border on 9 April she found out that the number of refugees coming to India had gone down to 5000. But on enquiry into the matter, she realized that this was not an immediate after effect of the ongoing reassuring

\footnote{\textit{Jayasree}, Baisakh-Chaitra, 1377(B.S), 1970, p.172.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.172.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.172.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.173.}
talks between the two countries but rather a reaction caused by a fresh spate of violence at Khulna and Benapole.\textsuperscript{195} Male members were most often the targets of attack; and in many cases they were separated from the rest of the family and detained. She was particularly concerned about the harassment meted out to women. After talking with the women refugees she came to know that while crossing over women were subjected to indiscriminate searches by the Pakistani male custom officials. Often their jewellery was taken away.\textsuperscript{196} She also learnt that there were some cases of molestation of women. At Bongaon station she found a signed statement of two girls who were molested.\textsuperscript{197} It was due to Leela’s initiative that the Committee started collecting data from refugee women from airports, railway stations and other places. In order to judge the appropriateness of these statements a Fact-Finding Bureau was formed. The reporters of leading Bengali newspapers became regular visitors to the Committee’s office for the collection of information relating to these issues.

The frequent visits of Leela to these areas made her come up with some suggestions on the measures that could be implemented to rectify the situation. At Bongaon she pointed out that the I.M.A units were running a hospital with eight beds on the Bongaon station platform and were also attending to all cases of medical emergencies. But they were facing an uphill task; given the fact that they were operating

\textsuperscript{195} Papercutting of Amrita Bazar Patrika dated 11.4.50, Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
on the station platform area in a makeshift hospital which could not be thoroughly sanitised against infections. Infectious cases were therefore sent to the A.G. Hospital which was quite at a distance from the station and no transport was available to carry such patients. Therefore Leela felt that arrangement of ambulances to carry patients was an urgent requirement.\textsuperscript{198} She also felt that the security arrangements for the relief workers attending at the Jayantipur area had to be improved.\textsuperscript{199}

As West Bengal was a land-hungry province various schemes were undertaken to rehabilitate the refugees outside West Bengal. It was alleged that Leela was putting up obstacles in the path of smooth relocation of displaced persons from East Pakistan to certain areas outside West Bengal particularly to the neighbouring provinces of Bihar and Orissa. Leela vehemently refuted such allegations and argued that she was not at all against the principle of sending refugees to the neighbouring states, provided the conditions of livelihood in those places were favourable.\textsuperscript{200} In fact she pointed out that a number of refugee families residing in the transit camps run by the committee had been sent to Orissa through the agency of this committee.

Meanwhile the Pakistan Government formed East Bengal Disturbances’ Commission of Enquiry to hear statements from the victims of violence. Leela appreciated this gesture but argued that in reality few displaced persons who had

\textsuperscript{198} Papercutting of Amrita Bazar Patrika dated 11.4.50, Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
come over to India would be willing to send statements either due to the fear of
molestation of their relatives still living in Pakistan, or due to the fear of victimisation in
case they needed to go back to Pakistan for settling or selling their property. Therefore
she suggested that the best result could only be ensured if the Commission had its sittings
both in East and West Bengal for the recording of evidence. She also urged that the
affected persons should gather courage and send their signed statements to the
Commission without any further delay.

In 1951 the West Bengal government tabled a bill on ‘Unauthorised
Person’s Eviction Bill’ to evict the refugees who had forcibly occupied vacant lands and on
their own initiative had settled down on such lands. Leela protested against this
government measure to evict the unfortunate refugees. She convened a meeting in the
Kalidhan Institution on 21 March, 1951 where four other refugee organisations also took
part. Leela presided over the meeting. On 28 March, at Wellington Square a massive
public rally was convened to protest against the biased bill. A protest march was also
organised, which headed towards the Raj Bhavan. The police blocked them in front of Raj
Bhavan and Leela was arrested along with others. The protesters however, were
released on the same day. The Government ultimately decided to review its stand; and
after holding discussions with some of the prominent leaders agreed to delete some
objectionable clauses of the bill. The modified Bill was renamed as ‘Resettlement of
Refugees and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation of Land Act, 1951.’

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201 Hindustan Standard dated 7.7.50, Special Branch File no.T.P-513/47. West Bengal Police Archive.

202 Jayasree, Baisakh-Chaitra, 1377(B.S), 1970, p.173
Leela once again took up the cause of the distressed refugees during 1960s when the Bengalees faced eviction from Assam. Leela criticised in strong words, the torture meted out to the Bengalees. In her failing health she visited the violence torn areas of Assam - Guwahati, Boko, Naogaon, Sonaghat, Deogaon, Jorhat, Sivsagar, and Tejpur. During her tour in many places Leela had to face the antagonism of the Assamese people. She realised that the Assamese were not at all repentant about their actions, but they had developed a deep-seated antagonism against the Bengalees.  

In 1969 (B.S) 1369, a devastating riot erupted in Rajshahi in East Pakistan. On 14-15 June about 600 Hindus, mainly Rajbangshis and Santhals attempted to cross the border in the middle of the night. While the unfortunate victims were crossing over the Pakistani forces open fired on them. As a result only 300 refugees were able to cross over. But what antagonised Leela was the indifferent attitude of the Government of India towards the plight of the Hindus. Nehru in the parliament in plain terms declared that India would not be able to bear the responsibility of the minorities in East Pakistan. Nehru even went to the extent of saying ‘it was wrong on their part to come out in the night and then use bow and arrows.’ But Leela refuted this by saying that it was the Pakistan Government which had given the Santhals bow and arrows a month back. Nehru also did not find any abnormality in the number of minority influx on both sides of the border. But Leela argued that during April and May of the previous year, 12827 Hindus


204 Leela Ray, “Ashaho Bhandami” (Intolerable Hypocrisy), (Calcutta), Jayasree, Asad, 1369(B.S), 1962, p.211.

205 Ibid, p.211.
had reached India from East Pakistan while in the similar period the number of Muslims
crossing over to West Bengal was 13053.\textsuperscript{206} So the argument that thousands and
thousands of Muslims had left for Pakistan was baseless. When Pakistan government
insisted that the influx of the Hindus from Rajsahi district was not due to communal
disturbances India did not give any reaction.\textsuperscript{207} Instead of sympathising with the Hindus in
East Pakistan Nehru, on the other hand, expressed anxiety that if the endangered Hindus
started migrating to India the latter would sink.\textsuperscript{208} Leela also pointed to the contrasting
policy of India towards the minorities in Pakistan and India. She referred to an incident in
the Gede station where three Hindu youths and seven Hindu women had been forced to
return to their original homes.\textsuperscript{209} Leela found this particularly appalling considering the
fact that molestation of women had become a regular affair in East Pakistan. On the other
hand, Leela pointed out that thousands and thousands of Pakistani Muslims had entered
India illegally, yet only 500 of them were made to return because the Pakistani Deputy
High Commissioner exerted pressure on the Government of India to discontinue the policy
of expelling the illegal Muslim infiltrates.\textsuperscript{210} Leela strongly deplored this attitude of the
Indian government describing India’s policy as immoral to the point of submitting to

\textsuperscript{206} Leela Ray, “Ashaho Bhandarni” (Intolerable Hypocrisy), (Calcutta), Jayasree, Asad, 1369(B.S), 1962, p.166.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid, p.167.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid, p.168.

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid, p.168.

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid, p.168.
Pakistan’s blackmailing strategy.\textsuperscript{211} Leela argued that it was clear from Government of India’s attitude that India no longer was eager to take the responsibilities of the unfortunate Hindus. But Leela argued that almost ten lakh Hindus still remained in East Pakistan. Therefore she urged the people of India to put pressure on the Government so as to make arrangements for the safe migration of those Hindus who were eager to come to India and make adequate arrangements for their rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{212}

In 1964 in the month of January again communal violence erupted in East Pakistan. Women were molested; Hindu houses were put to fire. Again the tormented Hindus started coming to India. As usual the Central Government tried to portray the incident as an insignificant one. But Leela was indomitable. Despite her ill-health she attended the All Bengal Citizens’ Convention to express her opinion in this matter. She led the movement organised by the ‘Save East Bengal Committee’ in support of the minorities of East Pakistan and in the process was imprisoned on 25 March, 1964. Her health deteriorated fast after this harassment. In spite of that she continued taking a leading role on the blockade of coal wagons going to Pakistan in Habra. From 1963 onwards she opted for a more sheltered life.

\textsuperscript{211} Leela Ray, “Ashaho Bhandami” (Intolerable Hypocrisy), (Calcutta), Jayasree, Asad, 1369(B.S), 1962, p.168.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid, p.211.