Chapter: 2

Renuka Ray (1904-1997)

Renuka Ray was born in an affluent, educated and nationalistic minded family. But, instead of living a life of comfort and luxury, she opted for a difficult path of social service. This provided her with the opportunity of witnessing the life of ordinary Indian women. Throughout her whole life she strove hard to bring about significant reforms in the life of ordinary women. As Mandira Sen has argued: ‘Her achievements were many, but were taken lightly.’

2.1 Renuka’s growing years and the predominant influences

Renuka was born to Satish Chandra and Charulata Mukherjee on 4 January, 1904. She was the first child of her parents. Her maternal grandfather P.K. Ray was an eminent educationist and the first Indian principal of the Presidency College. P.K. Ray was socially ostracized when he broke his ties with his family to become a member of the Brahmo Samaj. Renuka’s maternal grandmother Sarala Ray, championed the cause of female education in Bengal. Needless to say, her maternal family had exercised an important role in the educational and social life of Bengal, and was to leave an imprint in the mind of young Renuka. That her mother’s family was well ahead of its times in thought and action, became evident when Renuka’s birth was rejoiced in the family. Renuka commented: ‘This is unusual in a society where the birth of a son is a matter of joy

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while that of a daughter is just tolerated.\textsuperscript{2} Her grandmother had a profound influence on her. Sarala Ray was one of the founder members of the Brahmo Girls’ School in Calcutta. Later on she started the Gokhale Memorial School in Calcutta, which remains a well-known school even in present times. Renuka argued that by naming the institution after Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Sarala Ray, probably had tried to impart an inter-provincial character into that institution.\textsuperscript{3} Through the introduction of new subjects in the curriculum such as domestic science, comparative religion, sports and games for the girls Sarala Ray gave vent to her own educational ideas.\textsuperscript{4} As a friend of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sarala Ray strongly supported the cause of widow remarriage as well. She was able to persuade her father, Durga Mohan Das-a widower to marry a lady who had become a widow at a very young age, thereby contributing towards the cause. Sarala Ray also took part in organizing samitis for women. These incredible attempts on the part of Sarala, more often than not, became targets of social criticism. Renuka recalled a particular incident in Sarala Ray’s life to highlight this point. Sarala Ray desirous of attending a function of the Calcutta University along with her husband at the Senate Hall, chose to drive in an open carriage instead of a closed carriage which was the usual custom of the day. As a result, ‘... she was booed from all around and some young men even spat on the ground to express their extreme disapproval of a professor taking his wife openly


\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Mrs. Renuka Ray, Oral History Transcript} (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), Recorded on 6.9.68, p.1.

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{My Reminiscences}, p.70.
to the Senate Hall.\textsuperscript{5} In 1911 her maternal grandfather was appointed an Advisor to Indian students at the High Commission of India in London. Sarala Ray was quite active in London too, by founding a society through which scholarships were provided to women teachers in India for their training in Britain. Moreover many distinguished persons used to come to her maternal grandparents’ house. Deshbandhu Chittaranjon Das was Sarala Ray’s cousin and they were brought up as brother and sister. In fact a young Rabindranath Tagore often came to their place and he dedicated the first version of \textit{Mayar Khela} to Sarala Ray.

Renuka reflected on that her grandmother’s house was a centre for the intellectual elite of Calcutta, as her grandmother was both westernized, and yet had deep roots in Bengali culture.\textsuperscript{6} So in her growing years she was naturally influenced by her surroundings.

Renuka’s parents never differentiated between their sons and daughters. Her father, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, starting off as a brilliant academic had later on joined the Indian Civil Service. A proud daughter mentioned that her father was immensely respected and that they all ‘looked up to him.’\textsuperscript{7} Her father’s parents were the pioneers of the Brahmo Samaj and were dedicated to social service. Her father’s younger brother Khitish Chandra was a nationalist who took part in the Non-cooperation movement. Renuka’s father as District Magistrate used to tour different districts and this gave young Renuka an opportunity to witness district life more closely. But her father’s career suffered because he preferred to promote the welfare of the people rather than

\textsuperscript{5}My Reminiscences, p.7. See also Oral History Transcript, p.2.

\textsuperscript{6} My Reminiscences, p.6.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, p.1.
the empire. As the D.M of Nadia in 1942, he dared to organise charity shows in order to raise funds for the famine-stricken people. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, a leading nationalist daily, praised him for his humane consideration, but his career suffered as he was not promoted to higher posts.

Renuka’s father’s influence notwithstanding, her mother Charulata Mukherjee, remained her role model as she considered her an early feminist.\(^8\) She was one of the first two girls to enter the portals of the Presidency College. As her father was busy with his work, Renuka and her siblings spent most of their time with their mother. Her mother treated her sons and daughters equally. As little boys and girls, their hobbies and extra-curricular activities were not different. For example, her mother taught needle work and knitting to both her sons as well as her daughters. Her mother also believed that like girls, boys should also be self-sufficient in domestic matters.\(^9\) That is why Renuka’s brothers were also taught basic domestic work. Thinking beyond her times, her mother encouraged her daughters to select their own careers. However when Renuka and her younger sister Nita married early before starting their career, Charulata was really upset. Like her grandmother, Renuka’s mother too founded schools and Mahila Samitis. In Krishnanagar till then there was no girls’ school. Her mother started one which later on became a Higher Secondary School. Charulata was also a member of the AIWC and later on became its president. She established the All Bengal Women’s Union, dedicated to the welfare of women. She was also the first women delegate to the international conference

\(^8\)My Reminiscences, p.1.

organised by the League of Nations for the prevention of trafficking of women. While in London, Charulata along with Dowager Maharani of Coochbihar, formed the Sisterhood of the East. The Society used to hold discussions relating to some common problems experienced by the Indian, Asian and progressive minded British women. As the Society was meant exclusively for women so that those women who were observing purdah could also participate in the discussions. Renuka acknowledged that her mother had a profound influence on her future career.  

As District Magistrate Renuka’s father, was posted in different districts. Renuka along with her parents would often venture into such remote parts of a district where even roads would be missing. Sometimes she along with her mother would cross the threshold of huts to interact with the women living in seclusion. Renuka observed that despite the hard work put in by men and women in the fields, they were unable to arrange two square meals a day for their children who were mostly without clothes. However, she observed that the urban elite in Calcutta had no knowledge of the living conditions of the poor. She acknowledged the fact that her mother’s work with women in rural Bengal gave her a glimpse of a very different world.  

When they were in Krishnanagar her mother used to organise meetings of ladies hailing from rich orthodox Hindu and Muslim families, who came in closed horse-drawn carriages with their heads fully covered. Her mother with the help of some middle class women, comprising mostly

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10 *My Reminiscences*, p.4.

teachers used to train these ladies in tackling their elementary needs as well as their children. Some of these rich ladies later on joined her mother to work among the poor.

As a child Renuka went to Kensington High School in London for few years. In Calcutta she went to Loreto House and later Diocesan College. In London she never faced any sort of discrimination, but in Loreto House in Calcutta she for the first time faced racial discrimination. Her family was nationalist; their political ideal was to fight through constitutional methods. Growing up in such a family and during the anti-partition movement, it was rather difficult for her to stay away from anti-colonial movement. The sacrifices made by the revolutionaries also appealed to her. But as her family did not approve violence as a mode of protest, she was in a dilemma whether to join that line of action. Thus when she was eager to contribute to the nationalistic cause, she met Gandhiji.

2.2. Meeting Gandhi

Renuka was a student of the first year class at the Diocesan College for women, when Gandhiji gave his clarion call for non-cooperation with everything British. Responding to his call, she along with Lalita Ray were the first two girls to leave the college and join the Non-cooperation movement. Renuka recalled that her father inspite of being an ICS officer, was sympathetic to her decision.

On their first meeting Gandhiji asked Renuka about her future plans – what she intended to do after she finished her college. When Renuka replied that she
desired to do something for the nation, Gandhiji informed her that it would require a lot of training before she could start serving the nation.\(^\text{12}\) He also urged them to continue their studies and lead a simple life. Renuka attended the Special Congress Session held at Calcutta, where women in large numbers were present. Renuka and Latika were instructed to approach their former classmates to attend the meeting. On their request, Sister Mary Victoria, head of the College, put up a notice for the students and the teachers to attend the meeting. However, ultimately, it was Renuka and Lalita who were the only two students present for the session. In that meeting, Gandhi called upon the women to come forward, discard their purdah and other customs that pulled them back, help the men to behave in a disciplined manner and lead the movement from the front.\(^\text{13}\) He also called upon the women to donate their valuable jewellery to Tilak Swaraj Fund, created to help victims of social disabilities. Renuka was very much inspired by Gandhiji and gave her bangles to the fund. Renuka later on recalled:

> When I gave them [bangles] to him, large number of women came forward and followed my example. I have heard that this was probably the first meeting at which he asked for jewellery.\(^\text{14}\)

About the significance of the meeting on the life of Indian women, she wrote:

> The women who came from the seclusion of the purdah and those who came from remote rural villages in response to Gandhiji’s call were the means through which a countrywide silent revolution took place.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{12}\) *My Reminiscences*, pp. 16-17.

\(^\text{13}\) *Ibid*, p.27.

\(^\text{14}\) *Oral History Transcript*, p.5.

\(^\text{15}\) *My Reminiscences*, p.27.
After that session, Renuka went to Sabarmati Ashram for a brief period. Gandhiji then insisted that she should complete her education which was also her father’s wish. He told her:

I only wanted you to give up studying in an unfree atmosphere. As long as you do not become anglicized, which I hope you will not, I will be glad if you go with your father and take advantage of this education, because you will be better fitted to work for your country then.\(^\text{16}\)

Renuka initially felt very angry with her father, but her father insisted that both Gandhiji and C. R. Das felt in the same way, otherwise they would not have promptly agreed to his suggestion.\(^\text{17}\)

So in 1921 she went to England and enrolled herself in London School of Economics. Here she had the opportunity of attending classes taught by eminent intellectuals like Harold Laski. She enjoyed her days here as ‘It opened many doors for me because it fostered every school of thought.’\(^\text{18}\) She realized the necessity of land reforms in India in eradicating poverty and also understood the importance of village reconstruction and revival of handicrafts. It was during her stay in England that she joined the organisation called ‘League Against Imperialism’ which was then a live force. She also worked as a volunteer in the 1922 general election in Britain campaigning for the Labour party. Her task was to encourage the women to vote. But interestingly she noticed that a number of women were reluctant to cast their votes. On a personal level, in England, she

\(^{16}\) Oral History Transcript, p.7.

\(^{17}\) My Reminiscences, p.29.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, p.32.
was engaged with Satyen Ray, an ICS officer. Her would be husband assured her that his
career would never come in the way of Renuka’s activities. They were married on 26\textsuperscript{th} October, 1925.

2.3. Marriage and the beginning of an eventful life

Accompanying her husband to his rural postings in different districts Renuka got the opportunity of knowing a great deal about the ground realities of rural Bengal. As a Settlement Officer, her husband had to tour the districts of Burdwan and Hooghly to survey and inspect land. This proved fruitful for her. She wrote: ‘This gave me an insight into the real needs of villagers and helped me start projects for them which yielded results by reviving some of their dying handicrafts.’\textsuperscript{19} Renuka also started working amongst the women. In Burdwan and Hooghly, she noticed that the society was quite conservative in its attitude towards upper and middleclass women. They were not allowed to come outside except in occasions like marriages. With the help of non-resident women, she started a women’s group, devoted to welfare work for women of poorer section-like maternity and child welfare, schooling for children and girls, crèches for children of working women etc.\textsuperscript{20} With the help of Maharani of Burdwan, local women were also inducted into the task. She also observed that in Midnapore, north Bengal and eastern districts, women’s emancipation had progressed much more than the districts

\textsuperscript{19} My Reminiscences, p.43.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p.44.
surrounding Calcutta.\textsuperscript{21} She also observed the destruction of rural handicraft industry and strongly believed that Gandhi’s ideas on village reconstruction could revitalize the economy in an effective way. She represented the AIWC in China, Japan, U.S.A and Britain.

While she was working for the women in her own way, she met Gandhiji in 1936. Gandhiji asked her to work for rural reconstruction aimed at all-round development of a group of villages. He suggested that as a woman, she could start her work among women. But the goal should be the uplift of the entire village.\textsuperscript{22} So, she began her work in a couple of small villages with Sandeshkhali as the centre, near Mainamati, Comilla. She recalled that the women in joint families, after finishing their household chores, worked with her. She, at first used to send fortnightly report to Gandhiji and later every month.

The decade of the 1940s brought significant changes in her. She was nominated as a member of the Central Legislative Assembly, as a representative of the women’s organisations. Her task mainly was to concentrate on the bills with regard to the legal rights of women. During the Quit India movement, she engaged herself in collecting funds in Delhi and Bengal to support the families of those who were in jail. Many government officials donated towards this fund. During the Bengal famine of 1943, she saw with her own eyes the sufferings of the human beings. She gave a description of the famine in the Central Assembly too. During the Noakhali riots of 1946 she went there but her relief work was cut short by a terrible accident. After her recovery, on Gandhiji’s

\textsuperscript{21} My Reminiscences, p.44.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p.46.
advice she again went to Noakhali and worked for the riot victims there. During the same year Indian Council of World Affairs held the first Asian Relations Conference. She was one of the delegates. After independence, she became a member of the Constituent Assembly. She also became a member of the UN delegation from India. Between 1952 and 1957, she functioned as the Minister for Refugees and Rehabilitation in Dr B.C. Roy’s cabinet in West Bengal. She was a member of the Lok Sabha from 1957 to 1962 and then again from 1962 to 1967. She was also the leader of the Study Team on Social Welfare and Welfare of the Backward Classes under the Committee or Plan Projects of the National Development Council based on the Planning Commission. She also founded the Women’s Coordination Council to coordinate social work and relief agencies. She also held the responsibility of AIWC president from 1951-52.

However, she was gradually side-lined within the Congress party who did not give her re-nomination in 1967. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi invited her to join the Parliament as a member of the Rajya Sabha which she declined. After her days as a Parliamentarian was over, she came back to Calcutta and concentrated on social work. She continued to do so till her death in April, 1997.

2.4. The 1940s: Renuka the multitasker

Towards the beginning of the 1940s, Renuka decided to widen her field of activities. In 1942 when Gandhiji launched the Quit India movement, he instructed Renuka to look after the families of the leaders who had been sent to the jail. Concentrating on both, Delhi and Bengal she started collecting funds to help the needy
families of the jai
led leaders. Renuka recalled that the government officials, including many Indian ICS officers and members of defence forces, contributed willingly towards this fund, called as “conscience money.”

During this time when she became a member of the Central Assembly, she got an opportunity to fight for women’s rights. The campaign for a uniform social code for all women had started during the 1930s. Women at that time had no protection under the laws. They had early arranged marriages, and nobody bothered to take their consent. Thus women in general remained helpless, even if their marriage turned out into an unhappy one or their husbands deserted them. As Renuka commented: ‘The happiness of women was dependent on the benevolence of their menfolk-father, husband or son.’ The countrywide agitation demanding that the government should appoint a Hindu Law Committee under the chairmanship of Sir B.N. Rau was unleashed on a full swing. The AIWC decided to mould public opinion in favour of a uniform code and also to convince the Central Assembly to pass necessary legislation in this regard. A number of meetings were organised to create public opinion in favour of reforming the laws for women.

At the same time, different women’s organisations led by the AIWC pressurised the government to nominate a representative of the women’s organisations in the Central Assembly to argue the case in favour of women. The government at last agreed and as an apolitical organisation, the AIWC extracted a promise from the government, that AIWC would support the government only on social and educational

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23 *My Reminiscences*, p.89.

reform measures and not on any political issue. Renuka was selected to represent the women’s organisations in the Central Assembly. She became a member during the Budget session in February, 1943. She has described the atmosphere of the Central Assembly as ‘masculine.’ Apart from her, the only other woman member was Radhabai Subbarayan. The Hindu Law Bills on Marriage and Intestate Succession was introduced by the Law Member on 23rd March, 1943. The Intestate Succession bill recognised daughter’s claim to the father’s property, on equal level with that of the son. On 24th March she expressed her viewpoint on the issue. She recalled: ‘On that day the visitors’ galleries were packed by women drawn from all sections of society.’ In her speech, she referred to the bill as conservative - as the bill though intended to remove sex-disqualification, did not in any way bring equality. The conservative section opposed the bill on the ground that Manu, the ancient law-giver had refused to grant any rights to women. Under the influence of Sir B.N. Rau, Renuka became well-versed in the Smritis and Srutis- literature of the Upanishads which, on the contrary, appeared to her as advocates of equal rights for women. She thus argued that due to a misinterpretation of a Vedic text, women have been deprived of their property rights. She did not spare those who argued that the daughter’s right to father’s property would lead to the disintegration of the property. To them she said:

25 My Reminiscences, p.60.
26 Ibid, p.58.
When a man has only ten sons, each of them can inherit a share and can go in for a partition of the estates but no question of disintegration comes up. But if a man has a son and a daughter, if the daughter inherits, it will be terrible because there will be disintegration of the family! What should one say of such a mentality!\footnote{Legislative Assembly Debates, vol.2, 1943, p.1422.}

She also argued that ancient law always granted women absolute estates; it was only the man-made courts of law that had curtailed her rights and allowed her only limited estates. She argued that during the Vedic and post-Vedic period women were treated equally. But gradually, their position declined. During the period of the Smritis there was long debate between the law makers with regard to women’s rights. She felt that it was during the British period that the Indian women lost whatever rights they had, because the pandits and the priests appointed to explain such laws vouched for the most reactionary measures.\footnote{Ibid, p.1423.} So Renuka reiterated the fact that the Rao Committee had brought forward only what was already in the Hindu Law. She recalled that her speech was appreciated in the whole country and it drew headlines in the newspapers.\footnote{My Reminiscences, p.59.}

Even Gandhiji sent a congratulatory message through Sarojini Naidu. After the general discussion on the bill on intestate succession, it was referred to a select committee. But by that time the government had come to realise that those who actually opposed the bill were British loyalists, though their numbers were few. The government faced a crisis over the budget in 1944. The government was short of only one vote to pass the budget. Renuka was approached to support the government as it was thought that she would be an easy target, as her husband was a government official. But despite threats to her
husband’s career and other temptations, she remained firm on her stand and as a result the government lost the budget by one vote. She wrote: ‘Thereafter, I was completely cold shouldered by the government benches and the estrangement deepened.’³² The government’s loss of face had serious repercussions on the fate of the women’s bill. The government declared that with regard to the daughter’s right of inheritance, as the matter was still very controversial therefore it had to withdraw support from it. Eventually the Hindu law bills were dropped.

Another issue that Renuka raised at the floor of the Assembly was related to the question of the government’s decision to withdraw the ban on the employment of women in underground mines. On this issue she wrote a book entitled *Women in Mines* which was published by the AIWC in 1945. Here she discussed in details why underground mining was injurious to women. She pointed out that underground work by women in mines was reprehensible and contrary to all human considerations.

This is not only because of the risk to the life of the women but of the over-riding consideration that if women who are mothers or potential mothers, work in an atmosphere which is so injurious to health and nerves, the health of future generations is vitally affected. It is thus not only inhumane but criminal to allow women to work underground under such conditions.³³ That is why the Geneva Convention no.45 of 1935, prohibited women from employment in underground mines. India signed the convention and in 1937 the Government of India imposed the ban on employing women in underground mines. But in 1943 the

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³² *My Reminiscences*, p.64.

Government by a mere notification in the Gazette withdrew the ban. Renuka accused the government of violating the convention as according to one of the provisions of the convention, a signatory country in order to withdraw, had to give one year’s notice. She also refuted all the reasons that the government put forward for withdrawing the ban. The government argued that the ban had led to shortage of labour, it had reduced the family wage, family life had broken up and husbands were zealous of their wives who did not accompany them underground.\textsuperscript{34} The AIWC sent an Investigation Committee to the coal mines of Raniganj and Jharia to investigate the matter. Renuka was in the team along with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Kamala Chatterjee. After weighing all sides of arguments they suggested: (1) a minimum living wage and hours of work should be fixed, (2) tasks like loading wagons, sorting, basket making, weaving and spinning could be the alternate sources of livelihood for women on the surface.\textsuperscript{35} But Renuka felt that not enough had been done to provide employment for women on the surface. The government justified its decision of withdrawing the ban by arguing that there was acute shortage of labour in the coal mining industry. Renuka countered this by pointing out that coal raisings had gone down by at least 4.5% during 1944.\textsuperscript{36} Referring to Great Britain, she asserted that women there were not sent down in the mines even in the face of high demand of coal and labour shortage. The Government of India also put forward the argument that after the withdrawal of the ban, 10,000 women went underground in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{34} Renuka Ray, \textit{Women in Mines}, p.14.
\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid}, p.14.
\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid}, p.20
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mines although, women were in no way compelled to work underground. But Renuka pointed out that grave economic necessity was behind such a position. A woman used to earn three to five annas a day for surface labour, while for underground labour; they earned eight to eleven annas. So she pointed out when faced with such a situation women had no choice. The government’s argument also was that women miners also received equal rates of wages as that of men and that the husbands were jealous and preferred that their women would work underground with them. But Renuka argued that male miners preferred their wives or sisters to work underground with them as their own earnings were not adequate and employing their women would supplement their family income. She further pointed out that coal miners belonged to that part of the society which preferred their women to stay at home or work part-time, if the men earned enough to maintain their family. She wrote:

The family system of working in the coal mines has made it possible for much lower wages to be paid to individuals, in fact the low rate of wages at which women used to be employed and the lack of any minimum standard of wages provided an indirect subsidy to the coal mining industry.

She also revealed that pregnant women were not prohibited to work underground. Unfortunately, the numbers of such cases were not few. Even where the Maternity Benefits Act existed, the women enjoyed its benefits only for a month. Referring to a recent case she pointed out that a pregnant woman even gave birth to her child

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underground. If this was one side of the coin, the other side was no less disturbing as in a fair number of cases under-aged boys and girls were employed to meet the problem of labour shortage. On 8th February, 1944, Renuka introduced an adjournment motion in the Assembly asking for a re-imposition of the ban by the government. The Congress, the Muslim League and others fully supported her motion, but the government won by a majority of official votes. She also reminded the government that among the downtrodden sections of society, Indian miners especially the women miners were a glaring example of misery and exploitation. Therefore it was the duty of the government to safeguard the interests of the exploited section of the people.\footnote{Renuka Ray, 	extit{Women in Mines}, p.20.} The government facing strong opposition on the issue of withdrawal of the ban gradually softened its stand and after a couple of months, re-imposed the ban.

About her stint in the Assembly, she felt that the objectives with which she had entered the Assembly could not be achieved. The legislation for the betterment of the condition of the women could not be passed. But her experience in the Assembly made it easier for her to operate herself in future. She also felt that though women did not succeed in changing the social laws, they had won a psychological victory by convincing a section of the public opinion of the necessity of a social change.

While Renuka was still in office, news concerning deaths of hundreds of people in Bengal due to the food crisis of 1943 poured into the Assembly. Renuka presented a graphic description of the situation before the members of the Assembly.
With the assistance of the members of the house, a large volume of voluntary donations of food was collected and the railway authorities sent the goods free of cost to Howrah. But the League government in Bengal did not allow the wagons to proceed. Renuka returned to Calcutta and tried to convince H.S. Suhrawardy to lift the ban. But the latter felt that the famine was a myth, intended to disparage the League government. The Governor, Sir John Herbert too chose to remain inactive in this regard. It was only after the intervention of the Government of India that the goods wagons could start moving towards the affected areas. Renuka along with other AIWC members visited the affected areas of Midnapore, Dacca, Mymansingh and Chittagong. It was during this time that the AIWC started the All India Save the Children Committee to offer shelter to the orphaned children. With the help of VJjaylakshmi Pandit the AIWC appealed for donations both in India and abroad. When Mr. R.G. Casey of Australia took over as the Governor of Bengal; the rationing system was improved in Calcutta and some modified rationing was also introduced in some parts of Bengal. Renuka considered the Bengal famine as a blot not only on the British government but also on the Allied powers. The British government initially, was not at all serious about the gravity of the situation. But even when they became aware of its reality, they preferred to remain inactive. The British authorities notwithstanding, the Allied powers too, did nothing to save human lives. She wrote: ‘The Allies helped each other; the well-stocked food reserves of the United States were open to

\[41\] My Reminiscences, p.99.
Western Europe but not to India. She further wrote: ‘The agony of Bengal no doubt hastened the departure of the British from India, but the cost was heavy.’

To make matters worse, when the devastating riots erupted in Noakhali in 1946, in retaliation of the Great Calcutta Killing on 16th August, the effects of famine had not yet receded. Gandhiji now instructed Renuka to go to Noakhali. After his arrival in Sodepur, near Calcutta, on the way to Noakhali, he asked Renuka to organise women volunteers from the AIWC and other women’s organisations. Renuka after a few days at Chaumahoni, left for Haimchar which used to be a prosperous village. Here she witnessed the devastations of the riot. Almost all thatched houses were destroyed and only a few pucca buildings still remained undestroyed. She was sent to Char Krishnapur along with Ava Bardhan and Bulbul De. Their task was:

- to help the people gain confidence and return to their homes because many were in hiding. As we walked from village to village we would find them and take them back to Haimchar with us.

Gandhiji visited these places. With him, they walked from village to village, singing the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, to reinstate the courage of the Hindus. She recalled that although Gandhi succeeded in prevailing upon the Muslims to restore the homes of their Hindu brothers and to ensure their safety, but when left to themselves, the Muslims

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42 My Reminiscences, p.103.

43 Ibid, p.102.

44 Ibid, p.110.

45 Oral History Transcript, p.16.
showed their unwillingness to take back the Hindus.\textsuperscript{46} With Gandhiji’s help, Renuka learnt to cross the narrow bamboo bridges of Noakhali. But at Chandpur where she had come to collect stores, she met with a terrible accident. At that juncture, they were rescued by the Muslim Villagers. Renuka was sent back to Calcutta and was confined to bed for almost six weeks. After her recovery she returned to Noakhali but she was unable to take long walks. She was placed under Thakkar Bapa’s care and she worked in the main relief camp.

2.5. Renuka as member of the Constituent Assembly and provisional parliament

In 1947 after India became independent Renuka became a member of the Constituent Assembly. Gandhi earnestly wanted to include women, Harijans and other backward classes and minorities among Congress members. Renuka admitted:

When we took our seats in the Central Hall of the Constituent Assembly; we were conscious only of our elation. We had no forewarning of the terrible tragedies that were taking place in the Punjab and West India.\textsuperscript{47}

Independence was accompanied by a two-way migration in the west and later on by one way traffic into India in the east. In order to provide relief to the Punjabi refugees, Renuka worked with other social workers organising relief camps for the refugees. Migration also led to rape and abduction of women on the western side. Rescuing such women became a primary concern for the social workers. Renuka took up this cause in the Constituent Assembly. She considered the rescue and the restoration of such women to the social fold

\textsuperscript{46} My Reminiscences, p.110.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p.126
the most difficult, yet the most essential part of rehabilitation work. She emphasised that the mental rehabilitation of those women who had fallen victims of outrage required very intricate and delicate handling. She, therefore, suggested some measures that could be adopted with regard to this:

(1) She strongly believed that such women should be kept apart from other refugees, until they were able to take up the threads of normal life. They had to be placed under the individual care of competent women, who could help these unfortunate women to return to social fold. She insisted that these victims could not be returned to their families until they were mentally and physically fit. (2) With regard to unmarried young girls, she suggested that the authenticity of the relatives had to be properly verified, in the absence of their parents, prior to sending them back to their families. This way the possibility of their further exploitation could be minimized. Machinery like a Court of Wards could also be formed to decide any dispute that might crop up. The government or the Ministry of Rehabilitation was to be empowered in such a way as to enable it to decide what was best for the women, concerned. (3) Regarding the rehabilitation of women, she argued that few women were coming forward to take part in nation-building services. As thousands and thousands of women were rendered homeless and alone, this should be taken as an opportunity to train them to become useful and purposeful citizens. Women could be trained as nurses, teachers and social workers or in other useful occupations such as laundry services, cooperative restaurants, community kitchens etc. She preferred simple

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schemes which could be implemented immediately rather than large overhead expenses which meant delay. (4) Regarding the rescue of abducted women, she pointed out that a large number of such women were reluctant to return because of two reasons: (a) women in some cases were set as hostages for the protection of their families and (b) because of the bigotry and prejudices of Hindu society. She also felt that if women were convinced that under such unusual circumstances, these prejudices could be erased to a certain extent and that the Government of India could take their responsibility, then this would no doubt facilitate their path of return. (5) Lastly she argued that as women were searched at the border, it was extremely important to appoint women investigators or women police for the task on both sides.49

Renuka also expressed her opinion on other relevant issues apart from the refugee problem. She vehemently opposed an amendment seeking separate electorates. She told the Assembly on 28th August, 1947: ‘Religion is a personal matter. Religious differences might have been exploited as a political expedient by the British but there is no room for that in the India of today.’50 She reminded the House that:

The problem that faces us is the problem of the vast majority in the country irrespective of religion, the majority who today are surrounded by ignorance and ill-health, hunger and want. It is they who are the backward sections of the community and who are the majority at the same time. It is their problem that we have to take up.51

49 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.8.


Similarly she was not in favour of separate electorates for women. On 9th November, 1948 she said: ‘All along the women of India have been against reservation of seats or separate electorate.’ Her firm belief was that Indian women would not support such reservation in the Constitution.

Meanwhile, on the eastern side of the border, the situation was becoming more and more complex. When, on the western side of the border, a two way exodus was taking place, the situation in West Bengal was, what Renuka termed as a ‘deceptive calm.’ It was only at the end of 1949, that an influx of refugees from East Pakistan started. Renuka recalled:

They [the refugees] came through a great ordeal. Some were murdered on the way. Women were raped and many were mutilated or wounded. Terror-stricken, they arrived half-dead, weary and foot sore and as a result of their experiences needed psychological treatment.

The migration of the Hindus into West Bengal and Assam created a sort of panic among the Muslims in West Bengal and many of them started leaving for East Pakistan. But in India, the Muslims were given due protection and consequently very few of them actually left India. This made the exodus a one-way traffic. Unfortunately, as Renuka argued, the Central Government was extremely reluctant to acknowledge the problem, during the first few years, because refugees came in stages, unlike the western side where refugees came at one go. Secondly, in West Bengal the exodus was not accompanied by mass killings, abduction and rape of women on a scale that had happened on the western side. During

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52 Constituent Assembly Debates, vol.7, no.1, 1948, p.357.
53 My Reminiscences, p.140.
54 Ibid, p.140.
the November, 1947 session at the provisional parliament, neither the Centre nor the provincial government considered that there was any such problem, although at this time the streets of Calcutta and Sealdah station were crowded with refugees. Renuka recalled that when the Budget Session of 1948 was almost over, then the new Premier of Bengal approached the Centre, but by then allocations had already been made. It was only after the 1949 budget Session that funds were allotted for the East Bengalee refugees. When Renuka visited the Sealdah station in December, 1948, she remained an eye witness to the fact, that the station was over-crowded with terrified refugees. She alleged that the Minister for Rehabilitation at the centre, Mohanlal Saxena refused to believe that there was exodus on a massive scale. Renuka as a member of the provisional Parliament pointed out on 9th February, 1950, that the problem of the refugees required immediate attention as it involved the lives of the people of this country. She was quick to foresee that the policy of setting up relief camps giving out doles to refugees, would be detrimental to their re-absorption into the society. In fact as she had noted that, living on doles would have injurious psychological effects on them. Moreover, the administrative machinery would also cause a great deal of delay.

The rehabilitation policy, pursued with regard to the East Bengalee refugees was faulty from the beginning. It was planned that the refugees would be given house-building loans as well as some training so that they would be able to look for gainful

55 *Parliamentary Debates*, vol.1, no.9, 1950, p.379.


employment. But Renuka pointed out, that there were many instances where refugees were given house-building loans, but no attempt had been made to find any kind of employment for them. As a result, the house-building loan was often spent on subsistence. In some cases, settlements had sprang up in some areas but later these areas were abandoned, when it was found that such areas were not suitable for employment purposes. She said: ‘... there is also very little attempt to make rehabilitation fall into the picture of the nation-building activities.’\footnote{\textit{Parliamentary Debates, vol.1, no.9, 1950, p.379.}} Moreover nothing had been done to encourage co-operative efforts amongst the refugees.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.379.} She underscored that no proper investigation had been made in the camps defining what should be a suitable employment, or what type of training should be imparted to the refugees according to their capacity. As a result, large numbers remained employed.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p.379.} She also reminded the members of the House that the Hindus were facing atrocities, though their families had sacrificed everything generation after generation for the sake of India’s freedom. At the time of Partition, India had assured them that their lives and honour would be protected. Therefore, Renuka argued that it was India’s duty to make Pakistan realise that they should mend their ways with regard to the minorities. She also raised the issue of misbehaviour of custom officials at the Pakistan border. She stressed on the fact that things had come to such a pass, that

\footnote{\textit{Parliamentary Debates, vol.1, no.9, 1950, p.379.}}
even women were subjected to tremendous indignity and insult by male custom inspectors, although there were women officials at the Pakistan border as well.\textsuperscript{61}

The Indian government tried to tackle the problem of the refugees by signing the Liaquat-Nehru Pact in 1950. According to the pact, the governments of both the countries would encourage the return of their citizens and their homes and belongings would be protected. Conducive conditions would be created so that the minorities could live without fear. But in reality the Pact was honoured in India but not in Pakistan. The only positive aspect was that it allowed the migrants from East Pakistan to come over with some sense of security, together with some of their possessions without being killed on the way.\textsuperscript{62} But in her memoir, she admitted that the main provisions of the pact were based on the assumption that migration from East Pakistan was a temporary affair. The result was that their rehabilitation was put off to a much later date and when it was finally undertaken, it was executed in a niggardly fashion.\textsuperscript{63} In fact, after the pact was signed a large exodus of refugees began and it continued till the end of 1951.


\textsuperscript{63} My Reminiscences, p.142.
2.6. **Refugee rehabilitation work and ministerial responsibility:**

**Initial phase**

During the days when the provisional Parliament was functioning, then the Union Rehabilitation Minister, Mohanlal Saxena decided to appoint a Regional Advisor for the Eastern zone on the model of the Western zone. Renuka was entrusted to this task. This made her work closely with Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy who took over the charge of the portfolio of rehabilitation in West Bengal personally. As the refugees used to come from Bongaon Petrapole border posts to Sealdah Station, she used to wait at the station often after midnight to receive the refugees. It was during this time as Honorary Advisor of Relief and Rehabilitation to Government of West Bengal, that she found destitute refugee children, even orphan refugee children not finding place into the government orphanages. The definition of ‘orphans’ according to the Government of West Bengal was confined to those who had been orphaned or victimized by riot or famine. She felt that it was extremely necessary to extend the definition of the term, so as to include refugee orphans. She further opined that the government should send such children to the Children’s Homes run by NGOs where the government was providing financial aid.\(^{64}\)

It was when she was working for the refugees, as the Refugee Advisor for the Eastern Zone, that she received an offer for the post of Rehabilitation Minister in Dr. 

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\(^{64}\) *Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Renuka Ray’s letter dated 3.6.49 to D.M.Sen, Education Secretary, Government of West Bengal, Sub: File no.1.*
B.C. Roy’s cabinet in 1952. At first she declined. But on the next day when she wanted to discuss an issue regarding the refugees with Dr. Roy, the latter told her:

It appears that women like to be advisors but not to take on any responsibility and so I have nothing else to say for you. I made an offer to you to help me in resolving this difficult problem.\textsuperscript{65}

At this point her husband who was then the Chief Secretary, to the Government of West Bengal, also encouraged her to take up the challenge. Thus she became a Minister for five years from 1952-1957. She wrote: ‘It was a great experience for me and it gave me a clear insight into Centre-State relations at the time.’\textsuperscript{66}

As refugee rehabilitation minister, Renuka perhaps faced the most challenging task of her life because of the complex nature of the refugee problem on the eastern side of the border. On the western side the refugees came at one go. As a result there was virtual exchange of population, resulting in a substantial amount of evacuee property in the form of land and houses. This made the problem of their rehabilitation much easier.

But in West Bengal the refugees poured in into stages, sometimes larger in numbers, sometimes in smaller numbers, but without a day’s respite. As a result the exact number of refugees, who needed rehabilitation, could not be ascertained. Moreover, as the influx was a one-way traffic, as Renuka had pointed out, every refugee was an additional number to the existing population.\textsuperscript{67} The problem further accentuated because after

\textsuperscript{65} My Reminiscences, p.146.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, p.146.

\textsuperscript{67}Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in the Second Five Year Plan Period, Broadcast from the Calcutta Station of All India Radio, Sub: File no. 3.
partition West Bengal was one-third of its original size, with a density of population which was one of the highest in India and the world. Moreover, as Renuka had pointed out, that the economy of the state was hard hit even before the partition as a result of the famine in 1943 and the impact of the war; notwithstanding the turmoil that took place on the eve of independence.\(^6^8\) So the Government of West Bengal faced a much more difficult situation as compared to any other state government.

The first difficulty that Renuka faced after taking charge was the lack of adequate machinery. Referring to this point she reported at the Assembly on 4\(^{th}\) July, 1952, that the Government of West Bengal did not get sufficient time to re-organise the machinery for the smooth functioning of a social welfare state, and far less to deal with a problem of such a magnitude.\(^6^9\) She noted that in the different camps of Bengal between 1948 and 1951, there were altogether 440,443 refugees and the inflow never stopped; instead, the volume increased from May, 1952 onwards. As a result there were three transit camps. The transit camp, dealing with the needs of the women, became full. To combat this situation, her ministry opened a new transit camp. Steps were also taken to increase the capacity of the Ranaghat camp.\(^7^0\) As the majority of the refugees, coming from Barisal and Khulna, were agricultural labourers, she felt that steps should be implemented to send some of the refugees straight from transit camps to work. She also

\(^{6^8}\) Private Papers of Renuka Ray(Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), *Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, Speeches/Writings by her*, S- no.34.

\(^{6^9}\) *Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.6, no.2, 1952, p.243.

\(^{7^0}\) *Ibid*, pp.245-246.
provided a detailed sketch of the arrangement that the ministry sought to undertake after she took over. First, a rehabilitation of *khasmahal* (lands directly under the landlord) lands was undertaken. The lands thus acquired by the Government, were put up for purchase as private lands. Union board schemes on the other hand were meant for temporary rehabilitation on migrants’ lands. Secondly, up to 31st March, her ministry sanctioned house-building loans worth Rs.12,05,38,887, including loans for purchasing agricultural land. Thirdly, for generating employment, three centres dealing with cottage industries, polytechnics and other kinds of training were set up at a cost of Rs.4 lakhs. About 500 trainees from these centres were absorbed in industrial employment and some of them were able to start their own business. Fourthly, for women vocational training centres, both residential and non-residential were also started and some of these trainees were able to secure employment. Last but not the least, 1049 primary schools had been set up both in government as well as in the refugee colonies.\(^{71}\) Renuka, however, was never afraid to admit the shortcomings of her ministry. For example, she admitted that the loans were given in installments and the gap between the two installments was quite long. However, she assured the House, that her ministry was trying its best to re-organise the machinery.\(^{72}\)

Perhaps the greatest obstacle in the way of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal was the paucity of land. Renuka very clearly elaborated:

\(^{71}\) *Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.6, no.2, 1952, p.248.

\(^{72}\) *Ibid*, p.249.
There are 119 lakh acres of land in West Bengal of which 35 lakhs have been developed and are not available, 30 lakhs forest land, 20 lakhs Rivers, about 20 lakhs are needed for road and other development work, leaving a total of 10 to 15 lakhs of land.\textsuperscript{73} The situation was still more challenging as most of the available lands had to be developed. Another impediment for her way was non availability of ready funds which delayed different schemes further. She was in favour of regularising the Squatters' Colonies, as these were instances of self-help, which was rather absent in government colonies.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, she also felt that rehabilitation was absolutely necessary, as early as possible, as living in camps on doles for a long time, had a demoralising effect on the refugees.\textsuperscript{75}

The late 1952 saw a major influx of refugees. By October, 1952 almost ten thousands of refugees crossed over till the introduction of the passport system on 15\textsuperscript{th} October. Most of the migrants were agricultural labourers and cultivators who faced grave economic crisis, as differential treatment was forced upon them with a view to coercing them to leave East Pakistan. With limited land and resources and the ever increasing volume of refugees, it became impossible to arrange proper rehabilitation immediately. On the other hand, it was detrimental and injurious to the self-respect of the refugees to keep them without any work. That is why, Renuka, on 7\textsuperscript{th} February, 1953, announced a new policy of work centres on the floor of the House. She declared that (1) in the work centres initially, work like clearing water hyacinth could be provided which was far better

\textsuperscript{73} Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.6, no.3, 1952, p.1244.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, p.1248.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p.1250.
than no work at all. Gradually other types of work like road construction, irrigation work in irrigation projects could be provided. She also acknowledged her ministry’s inability to provide work-site camps for all the refugees.\footnote{Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.7, no, 1, 1953, p.361.} (2) The other type of camps started on the site of rehabilitation was to function for its development.\footnote{Ibid, p.362.} She admitted that there were inadequacies as well as mistakes but took pride on the fact that even the U.N.O would not have been able to deal with the refugee problem, the way it had been done here.\footnote{Ibid, p.362.}

She also claimed that her ministry had paid a good deal of attention to the children. She admitted that a number of children had died in Cossipore due to an epidemic but she claimed that necessary arrangements were quickly made to control the epidemic. She pointed out that the epidemic spread quickly because nobody induced the mothers to lift their dead children.\footnote{Ibid, p.362.} She claimed that in most of the camps and work-site centres, there had been a general improvement in the health of the children. She lamented, that although the educational opportunities provided for the refugee children were as good as any other educational institution within the state, and could even compete with those in other parts of the country, the opposition kept on questioning her claim.\footnote{Ibid, p.362.} She also pointed out that a number of refugees in different places were incited by interested persons. Such things, she felt, were drawing away local sympathy from the
refugees, hampering the cause of the refugees. A number of refugees had deserted their camps. She announced that if they did not return, the government would presume that these people were no longer interested in rehabilitation benefits. She reiterated, as announced earlier, that refugees from work-site camps would be absorbed in irrigation projects. Informing the House on 12th March, 1953, she added that the Mayurakshi Project administration had helped them in this matter in the past, and that negotiations were on with the D.V.C to provide the government similar kind of help with regard to absorption of refugees for work purposes. There were also reports of delay in payments because there was not enough decentralization.

Renuka took steps to decentralize the work to some extent which was expected to expedite matters. Regarding house-building loans, she informed the House that efforts were being made to provide loan in one installment. With a view to the rehabilitation of refugee businessmen, she created one Board instead of two, thereby facilitating the matter. Her personal feeling was that the policy of offering small trade loans in densely populated West Bengal would not help the cause; rather it would be much better if people started work-centres where the refugees could go and work. In order to regularize the squatters’ colonies, the Government had placed before the Government of India Survey Office a large number of squatters’ colonies which had come

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81 *Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.7, no, 1, 1953, p.368.
82 *Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.7, no.2, 1953, p.986.
83 Ibid, pp.987-988.
84 Ibid, p.992.
into existence after 1950 and asked for a ceiling limit for each family of Rs.2,250. However, the Government of India had permitted a limit of Rs. 1,250 per family. As a result in some expensive areas, the colonies could not be regularised. \(^{85}\)

On 13\(^{th}\) March, 1953 she informed the House of the development of Habra as a rural colony. There were 4,000 blocks which had been distributed and roads were built. There was already a women’s college, girls’ school and a boy’s school. Apart from this, there were five primary schools, training camp centres offering training to local refugees. A bus route was also opened by the refugees themselves.

2.7 Refugee rehabilitation and Renuka Ray: Post 1954 work

Though the year 1954 did not witness any major exodus, still the government failed to draw up the final figures. Nevertheless, the Rehabilitation ministry under Renuka, drew up a two year plan. As scarcity of land was the main issue, the ministry adopted three ways to overcome the problem. (1) Marginal lands were taken over and the refugees were placed in worksite camps to develop these marginal lands. This sort of effort was first undertaken at Salanpur. She intended to turn Salanpur into a model agricultural colony. In other areas too she hoped to implement similar method so that about 30,000 acres of such land could be developed. (2) The second method was to develop the water-logged areas by de-watering the areas with refugee labour. The Union Ministry of Rehabilitation and Agriculture had sanctioned funds for the scheme for de-

watering Bagjola and Canning areas. By this method she estimated that about 38,000 acres of new land would be made available. Some of this land would be used for rehabilitating the refugees, but the rest would be used for improving the position of local agriculturists. (3) The third method was to send the refugees to the Andamans. She had also requested the Government of India to give priority to East Pakistani refugees for at least the next two years.86

Renuka also placed a list of the achievements of her ministry, stating that she had actually set about a target for the different categories of refugees and had hoped to fulfill the same. (1) Out of 4000 targeted agriculturists, 1,176 families had already been provided with land and loans, 1085 had been put on rehabilitation sites where they had likewise been provided with development work and finally 2000 more were to be allocated on the sites of rehabilitation by the end of March. (2) In case of fishermen, the target was 150 families which, she explained had been complied. (3) The 200 families of Barujibis (a Hindu caste occupied in growing and selling betel leaves) were likely to be rehabilitated in Gobindapur and Nandipet by the end of March or April, 1954. (4) As regards non-agriculturist families, she aimed at rehabilitating 50% camp refugees and 50% non-camp refugees. The ministry eventually settled 997 families of camp refugees and 500 more such families were to be rehabilitated shortly. 1100 families of non-camp refugees were also settled. (5) Renuka articulated that her plan was to shift by

July 2000, all such refugee families who had been earlier placed in houses evacuated by the Muslims to alternative sites.  

Rehabilitating refugee women was however, her primary concern. She ventilated her feelings on this issue on the floor of the House on 23rd March, 1954:

\[\ldots\text{I consider that it is an insult to women that they should be considered to be permanent liabilities in the India of today, when there are no men to earn for them.}\]  

Therefore she gave special attention to the training and rehabilitation of refugee women. She informed the House that 2,221 refugee women were trained by the women’s section of the Rehabilitation Department and non-official organisations with residential centres. As women often failed to find employment after training she tried to ensure that training was followed by employment. The first step that she undertook was to set up an inter-departmental training and employment board. She informed the House that about 844 trainees from government and non-official organisations with residential centres were soon to be rehabilitated. Out of this number, 200 women would be rehabilitated at Udayvilla Co-operative, 441 women were provided training in subjects like tailoring, weaving from different non-official centres as well as at Uttarpara Government Centre. At Habra a special production centre was opened for women. Her ministry also tried to make an arrangement with the Public Health authorities to employ the women who were trained as ward attendants. Apart from this, seventy women got training to run a canteen,

\[\text{87 Proceedings of West Bengal legislative Assembly, vol.9, no.1, 1954, pp.842-844.}\]

\[\text{88 Proceedings of the West Bengal legislative Assembly, vol.9, no.3, 1954, p.95.}\]

\[\text{89 Ibid, p.95.}\]
twenty four received training as nursery school teachers and thirteen in horticulture management. In order to ensure maximum employability, only the optimum numbers of women were trained so that they could be immediately provided with employment.\(^9\) A special arrangement with the Central Rehabilitation ministry was also arrived at whereby the women trainees at the completion of training would get a subsidy for three years on a sliding scale taking into account the number of children they had, along with house-building loans or equipment grants. Refugee Handicrafts Sales Emporiums were to be set up for marketing the products. There were also non-residential centres where women were trained in order to help the family wage.\(^9\)

For the economic rehabilitation of the non-agriculturist refugees, her ministry adopted the following measures:

(a) Schemes were to be introduced for the internal development of the colonies where the refugees worked for wages. Three such schemes had started functioning and plans were there to start five more, (b) training of refugees and setting them up in cottage industries and production centres, were also considered. (c) Securing employment and (d) general development of townships.\(^9\)

Renuka also described the situation prevailing in Taherpur colony. She informed the House that there had been a large concentration of non-agriculturist families

\(^{90}\) *Proceedings of the West Bengal legislative Assembly*, vol.9, no.3, 1954, p.96.

\(^{91}\) *Ibid*, p.97.

\(^{92}\) *Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.9, no.2, 1954, pp.1201-1202.
at the said colony. But the area, unfortunately, was not suitable for their rehabilitation. She further informed the House that 2,791 families were living in their own houses, while 52 families had sold their houses and were living in the houses of other refugees in the colony. All these refugees had received the full limit of the urban rates of loans for house-building purpose which amounted to Rs.1, 250. Similarly, they had also received small trade loans amounting to Rs.750. Besides a special house-building loan of Rs.75 had also been extended to each family.\(^93\) In spite of all these efforts, the refugees there could not settle down satisfactorily. So her ministry made further efforts towards this end. She informed the House that about 500 refugees were working in return for wages at the excavation of canal and the construction of cement concrete roads between Fulia and Birnagar via Taherpur. The Railway Ministry also sanctioned a railway station at Taherpur at her request, and the construction of the same started sometime in April, 1955.\(^94\) Renuka also made elaborate arrangements for the education and employment of the refugee children in Taherpur. There were eleven primary schools, one extended M.E school and a training centre for women in different vocations. One-hundred and twenty five boys were admitted into the Fulia Vocational Training Centre in different crafts and they were provided a stipend of Rs.30 per month each. Forty boys were admitted into Titagarh for a monthly stipend of Rs.25 each, while thirty more were admitted into the Merchant Navy, Police etc. Finally, twenty others were provided in different services with the help of the new Employment section. Plans for starting a small spinning factory in

\(^93\) *Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.9, no.2, 1954, pp.1202-1203.  
\(^94\) *Ibid*, p.1203.
Taherpur and sinking very big tube-wells with the help of electric power from Fulia were also underway. In future, this power was to be utilised for promoting small cottage and co-operative industries for the boys who were undergoing training.\footnote{Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.9, no.2, 1954, p.1203.} By 1954, however, it became evident that the state of West Bengal would no longer be able to accommodate the new refugees.

In 1955 the refugee problem further aggravated with the influx of new refugee entrants. On 14\textsuperscript{th} February, 1955, she informed the house that during the past six months 75,000 persons had crossed over.\footnote{Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.11, no.1, 1955, p.301.} To improve matters, the Central Ministry strengthened the Secretariat Branch in Calcutta for the eastern zone. Several charges were levelled against her, which she refuted. The opposition members alleged that the loans had been provided through many instalments. Renuka defended her position arguing that initially, the loan amount had to be disbursed in instalments because money provided to the State arrived in small dribblets. As for the last two years, the only exception was made in the case of the house-building loan which was disbursed in two instalments in order to ensure that that the refugees were really settling down. But all other loans were given in single instalments, in most cases within a period of two months.\footnote{Ibid, p.301.} There was also an allegation that Rs.60, 000 spent on roads etc. for the Mahisila colony had been wasted. But Renuka refuted this allegation and argued that masonry of six inches diameter had been constructed in the colony, homestead blocks and roads had been...
completed as well; a new Development Committee had been set up to implement further development works and to survey all the colonies. The Mahisila colony was to be transformed into an urban colony. 98 Regarding the employment opportunities for refugees, she pointed out that there were two kinds of work-site camps. The first category included such camps that stood on once water-logged areas, which had to be reclaimed later on; where refugees could settle down only after such areas had been drained out and they could work near their camps. The second type was for those who had failed to find any kind of employment within the state. They were employed in projects of the Central and the West Bengal government. She also stressed on the fact that in both type of camps, capable adult male and females within certain age limits, were expected to work and their dependents and the rest of the family would be provided with subsidy. The average monthly income was Rs.1-6 per month. 99 She also praised the efforts of the refugees working in Bagjola and Sonarpur-Arapanch schemes.

By the early part of 1955, eight reclamation and development schemes were in operation, covering a land area of 15,100 acres. Of the 5,768 non-agriculturist families in camps, 4,564 families were provided up to 28th February, 1955 while others were to be removed to the colony shortly. But she admitted that the rehabilitation of non-camp refugees had been hampered largely due to delay in sanctions from the Union government. 100 Of the 11,500 families, who had squatted in the houses of the Muslim


100 Ibid, p.922.
migrants, 3,800 were given alternative accommodation.\textsuperscript{101} A new policy with the concurrence of Union government was also initiated by her, whereby, multi-storeyed tenements could be set up. Such tenements were under construction at Ganguli Bagan and another 4000 tenements were to be constructed by the Union government in the old Alipur air-field.\textsuperscript{102} Some projects were held up due to delay in sanctions from the central government. For example, in Baranagore, 700bighas of land had been obtained through negotiations where 2,500 persons could be settled, but the same could not be started because it was delayed for two years by the central government.\textsuperscript{103} She also laid stress on after-care arrangements and informed the House that her ministry was making provisions for this to some extent.\textsuperscript{104}

With a view to strengthening the economic condition of the refugees, she tried to engage those refugees unable to earn anything in development work until such time when they could be brought under rehabilitation measures. Secondly, the training-cum-production centres were able to secure orders not only from within the state but without as well by tendering the lowest price. Loans were now provided to the industrialists to set up small scale industries. An Industries Committee composed of experts, both from State and Union governments was set up to process the schemes.

\textsuperscript{101} Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.11, no.1, 1955, p.923.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p.923.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, p.923.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, p.923.
Arrangements were also made with the industries to train up a number of refugees offering skilled jobs. Lastly, the Government of India had also agreed to the setting up of cottage industries on the basis of co-operatives. The Co-operative and the Rehabilitation Department decided to set up a board jointly to supervise the procedure of starting up registered co-operatives.\(^{105}\)

Renuka also started a two-year scheme to transform gradually the permanent liability camps into institutions. A number of unattached women who were offered training both by the State government and by the non-official social organisations, were now associated with two production centres. A third centre was to come up soon. A Committee was also set up to look into the whole matter of re-organisation so that growing children of the refugees as well as a large number of unattached women could obtain some training to rehabilitate themselves. Even those who could not be fully rehabilitated would also be given training to work in institutions. Institutions were to be set up on the recommendations of the Committee. The State government had also set up a committee to prepare plans for the development of urban government sponsored colonies as well as squatters’ colonies.\(^{106}\) The Union government had also agreed to sanction grants to municipalities with high congestion of refugees with a view to improve municipal amenities. New schemes were also on the way for setting up fifteen new collages for the refugees living near the city and the suburbs.\(^{107}\) Renuka felt that as by that

\(^{105}\) *Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.11, no.1, 1955, pp.923-924.


\(^{107}\) *Ibid*, p.925.
time West Bengal had reached a saturation point with regard to availability of land and employment opportunities, it was absolutely necessary to locate land and employment opportunities for the refugees in other states as well. But many refugees had come back from Orissa and Bihar because of lack of basic amenities. To prevent such happenings, she had drawn the attention of the Government of India to the necessity of having proper schemes where preliminary arrangements of water supply, irrigation facilities, building of houses, arrangements of after-care already existed so that the refugees did not have to come back.108

As a number of Tuberculosis affected cases were reported among the refugees, Renuka’s ministry made arrangements for medical aid to refugee T.B. patients. At Dhubulia and Chandmari, for example, separate hospitals were provided with a total number of 150 beds. Besides this, preventive measures such as vaccinations etc. were also arranged for other diseases. For T.B. patients in suburbs of Calcutta, there was a provision for 200 free beds; there were four mobile units for treating T.B. patients at their houses with headquarters at Krishnanagar, Kanchrapara, Chinsura and Barrackpore. For other diseases, refugees were given highest priority for admission in free beds at hospitals. Refugees were given help in the form of treatment either in hospitals or at home. There was also a provision for providing grants to purchase medicines and food for patients in general and T.B. patients in particular.109


At the Conferences of Rehabilitation Ministers of the Eastern Zone, organized by the Union Rehabilitation Ministry towards the end of 1955 and also in the beginning of 1956, it was decided that the scheme of rehabilitation would be undertaken in congenial atmosphere. It was resolved that the newcomers would be kept in camps in West Bengal, pending the execution of schemes of resettlement for them in other states. The Prime Minister also wrote to the Chief Ministers of the different states. Renuka admitted that there was reluctance on the part of the refugees to leave West Bengal. But when there were well-planned schemes, like the Andamans and Nainital, the refugees settled well.\textsuperscript{110} Of the 19.80 lakhs of persons who had received rehabilitation benefits, 1 lakh had been settled in the Andamans and other States in India outside West Bengal.\textsuperscript{111}

In 1956 the arrival of migrants continued unabated. From July, 1955 to June, 1956, around 2, 62,315 persons had migrated to West Bengal. Of these, 1, 12,533 persons were to be placed in the camps.\textsuperscript{112} As West Bengal had already reached a saturation point, arrangements had to be made outside West Bengal. She assured the members of the House that schemes of rehabilitation would be cautiously undertaken and that in each area at least 500 families would be placed together. All arrangements for educational facilities would be given in the mother tongue. Social workers attached to

\textsuperscript{110} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), \textit{Migration over a Decade from East Pakistan}, Sub. File no.3.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal, 1956}, published by Home (Publicity) Department, on behalf of the Refugee and Rehabilitation Department, Govt. of West Bengal, p.3.

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly}, vol.15, no.1, 1956, p.374.
these schemes, were to help the refugees to settle down and the Union Ministry would organize follow-up organisations with the help of the respective states.\textsuperscript{113} She also elaborated on some schemes that were devised. In Bihar, a scheme had been devised to settle 838 agriculturist families, 130 fishermen’s families and 68 families in ancillary trades or occupations. 4,171 persons had already gone to Bettiah camp and another 25,000 were expected to go there. In Orissa too, 2,700 persons had gone to Charbettiah camp. In Saurashtra, accommodation for 1000 persons of P.L. camps had been arranged and social workers were attached to these homes.\textsuperscript{114}

But Renuka faced a major hurdle while trying to settle refugees outside West Bengal as the refugees resorted to large scale desertion. Renuka admitted that there was reluctance on the part of the refugees to leave West Bengal and this reluctance was more emphasized in the case of those who had entered in camps and remained there for some time. This, she explained, was due to the psychological fact that

\textbf{. . . those who are torn from their surroundings want to cling to the new ones if they are kept for any appreciable length of time. It was one of the mistakes made from the outset in not sending refugees straight outside West Bengal when it was found that rehabilitation for them was no longer possible in this state.}\textsuperscript{115}

This reluctance notwithstanding, she argued, when there were well devised schemes, such as Nainital or the Andamans, there was no such desertions. Two factors Renuka felt, accounted for demotivating the East Bengalee refugees from settling outside West Bengal.

\textsuperscript{113} Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.15, no.1, 1955, p.376.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, pp.376-377.

\textsuperscript{115} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial and Museum and Library, New Delhi), Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, Speeches/ Writings by her, S-no.34.
First, delays in sanction of allotments by the Centre stood in the way of proper implementation of the schemes. It was simply not possible for the concerned state governments to provide from their limited resources schemes that could be properly implemented. Secondly, she argued that once refugees had been kept for a longer period in one place, after they had left their homesteads in search of a new land, they naturally became averse to the idea of taking a second move. So, when the refugees went to the camps in neighbouring states and found that rehabilitation was not provided they felt that if they returned to West Bengal, they would probably be able to find something. She further noted that a section of the interested persons also instigated the refugees to desert such new shelters even when the scheme was good as ‘It was easy to do this particularly amongst refugees who had been in camps for a long time and had thus gradually lost the sense of responsibility and self-respect.’

In 1957, an important decision was taken to close camps in West Bengal. It was then decided that the refugees would be sent to Dandakaranya. The Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was set up in October, 1958 to speed up the rehabilitation work. The Union Rehabilitation Minister announced that 35,000 agriculturist families would be sent to Dandakaranya by July, 1959. Later, according to a revised schedule, it was declared that 6,500 families would go to Dandakaranya. But this target was not met and by March, 1960, only 1645 families had gone there. The mismanagement of the

116 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial and Museum and Library, New Delhi), Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, Speeches/ Writings by her, S-no.34.

117 Private Papers of Renuka Ray, Sub: File no.3.
rehabilitation programme was evident when Renuka pointed out that total area reclaimed was much below the target. Up to 5.1.1960, the area that was reclaimed was as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States with refugee families</th>
<th>Total area reclaimed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pharasgaon (M.P)</td>
<td>2100 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umerkote (Orissa)</td>
<td>1900 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paralkote (Orissa)</td>
<td>1200 acres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even the reclaimed area could not be brought under cultivation on time. Roots and stumps were abundant. Renuka pointed out that contour bunding of the land was essential but only 200 acres had been bunded. Out of the families sent, she pointed out, 100 small traders’ families were taken to Dandakaranya from Bettiah and categorized as agriculturists, while 131 families in Pharashgaon had been allotted seven acres per head without any title on land and without any co-operative facilities. In Umarkote 1900 acres had been reclaimed but not allotted while in Paralkote 1200 acres had been reclaimed but not allotted to the refugees. The issue of title of land was very essential because most of the land was khas land or some of them might belong to the tribes. So, this issue had to be settled if the displaced persons’ future had to be settled. While loans for purchasing

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118 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Sub. File no.3.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.
cattle and implements for cultivation had been provided in March, it was limited to 15 to 20 families only.\textsuperscript{121} She also pointed out that as there were no irrigation facilities, small tanks could have served the purpose, but no steps had been taken in that direction so far.\textsuperscript{122}

The plan for employment of the refugees was also in a pathetic state. She pointed out that the majority of the 1,645 families were on the national highway in camps and were given work in road projects. The average income was 62 n. p. per day. Work was provided to them on an average for 26 days in a month. In each family there were at least two workers and the average income of the family consisting of six to eight workers did not exceed Rs.30/- The suggestion made by the West Bengal government and the public that refugees should be placed in the site where they would eventually be settled, remained largely ignored. The idea of utilizing their manual labour for building of their homes and roads or reclaiming lands for their cultivation, were likewise ignored and twisted to highlight the fact that West Bengal authorities did not object to the refugees from utilizing their manual labour. No cottage industry centres and any other subsidiary sources of income were started till the early part of 1960, though such schemes had already been submitted. No loans had been granted to artisans and all the 37 families of small traders were either working as coolies or were engaged in earth-work. Basic facilities like drinking water were also lacking in Dandakaranya. The number of tube-wells was

\textsuperscript{121} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), \textit{Sub. File no.3.}

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Ibid.}
inadequate and as the terrain had not been taken into consideration before the tube-wells were dug, the latter turned out to be defective.

For a quicker implementation of the project, she felt, that some persons had to be held completely responsible. But in Dandakaranya that was not done. The powers of the Chief Administrator were restricted. His suggestion that 1/3rd of the refugees sent to Dandakaranya would have to be non-campers was ignored and except for a few drivers, no non-campers were sent to Dandakaranya. She also explained the causes why the refugees were reluctant to go to Dandakaranya. The refugees after coming from East Pakistan

... were residing in a block in a camp were broken up before being taken to Dandakaranya. Surely, people whose roots are together and who have, after being uprooted once, have belonged together and tried to keep their community environments to some extent will have greater reluctance to go out for some are left behind and some are taken. Even in the case of some individual families this was done sometimes. She questioned the rationality of such a policy and warned that without making preliminary arrangements, especially of drinking water, Dandakaranya would not be ready to take the refugees.

She disagreed with the Central government with regard to its policy towards the East Bengalee refugees. She did not support the way the Central government was spending huge sums on the temporary camps. As a minister, she pointed out that huge sums were spent yearly on mere repairs. Moreover, the displaced persons were kept in these camps for years without any occupation. This ‘... crippled them psychologically

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123 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Sub: File no.3.
and made them unfit to be rehabilitated.\textsuperscript{124} She pointed out that the urgent need was to keep the refugees in smaller camps where some sort of work could be provided to them.

On the other hand, big camps were centres of exploitation and if they were closed down, then huge sums spent on their annual repairs could be saved and these could be spent on starting work-site camps. When Ajit Prasad Jain was the Union Rehabilitation Minister, with his consent, a number of work-site camps were started, but when Meher Chand Khanna succeeded him, that practice was totally stopped.

Another point of disagreement with the Central government was its policy of showing preference to camp refugees. She argued as the population in the transit camps was a direct charge on the Central government, the tendency was always to give priority to them particularly up to 1954. As soon as a proportion of the camp inmates resettled, their places were taken by new comers.\textsuperscript{125} As the refugees who earlier went to the camps were given priority, in later years, a large majority of refugees went to camps. She wrote:

\begin{quotation}
Those who came in the years 1948-49, 1949-50 and 1950-51 and did not go to the camps but showed signs of self-help found it difficult, if not impossible, to receive rehabilitation assistance.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quotation}

She explained that those refugees who had managed to bring with them little money meant to fend for their stay for a month or two in a rented accommodation, were given

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{124} \textit{My Reminiscences}, p.148.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Private papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), \textit{Migration over a Decade}, Sub. File no.3.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Private Papers of Renuka Ray: \textit{Sub. File no.3}.
\end{itemize}
the lowest priority in so far as the allotment of assistance for building up of a homestead was concerned. The refugees putting up with their friends or relatives for sometime were also marked as a low priority issue, while those who squatted on other peoples’ lands and houses fared a better position.127 The highest priorities were accorded to those refugees who had gone to the Government camps straight way without helping themselves on their own. But the West Bengal government sought to mix the camp and non-camp refugees, as the camp refugees usually lost their initiative after living in camps, and it was essential for them to mix up with the non-camp refugees who still had the initiative to provide leadership and direction.128

Renuka also blamed the Central government for their delayed action; as she felt that rehabilitation of the refugees outside the camps was a central responsibility and the finances also came from the Central government. The State government merely played the execution work. She wrote:

The procedure adopted has been for the Central Rehabilitation Ministry to examine in detail each individual scheme for rehabilitation, however small the expenditure incurred, before these are sanctioned under the overall allotments made in the Budget to State Governments concerned. The sanction for schemes over a given limit has again to have the approval of the Standing Expenditure Committee of the Finance Ministry. This involved procedure has meant long delays, even the drastic curtailment or dropping of schemes. The lack of knowledge of actual conditions obtaining in the locality by Central sanctioning authorities led to voluminous correspondence while refugees waited for rehabilitation.129

127 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Sub. File no.3.

128 My Reminiscences, P.149.

129 Private Papers of Renuka Ray, Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.34.
To improve matters the Central Ministry established a branch of its Secretariat in Calcutta for the eastern region on the request of the West Bengal government. Renuka observed that this step helped matters to some extent, but the dual authority led to such a position that schemes drastically changed, could either not be executed or were unsatisfactory.¹²⁰ She illustrated her argument citing two cases. For example, the Central Government sanctioned a scheme for building one-roomed tenements at Ganguli Bagan in Calcutta, against West Bengal government’s suggestion that these would not be suitable. The project ultimately failed because ‘… as the rent is too high for those who might be satisfied with one roomed tenements and the space too little for those who could afford to pay…’¹³¹ Eventually these were rented out to both refugees and non-refugees. Similarly in Harbhanga, in the Sunderbans, the West Bengal Government was able to procure land but it involved huge expenditure to transform the same into rehabilitation plots. The Central Government sanctioned the scheme, but financial sanction did not come immediately so the scheme got delayed.

Another deficit in the Central policy towards the refugees was its policy of providing small loans in instalments for housing, agriculture or for starting small business. But as the loans were given in instalments, they were actually spent in meeting day to day expenses. It served no real purpose, on the contrary, as Renuka pointed out,

¹²⁰ Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.34.

¹³¹ Ibid.
these regular small doles were habit-forming and conducive to continued dependence.\textsuperscript{132} Moreover, in 1954 and 1955, funds were not timely disbursed by the Centre. As funds had to be utilized within 31st March, of a financial year, it could not be carried forward, even if the sanctioned amount reached the recipient very late. As a result large sums of money, sanctioned in the budget, remained unspent and rehabilitation work suffered. But the Centre blamed the State Government for failing to utilise the Centre’s budget allocations. Renuka pointed out that there were number of reasons why funds could not be utilised on time. Earlier, funds used to be allotted in a pool and not earmarked for any particular scheme. This new policy left the State government no option to divert funds, sanctioned from one scheme to any other ready scheme. This along with delays in sanctioning led to the accumulation of a large amount of unspent balance. Finally, the Government of India’s circular asking the State Governments to submit complete rehabilitation schemes for scrutiny and sanction in the post 1956 April, period also deterred the pace of rehabilitation schemes. This slowed down the procedure of sanctions.\textsuperscript{133} To speed up the matter she repeatedly requested the Central government to divert a portion of the unspent balance for implementing schemes for the non-campers.\textsuperscript{134} At the conference of the State Rehabilitation Ministers in January, 1956, she informed the members that schemes for the development of four townships, which had been sent by the middle of

\textsuperscript{132} My Reminiscences, p.147.

\textsuperscript{133} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Letter dated 11\textsuperscript{th} July, 1960 by Renuka Ray to Morarji Desai, Sub: File no.5.

\textsuperscript{134} Private Papers of Renuka Ray, Letter dated 29\textsuperscript{th} October, 1960, by Renuka Ray to Morarji Desai, Sub: File no.5.
the last year, had not been sanctioned. She noted that actual implementation of a scheme
took time and if sanctions were delayed, then essential work would also be delayed.\textsuperscript{135}

She also lamented the fact that the opposition parties in West Bengal
encouraged the refugees to stay on, when arrangements to settle them outside West
Bengal were on the way. Instead, they could have pressurised the centre to provide
better amenities in an overcrowded economy. In her own words:

They [the opposition] could have given full support to the state government’s plea for
considerable expansion of civic amenities in Calcutta, for setting up a proper township with
adequate rail and road connections. Instead of allowing the Centre to give loans in a
niggardly fashion, they could have stressed the need for generosity on the scale that was
displayed in setting up a city such as Chandigarh for the refugees from West Punjab. The
state government’s entreaties for funds to establish new avenues of employment and long-
term schemes for reclamation of land could have received their backing and thus
rehabilitated a large number of refugees in West Bengal. But the role played by the
opposition party politicians of West Bengal at the Centre and in the State Assembly was
negative and did not help increase the facilities for a large number to be accommodated in
the state.\textsuperscript{136}

That the Central policy towards the East Bengalee refugees was a biased one was
indicated by the Report of the Ministry of Rehabilitation, when by the end of 1959-60, the
total expenditure on the relief and rehabilitation of the displaced persons from West
Pakistan was estimated at Rs. 186.81 crores and that from East Pakistan was Rs.165.71
crores. She also criticised the Union government for not allowing the refugee settlements
in Andamans to flourish. She felt that the island environment was suited to the East
Bengalee refugees, coming from a riverine nature. The number of refugees who would be
rehabilitated, fixed by the centre, was soon exhausted. Witnessing the refugees’

\textsuperscript{135} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), \textit{Paper cutting dated}
\textit{29th January, 1956, Sub: File no.4.}

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{My Reminiscences}, p.150.
eagerness to settle there, Renuka requested the Home Ministry to increase the quota. But the Ministry refused on the ground that ‘. . . persons from Kerala and other places in India had also to be accommodated in the quota fixed for outsiders.'\textsuperscript{137} To Renuka this decision seemed most unsympathetic because when West Bengal was facing constant flow of refugees, the Government of India was thinking in terms of theoretical quota. The biased attitude of the Central government was manifested when a study made by the Union ministry of Rehabilitation pointed out that while Punjabi refugees had paid back their loans, the East Bengalee refugees did not. But Renuka pointed out that the loans given to the displaced persons in the Punjab were set off against the evacuee properties they received in exchange.\textsuperscript{138} But displaced persons in the East were given loans in instalments which were exhausted to meet their daily expenses. She felt that if loans were given in one instalment, the situation would have been totally different.\textsuperscript{139} With so many hurdles in her path, a frustrated Renuka, refused re-election, when elections were announced in 1957; thus ended her stint as a minister.

2.8. **Renuka and the women’s movement**

Renuka from her early days was actively involved with the women’s movement. She wrote that women throughout their lives were under patriarchal

\textsuperscript{137} My Reminiscences, p.151.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid, p.152.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, p.152.
control. But Women’s movement in India was fundamentally different from the women’s movement in the West in the sense that here the movement was not for the establishment of women’s rights but rather for the restoration of rights which women had enjoyed in the past when Indian civilization was at its height. She wrote: ‘In India, the conditions that operated in bringing restrictions upon women are closely woven with the general degradation that led to the subjection of the race.’ Later when the political movement for India’s independence started, the question of women’s emancipation became an integrated part of it. During Gandhian mass movements, women from different walks of life came forward and joined the mass movement. During emergencies like riot and famine women had played a notable part. In independent India women had equal rights of enfranchisement on the basis of adult suffrage along with men. Legally there were no restrictions against women in politics or in public life or in matters of employment. As a result, women of the middle and upper middle classes had benefitted. She found the position of women in India paradoxical. She wrote:

We have highly educated women who hold responsible jobs and lead independent lives and have blazed a trail in politics and public life. But by their very success they have increased the gulf between themselves and the less privileged women.

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140 My Reminiscences, p.73.

141 Private Papers of Renuka Ray(Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Women As Citizens of Free India, sent for publication in the first issue of The People, to be out on 6th July, 1951, Speeches/Writings by her, S.no.14.

142 Ibid.

143 My Reminiscences, p.74.
She observed that amongst the women who had opportunities denied to others, it was the few and not many who had come forward in the task of nation-building. She reminded them:

... they [the educated women] are living in critical times and they are still in the nature of pioneers. Whatever they do finds reflection and influences the lives of vast numbers of their sisters.144

A great majority of women work with meagre wages which did not allow them to have minimum living standards. She noted that progressive laws, passed by the Parliament, had often worsened the condition of women, instead of improving their conditions. ‘Employers . . . preferred to get rid of their women workers rather than comply with the law.’145 In spite of women taking up different professions and vocations, the greatest impediment to the women’s progress was the lack of educational opportunities for women. She showed that women graduates were 0.3% compared to men graduates who were 1.0% of the literate population of India, while at the primary stage male were 11.9% and females 3%. The literacy rate was 18.4% for women and 39.5% for men.146 The disabilities in social laws often acted as a great deterrent to women and often caused great injustice to them.147

Health wise too she found the picture not very encouraging for women.

Early marriage, high fertility, idealization of the roles of mother and housewife affected

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144 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Women As Citizens, Speeches/Writings by her, S.no.14.

145 My Reminiscences, p.74.

146 Ibid, p.75.

147 Private Papers of Renuka Ray, Women As Citizens, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.14.
women’s physical and mental health. Malnutrition was high among women especially among the poor. Mortality rate was also high among women. In the absence of family planning, women were never free from repeated child-births. She also observed that due to lack of education the Indian mother was unaware of the most elementary rules of hygiene and health, of child welfare and of dietics. Therefore it was extremely urgent to establish a sufficient number of maternity and child welfare centres, clinics for family planning and adult education centres throughout the country and in every village, thereby enabling every woman not only to cope with her household chores but also to allow her to become conscious citizens of the country.\textsuperscript{149}

Renuka felt that a woman’s economic dependence went against her. She considered a housewife to be as much a working woman as the men and women earning their livelihood outside. But the society did not recognise the economic values of the essential services performed by the women and in consequence their prestige suffered.\textsuperscript{150} Notwithstanding the fact that a large number of women were seeking employment, she argued, the vast majority of women would contribute their services as economic units in the domestic sphere. Therefore, she strongly believed that it was the duty of the women’s movement to change the attitude of the society and to give full recognition of the

\textsuperscript{148} My Reminiscences, p.75.

\textsuperscript{149} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Women As Citizens, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.14.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
economic value of the housewife. At the same time, she urged the women to come out of their homes. She wrote:

The nation is but the larger home. The experience gained in managing the affairs of the home can rightly guide women to take part in municipal or civic work or in the nation’s affairs.

Therefore, ways and means had to be found out, whereby women could contribute as citizens, without neglecting their household duties. She suggested:

Disciplined and well-regulated lives, with the assistance of simple technical gadgets in the home, would make it far more possible, for women to contribute according to their capacity and ability.

She also did not hesitate to suggest that the women’s organisations should not confine its activities only for women. She wrote:

Women’s organisations can no longer afford to circumscribe their activities to subjects relating to the progress of women only. They can only justify their existence if they can put forward the effort in an integrated manner to lay the pattern of the society of the future and work for the all-round development of the country.

Renuka also suggested ways and means through which women could become self-sufficient and contribute towards nation-building. Renuka suggested if women could put their ornaments and jewellery in National Savings, it would enrich the country as well as improve their personal finance. The money so raised could then be spent on the training of womenfolk. Secondly, for women belonging to the poor and the middle class

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151 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Women As Citizens, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.14.
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
families new means of generating income would have to be explored, so that their family wages could be augmented; thereby setting a minimum living standard. Thirdly, new ways and means had to be devised through which the quality of goods produced in the industrial centres could be improved and an adequate machinery established, facilitating the sale of such products. Fourthly, in the villages and in smaller district towns co-operative centres for women had to be started with the goal of all round development. With a view to augmenting the spirit of social service, personnel implementing different projects would have to be trained from the village level. Women could also pay a leading role in encouraging the purchase of cottage industries and handicrafts.\textsuperscript{155}

Renuka was the President of the AIWC from 1952 to 54. It was under her tenure that the AIWC celebrated its silver jubilee. Under her guidance the AIWC decided that their activities should be conducted in an integrated manner for an all-round development of the society. The AIWC also undertook a vigorous propaganda for the Hindu Code Bill. During the 1952 elections a pledge to support the Hindu Code Bill was drafted by the Conference and members went to candidates to obtain their signatures on it.\textsuperscript{156} Under her tenure the branches actively arranged meetings to mobilise public opinion for the Hindu Marriage and Succession bills and other government bills of social importance. Under her encouragement An All India Day for the removal of legal disabilities was held on 9\textsuperscript{th} April, 1954. Roshni, the journal of the AIWC also published a


special issue on Women’s legal disabilities. During her time, the Madras branch established a cancer institute on 18th June, 1954.

Renuka was also instrumental in establishing the Women’s Co-coordinating Council (WCC) in 1959. Under its banner, a large number of women’s organisations combined to work together, particularly during emergencies like floods, cyclone etc. At the outset fifty organisations worked together successfully during the floods of 1959. She recalled:

It was with a certain amount of hesitancy that we had embarked in the new field of co-ordination wherein each separate organisation agreed in some measure to give up their autonomy to combine during times of emergency to pool their resources and avoid duplication of work.157 While working together, the WCC was careful that the entity of each individual organisation was kept intact and no attempt was made to encroach upon their normal functions. During emergencies distribution work was undertaken through its members and local workers with centres set up in affected areas under its own supervision.158 In 1968 the WCC had established rehabilitation centres in Jalpaiguri. The WCC also came forward during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. By June of that year, over seven million evacuees had arrived in India to escape the atrocities committed by the Military Junta of Pakistan. The WCC ran a number of relief centres in the border districts of West Bengal. These centres were Chandpara in Bongaon, Maitrya Bagan in Basirhat, Kalyani

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157 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Welcome Address by the President, Sm. Renuka Ray, on the occasion of celebrations of A Decade of co-ordinated Effort, on 9th August, 1970, Sub: File no.31.

158 My Reminiscences, p.228.
camps 1 and 2, Nadia, Jalgani in Murshidabad, Phasidewa near Siliguri-Darjeeling and WCC community centre in Mainaguri-Jalpaiguri. In Chandpara, the WCC instituted a fully equipped medical unit from the month of May. WCC emphasized on children’s feeding programme, medical care, schooling and handicraft training for women. A residential training centre for Bangladeshi girls had also been started to train women in nursing and handicrafts. Apart from emergency relief, the WCC also pioneered new ventures like home for the aged and the Consumers’ Action Forum in 1973. It also started providing legal aid to poor women in semi-urban and rural areas.

Renuka felt that one of the most commonplace difficulties that nearly all voluntary associations offering social welfare work confronted was organisation of funds - this took away much of their time and energy. The government and semi government sources did provide grants but too many delays hampered welfare work. Besides, the voluntary sector believed in maintaining its independence and therefore too much reliance on government grants was not considered desirable. To solve this problem she suggested the creation of a ‘Community Chest’ with the combined understanding and

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160 Ibid.

161 My Reminiscences, p.228.

good will of all. This, she hoped, would provide available funds that would help the individual organisations to work unhindered.\(^{163}\)

On the position of women in independent India, her argument was that women acquired equality under the law and the constitution. But for a majority of women, this remained only on paper. In fact, she commented, the question of equal rights were a ‘. . . a mockery for those who are ignorant, victims of social prejudices, which hamper the development of women in society.’\(^{164}\) But what was shocking was the fact that the dowry system, trafficking in women and children and other decadent and degrading customs which were the outcomes of double standards of morality for men and women had become more widespread.\(^{165}\) Laws, penalising these practices had been enacted but they were not enough to stop them. Only a change in social conscience could produce effective results. The change had to come first at home which constituted the basic unit of society. For women, education was of utmost importance, because in order to inculcate right approach among the children, the mother had to be educated. She wrote: ‘It is from earliest childhood that discriminations between boys and girls takes place, even in the home of many who are educated, and the main culprits are the mothers.’\(^{166}\) A daughter from the childhood was taught domestic work, while the son was

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\(^{163}\) My Reminiscences, p.229.

\(^{164}\) Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Renuka Ray as President, International Women’s Year 1975 Celebration Committee, Sub: File no.34.

\(^{165}\) Ibid.

\(^{166}\) Ibid.
exempted. Men were singled out to play their part in national and international affairs. During the first seven months of the year 1975 (International Women’s Year), women organisations met women on door to door contacts, public and mahalla meetings, in training camps, over the radio and in the press to create awareness of their rights. While stressing equality of men and women in all spheres, she reminded that equality did not mean mere duplication of men’s endeavour.

Renuka was happy to observe that in independent India, women were gradually coming forward to take up different professions. She was particularly impressed by those women who had joined the IAS, medical and legal professions. But at the same time, there were some professions, where women were not able to achieve as much. She pointed out that in the field of journalism, there was still prejudices operating against women. She writes: ‘. . . no woman from India has gone out as an accredited correspondent of any newspaper so far.’ Similarly, in the field of education, women had achieved excellence, but ‘. . . their chances of reaching the highest rank in their services in many states have yet to come.’

One of the aims of the women’s movement in India was to ensure equal pay for equal work for women. But she observed that certain difficulties had led to a decline in the number of women employed in certain professions like mining, agriculture,

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167 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Renuka Ray as President, International Women’s Year 1975 Celebration Committee, Sub: File no.34.

168 My Reminiscences, p.83.

plantations and industries. One of the main reasons for such a decline, she believed, was that maternity benefits and other amenities had to be provided to women workers. She felt that the denial of the precautionary measures associated with motherhood appeared to be one of the most common injustices meted out to women workers, despite the fact that they were prepared to do their duties. The position of the educated women were relatively better, but they had to be more efficient than their male counterparts to improve their grades and secure promotions. She had also advised women to build up an effective consumer movement.

These issues notwithstanding, Renuka also laid stress on the issue of lack of family planning and its possible impact upon the lives of women. She articulated:

. . . those who have better standard of living and who can perhaps afford to have large families are the ones who have both the knowledge and the inclination to restrict the size of the family whereas others whose possibility of producing healthy children are low, are the persons amongst whom in all nations today large families prevail. In India things in this respect are considerably worse and family planning is a dire necessity if we are to have a healthy race.

It was the women who had to pay the price for the lack of family planning. They became emaciated and prematurely old due to the birth of so many children and that too without the provision for adequate maternity or child welfare amenities.

170 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Impact of the International Women's Year, Sub: File no.34.

171 Ibid.

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid.
When the Hindu Code Bill was enacted, she strongly supported the Divorce Laws, which were a part of the bill. She reflected that divorce had sanction in the ancient Hindu law. Marriage, to her, was an institution ensuring the protection and safeguard of the family and more importantly the children. A normal, peaceful environment was the basis for the welfare of a child. But when such conditions were not possible, then under such circumstances, dissolution of marriage was a better option, as it could prevent the child from the stress and strife that prevailed at such a home.\textsuperscript{174} Her advanced way of thinking regarding marriage was manifested when she suggested that marriage should never took place between people suffering from incurable diseases, which were likely to be transferred to their child. To prevent such a happening, a test should be carried out. If such a marriage did happen, there should be a provision for divorce.\textsuperscript{175}

She was particularly impressed with the way the Indian women, especially the rural women participated in the general elections in India. She pointed out that in the first general elections held in 1952, almost 60\% of the rural women exercised their voting right.\textsuperscript{176} But what was disappointing was the fact that in the following years, the number of women going to Lok Sabha or state assemblies was not that high. This was partly because educated women were unwilling to contest elections on behalf of political

\textsuperscript{174} Private Papers of Renuka Ray(Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), \textit{Radio Talk on ‘The Future of Marriage in India,’ Speeches/Writings by her, S.no.26}

\textsuperscript{175} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{176} \textit{My Reminiscences}, p.82.
parties. Most parties were male-dominated and therefore reluctant to give nomination to women. Even if the party was led by women, she too preferred candidates without a strong personality or determination.\textsuperscript{177}

Renuka was quick to point out that some sort of complacency had crept into the women’s movement during the 1950s. This was because women wrongly believed that after independence a new constitution and some progressive laws would bring about a better environment for women. Even the AIWC which always highlighted the need to change the attitude of society towards women started concentrating on constructive social work.\textsuperscript{178} As a result of this complacency, women could achieve little by the year 1975, which happened to be the International Women’s Year as well. Most of the women, she observed, were unaware of their basic rights. Legal aid was not available to most of the women. Age old prejudices weakened the progressive laws intended for the welfare of the women. ‘A great deal of effort was required to sweep aside the old prejudices and remove the disabilities that women still suffered.’\textsuperscript{179} She also pointed out that men were not the only enemy of women. Women were often their worst enemies. Therefore, she believed in creating a society where men and women would not be divided into hostile camps. ‘Men and women have much to learn from each other.’\textsuperscript{180} Progress could not be addressed by merely emulating men, but women should be provided with

\textsuperscript{177} My Reminiscences, p.82.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid, p.80.

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid, p.84.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid, p.85.
opportunity to develop themselves fully and freely so that they could contribute their best to society.\textsuperscript{181}

2.9. \textit{Renuka and other key issues}

Renuka was particularly concerned with the sphere of education, as she believed that education was the very foundation on which the issues of reconstruction of society and nation building rested. But, alas, in India more than 80\% of men and women were deprived of any semblance even of literacy far less education.\textsuperscript{182} For overhauling the education system, the first step that should be taken was to improve the status and training of the teachers. She believed that the teacher was not only important within the walls of school buildings and universities but in the re-building of the nation itself.\textsuperscript{183} Increase in the number of schools was dependent upon the availability of teachers’ training centres. Although at the junior basic level of education, women were preferable, there was severe dearth of suitable women candidates.\textsuperscript{184} Moreover, it was a common belief that as teaching was a noble profession, teachers were to be placed beyond the mundane and pretty trifles. Renuka believed that this could only be possible when the teacher was assured of a standard of living and not confronted with the problem

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\textsuperscript{181} My Reminiscences, p.85. \\
\textsuperscript{182} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Presidential address at the annual meeting of the Women Educational League (undated), Speeches/Writings by her, S.no.75. \\
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
of earning the daily bread. But the rate of pay of teachers were poorest compared to other professions. So, her suggestion was if best talents were to be drawn into this profession, then the teacher’s pay had to be equal to the rank of administrators. She also lamented the fact that due importance was not given to the educational sector. While in other countries, new methods of educational developments were successfully accomplished, in India, financial limitation remained an excuse for not implementing similar schemes.

In independent India Renuka had the opportunity to serve some important committees. She chaired the School Health Committee, appointed by the Union Health Ministry, which sought to probe into the health and nutrition problems of school going children. As the chairperson, she stressed the need for an integrated health service for the benefit of school children. The child in India, according to her, was very much neglected and there was high incidence of protein malnutrition. She argued if the objective was to give the child a sound training in school, then matters like environmental sanitation in schools including attention to housing facilities, protection of water supply, drainage and disposal of waste also needed to be looked after. Along with this periodical medical inspection, the institution of remedial measures and a proper follow up was

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185 Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), Presidential address at the annual meeting of the Women Educational League (undated), Speeches/Writings by her, S.no.75.

186 Ibid.

187 Ibid.

absolutely necessary. Vaccination against small pox, immunization programmes against typhoid, tuberculosis and other diseases needed to be introduced on a widespread scale.\(^\text{189}\) The committee in its report insisted that school health services should become a part of the community services.\(^\text{190}\) The committee selected the primary school children as the main focus of the school health scheme. Accordingly, children were to receive preventive health care along with their parents so that the elders in their turn could be educated in basic health care.\(^\text{191}\)

A school health service which did not include a mid-day meal programme even of a minimum nutritional standards implied that in a country like India it was virtually providing nothing.\(^\text{192}\) In India, the most important cause of ill-health among children was malnutrition. Therefore, a high standard of nutrition was absolutely necessary to raise a ‘quality race’.\(^\text{193}\) The Third Plan was to provide a nutritious meal for the primary school children while the Fourth Plan was to provide the same for the middle school children. She suggested that a school meal should necessarily make use of the locally available foodstuffs and should provide 1/3 of the dietary and nutritional

\(^{189}\) Private Papers of Renuka Ray( Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), *Health and Nutrition of the School Child in India*, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.50.

\(^{190}\) *My Reminiscences*, p.216.

\(^{191}\) *Ibid*, p.216.

\(^{192}\) Private Papers of Renuka Ray, *Health and Nutrition of the School Child* in India, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.50.

The Third Plan sought to address primary education for the school children between the age group of 6-11. But Renuka argued that the expenditure incurred on setting up of school buildings, providing teachers and text books for literacy education would be wasted unless a holistic development of the child was not looked after by providing adequate health service. She also suggested that for an integrated health service for the school-going children a five years phased system could be explored. It would be introduced in such areas where, at least a primary health centre was available, if not a fully equipped hospital, so that follow up work could be implemented. She estimated that a mid-day meal for 200 days of a year costing at the rate of 12 n. p., per day, would require an outlay of approximately Rs. 140 crores for a five year plan period. As a result the Planning Commission had pleaded paucity of funds. But Renuka considering the vital nature of the problem felt that the Commission would be justified in sacrificing some major projects like a steel plant to finance such a scheme. In her lifetime she saw the successful implementation of the Rural School Improvement scheme in a Tamil Nadu village. Here every villager contributed to the improvement of the school, according to their capacity. For example, widowed women were involved in cutting vegetables and cooking the mid-day meal. The school children themselves white-washed the walls and cleaned the place. The State government bore one third of the cost involved while two-

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194 Private Papers of Renuka Ray, (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), *Health and Nutrition of the School Child in India*, Speeches/Writings by her, S-no.5


thirds were borne by all the villagers.\textsuperscript{197} The mid-day meal scheme, did take off at a later period throughout the country.

Renuka vouched in favour of establishing an evaluation organisation, of a permanent nature, for the education sector in India to evaluate the progress of different schemes, initiated by the government. She suggested that the national system of education should have three aspects: (1) it should promote national integration, (2) it should provide purposeful education, and (3) it should fulfill the basic aims and objectives laid down in the constitution. Her suggestion was that educational opportunities should be equal for both rich and the poor, elementary and secondary education should be free and if fees were to be levied, it should be done in accordance with the parents’ income. She also stressed on the need for implementing equal educational opportunities between urban and rural areas and for this the establishment of good schools in rural areas was absolutely necessary. Good quality teachers should be appointed at the elementary level. They should be given adequate salaries in commensurate with the changes in the cost of living. As text books were quite expensive, her suggestion was that they should either be free or should be borrowed from the library. As the girls were lagging behind in terms of education, Renuka was of the opinion that girls’ education should be free up to the highest stage. As regards educational finance, she suggested that resources of voluntary

\textsuperscript{197} \textit{My Reminiscences}, pp.218-219.
organisations and the State governments should be pooled together for a programme of educational development and expansion.\(^{198}\)

She considered the terrible wastage of the educated youth of the country as one of the worst features of Indian development.\(^{199}\) This was due to the defective system of university education in India. She wrote: ‘. . . the problem before our youth is not only that of unemployment but of un-employability as well.’\(^{200}\) To solve this problem, she was in favour of two years’ compulsory national service prior to the granting of a university degree as this would inculcate ideas of discipline and citizenship.\(^{201}\) Such a scheme would help the students to acquire skills while doing some useful work for the nation and would guide them to know their own aptitude so that they would be employable and could be absorbed in new types of employment.\(^{202}\) She was particularly concerned about the problem of the youth. She wrote: ‘Throughout the ages the youth has revolted against the inequalities and injustices which surround society when it becomes complacent and smug.’\(^{203}\) But at the same time misdirection of youth for ulterior purposes had to be prevented. That is why the WCC had set up a Youth Service Bureau to guide students and youth to find their aptitudes.

\(^{198}\) Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), *Summary Record of the evidence given by Renuka Ray before the Education Commission on 23\(^{rd}\) September, 1965*, Sub: File no.25.

\(^{199}\) *My Reminiscences*, p.217.


\(^{203}\) Private Papers of Renuka Ray, *Sub: File no.31.*
In 1958 the Planning Commission had set up a Study Team on Social Welfare and Welfare of Backward Classes. Renuka was nominated as the leader of the team. The team toured all backward areas in every state for two years. The team found that separate institutions for the tribals and the Harijans were actually perpetuating the problem of segregation. Therefore the team suggested that the welfare of the Harijans should be integrated with general social welfare and special scholarships and subsidies should be provided for the Harijans and the tribals.\textsuperscript{204}

Turning to the family planning programme, she suggested that integrated health centres covering maternity, child welfare and family planning were to be introduced. She wrote:

\begin{quote}
What is required is direct access to a maternity centre or a health centre where mothers would come to know what family planning means and where proper follow-up services are provided. Such centres would also serve the health needs of men.\textsuperscript{205}
\end{quote}

But she noticed that funds came from different departments of the government which caused delay. Therefore such obstacles were to be removed.

The community development programme was launched throughout India on 2\textsuperscript{nd} October, 1952, on the occasion of Gandhiji’s birthday. At Baruipur, West Bengal Renuka inaugurated one such project. This community development programme envisaged a framework for 50 to 100 villages as blocks for which welfare services,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{204} My Reminiscences, p.212.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid, p.213.
\end{footnotesize}
agricultural extension services, community crafts and recreation centres were visualised.\textsuperscript{206} In her speech Renuka stressed that

We have to overcome ignorance, poverty and all the ills that ignorance breeds and to increase our productivity so that a redistribution of wealth can bring living standards to our people.\textsuperscript{207}

This project was to function as an integrated township-cum-village centre which would re-orient the society. She argued that unless human material could be built up, health improved and basic education be introduced; this scheme would fall through. She further argued that it was necessary to make people understand the rights as well as responsibilities of citizenship in a free country, without which advancement would be fractured. She concluded that the community projects were important as they included all of these factors.\textsuperscript{208} She also firmly believed that those who ran the local administration at the rural level, had to be given training in basic administrative skills with an orientation for development work, which would work against reactionary social beliefs and customs.\textsuperscript{209}

2.10. Renuka Ray in the Lok Sabha

In 1957 Renuka decided to contest the Lok Sabha elections from the Malda Lok Sabha seat. Unable to convince the Centre in solving the refugee problem in West Bengal, as a minister of the state, she perhaps contemplated that through a platform

\textsuperscript{206} *My Reminiscences*, p.214.

\textsuperscript{207} Private Papers of Renuka Ray (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi), *Speech given on 2.10.52, Speeches/Writings by her*, S.no.17.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{209} *My Reminiscences*, p.214.
like the Lok Sabha, she would be able to raise the issue of the refugees from East Pakistan and secure an amicable settlement. She recalled that women overwhelmingly supported her and she won with a comfortable majority. She was a member of the Lok Sabha from 1957 to 62 and then again from 1962 to 67. Since she had been a member of the Constituent Assembly earlier, so this time also she came to the Lok Sabha with high expectations. But unfortunately, she found that the crusading spirit that had prevailed in the Constituent Assembly earlier was absolutely missing this time. She found out to her dismay, that relevant issues, were no longer, prioritized except of course, when such issues were vouched by important personalities through the debates; the rest merely spent their time in tea and gossip. She wrote: ‘This was the beginning of the deterioration which made itself more evident in the subsequent Lok Sabhas.’ In such an environment she found it rather difficult to fulfil her primary objective that of turning the attention of the Parliament towards the refugee problem in West Bengal. Yet, she raised poignant issues in the Parliament and actively participated in the debates. Social issues figured prominently in her speeches.

On 15th May, 1957 she pointed out during the Motion on Address by the President that the President’s address while mentioning the areas where natural calamities had affected the food position, had omitted areas like Bengal where an equally difficult position prevailed. She hoped that adequate food grains would be supplied to

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210 *My Reminiscences*, p.190.


212 *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.1, no.1-10, 1957, P.461.
West Bengal and that the rising price of rice kept under check. She also reminded the house that because of unprecedented floods in West Bengal, the purchasing power of the people had suffered. Therefore, rice had to be subsidized.\textsuperscript{213} When there was devastating floods in West Bengal in 1959, she pointed out in the Lok Sabha that people suffered terribly as a result of the intensity with which the DVC waters were let out. She pointed out that by the second week of September it was clear that dams and reservoirs were full. The DVC could have released the water at an easier flow. Yet, they waited till the month of October. But by then, cyclone and the floods were of much greater intensity. As a result the water had to be released at a tremendous rate, resulting in the complete destruction of crops.\textsuperscript{214} She also reiterated that so far no attempt had been made to control the Bhagirathi and the Farakka Barrage Scheme was still only on paper.\textsuperscript{215} She was equally vocal about issues concerning women, when they came up for discussion. On 9\textsuperscript{th} December, 1959 during the discussion on the Dowry Prohibition Bill, she sharply retorted that though such a Bill was no doubt welcome, but the members should not be complacent, as it could hardly be effective unless there was a simultaneous change in the social psyche. She also suggested that no police officer below the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police should have the powers to investigate.\textsuperscript{216}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{213} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.1, no.1-10, 1957, p.461.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.35, no. 1-10, 1959, pp.777-778.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Ibid, p.779.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, no.11-20, 1959, pp.4231-32.
\end{itemize}
In the beginning of the year 1960, she was very much concerned about the impending food crisis. On 16\textsuperscript{th} February, 1960, on the floor of the house, she pointed out that when there was shortage of food, then the government must exercise some control in order to ensure that all people, especially the children got nutritious food. She argued:

... it is necessary when we are in short supply that Government should arrange through some form of State trading for enough food, in fact not merely arrange, but see that the distribution of food goes on the right way and that priorities are allotted in the right way.\textsuperscript{217}

She also favoured rationing of milk by the government for its effective distribution to children and nursing and expectant mothers. But no steps had been taken in this direction. Therefore, she wanted an assurance from the Food Ministry that some steps would be taken in order to ensure that the children got a nutritious diet.\textsuperscript{218} At the same forum, she accused the government of not paying due attention to the flood ravaged West Bengal. She also reminded the House that the Farakka Barrage on the Ganga, so essential in preventing floods had not yet been started.\textsuperscript{219}

As she was always very concerned with the future and the welfare of the youth, the lack of employment opportunities for the youth also received her attention. On the floor of the house, on 15\textsuperscript{th} March, 1960, she pointed out that in order to tackle the problem of unemployment and unemployability, there should be a system by which the students at the end of the higher secondary stage of education, be initiated into such

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.38, no.1-10, 1960, p.1200.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Ibid}, p.1200.

\textsuperscript{219} \textit{Ibid}, p.1201.
activities as would be suitable to them. There should be adequate number of training institutions and polytechnics.\textsuperscript{220} She lamented that even after receiving training from renowned institutions, some of them remained unemployed. So, according to her, the focus should be on the problem of employment for every student after his preliminary training; and only those who had the capacity to benefit from higher education should move on for university education.\textsuperscript{221}

About the welfare of the children, her opinion was that they should receive the first priority in every sphere. Amongst children, the slum children, she suggested should receive the maximum attention, as there was a chance of them becoming juvenile delinquents.\textsuperscript{222} Renuka was rather disappointed by the picture of women’s education. She pointed out that even at the elementary level schools in some of the progressive states the number of girls was one-third of the number of boys. Moreover, in many places, there were no secondary schools for the girls. In such cases, girls had to be sent to co-educational schools and female teachers had to be attached to them.\textsuperscript{223} She was always in favour of a better pay scale for the teachers because teaching profession required best talents. She therefore asked the members: ‘But how can we expect that that

\textsuperscript{220} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.40, no.21-30, 1960, p.6062.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid, p.6063.

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid, p.6065.

\textsuperscript{223} Ibid, p.6066.
talent will be coming to the teaching profession if the teachers are expected to live in
noble ideals alone but not on bread?224

When the refugee problem in West Bengal was discussed in the Lok Sabha, she did not hesitate to blame the Central policy formulated by the leaders belonging to her own party. She termed the policies with regard to the refugees as disastrous. On 12th April, 1960, she informed the house that huge amount was spent on repairing military hutments year after year, yet the Central Ministry failed to put up something more permanent.225 Secondly, the central policy of giving priority to camp refugees had a disastrous impact. According to her it was rather a short-sighted policy and encouraged the refugees who came later, to go into the camps, displaying no initiative.226 Not only that, in order to deal with T.B. cases amongst the non-camp refugees, the State Government had asked for funds but this too was reduced.227 The Central government was also haphazard in its planning for rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. The first important thing for the refugees sent to a new place was that there should be adequate arrangement for drinking water. But some of the tube wells were not working. She also refuted the charge that the East Bengalee refugees were reluctant to go outside West

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226 Ibid, p.11241.
Bengal. She termed this charge as a ‘bluff,’ because the refugees had already gone to the Andamans.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.40, no.41-50, 1960, p.11246.}

Concerned about the welfare of the children, Renuka while welcoming The Children Bill in the Lok Sabha, on 28\textsuperscript{th} April, 1960 stressed on the fact that the causes which gave rise to delinquency amongst children should be eliminated. She urged that special care had to be given to the slum children, who owing to their environmental circumstances had a tendency to become delinquents. So, more focus was to be given to prevention, rather than cure.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.43, no.51-60, 1960, pp.14523-14524.} The homes where the delinquent children would be sent to must have trained personnel, so that the delinquents were given proper training. Regarding the primary education for the children, she pointed out on the floor of the house that the third plan had aimed to bring the children aged between six and eleven years into schools, but the plan did not lay equal stress on quality content of the education. Besides education without any health education and proper mid-day meal was useless. She emphasised that blindness in a large number of children was caused due to lack of proper nutrition, but in the third plan, no provision had been made for tackling this problem or for providing mid-day meal.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.52, no.21-30, 1961, p.6014.} She firmly believed that providing one meal would help the cause of compulsory primary education for children aged between 6 and 11 years. In order to enforce compulsory primary education, it was essential to get the willing co-operation of the parents and of the village community and legal enactment
alone would not be of much help. In order to give quality education, proper training of the teachers was absolutely necessary. She reiterated her demand for bringing improvement in the status and salary of the teachers. She also reminded the house that it was only the sectors like health and education which should have received attention first when pruning of a plan was taking place. So, she appealed to the Planning Commission and the Finance Ministry not to curtail vital portions like education and health and welfare schemes through which alone the country could build up the youth force who ultimately would gear up the nation to forge ahead. She strongly supported the scheme of national service on a compulsory basis for the youth. She believed that the youth received only theoretical training in the colleges and universities which did not equip them to face the realities of life. Therefore, before they were granted their degrees, the youth could be involved for a year into services which were required to re-building the nation. This way, she believed, the youth would be ‘... enthused in the developmental plans, so that in whatever walk of life they may be called upon to earn their living, they will be able to do the work in a proper manner.’

On the floor of the house on 8th August, 1962, she supported the Adoptions and Maintenance (Amendment) Bill which aimed to delink religion from the identity of an abandoned child. Arguing in its favour, she went back to the days of the

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famine in 1943, when the AIWC picked up children and sent them to homes. But then the orphaned, abandoned children could not be given for adoption because the religion of the child was unknown. There were many willing parents to adopt those children, but religion stood in the way.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.6, no.1-10, 1962, p.747.}

Referring to the food situation in the country in 1963 she briefed the house that till such time when the incomes of those who were below the standard of living went up, the government would have to provide essential commodities such as cloth, food, transport, education and health facilities at subsidized rates.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.23, no.11-20, 1963, p.2567.} She also believed that India should follow a food policy by which there could be an equal distribution of the available food.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.51, no.11-20, 1966, p.5355.} In 1964 when communal disturbances started in East Pakistan, she suggested the following steps:

Firstly, the restrictions imposed on the migration of the East Bengal Hindu minority have to be lifted, secondly, initiative in rehabilitation have to be encouraged as far as possible; and the new procedures and policies have to be adopted in order to cope with the problem of rehabilitation and finally, the problems of the East Bengal minorities be shared with the U.N so that world attention could be focussed on it and a solution found out.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.25, no.1-10, 1964, p.307.}

In the same year, she pointed out that although huge sums have been spent on DDA, it
had not produced commensurate returns. She accused the Central Government of spending extra funds on TA bills when the actual amenities or services necessary for the refugees in Dandakaranya were denied.239 She was also in favour of taking stern action against those who were involved in food adulteration. Regarding the ban on cow slaughter, her argument was that normally, there should not be any interference with others’ food habits. But it was also important to remember that the cows offering milk would have be spared from slaughter as they were useful and necessary.240

About the welfare of the backward sections, she felt that the amount allotted under the third plan in this regard was by no means a very insubstantial amount for a country like India. But unfortunately the funds were not utilised in the way it should register the desired results.241 With regard to the Scheduled Tribes, she pointed out that there were different layers amongst this community. It was the topmost layer who received the maximum benefit and the lowest layer remained the most backward amongst themselves.242 She also cautioned the house that untouchability was abolished under the constitution but it still prevailed in some parts of the country. Therefore what was necessary was a change in social mentality. Apart from reservations for the S.C and the S.T communities in the services and in legislatures, she felt what was more important,
was to integrate these people with the rest of India.\textsuperscript{243} That is why she opposed the scheme for separate hostels for the backward communities. There were, indeed, very few hostels where children of all communities could stay together. She commented: ‘Unless the welfare service standards are equal for all citizens, we cannot accept that we can go ahead.’\textsuperscript{244}

\section*{2.11 Conclusion}

As a parliamentarian, it can be safely argued that she was able to rise above party-politics to express her own views. But her independent line of thinking was not to the liking of her party. When elections came in 1967, she was not nominated by her party. She wrote:

\begin{quote}
Since the time of Mahatma Gandhi I had always been able to express my view point even when I differed with the party and sometimes won my point also. I continued to take this independent line but this obviously was not relished and so I had to suffer the consequences.\textsuperscript{245}
\end{quote}

Indira Gandhi counseled her to join the Parliament through the Rajya Sabha. But she declined as she felt that she had worked for her constituency for years and therefore she should not be deprived of her constituency. Renuka had always opposed the concept of an upper house on the grounds that it was unrepresentative and expensive for a poor country like India.

\textsuperscript{243} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.52, no.21-30, 1961, p.4788.
\textsuperscript{244} \textit{Ibid}, p.4791.
\textsuperscript{245} \textit{My Reminiscences}, p.209.
As a social activist, she never claimed herself to be a pioneer. But in one respect she claimed herself to be a proud pioneer. She wrote:

It is the fact that without breaking up my married life I established the right of the wives of those in public services to follow their own independent career in political or public life. This establishes that no category of women can be treated as appendages to their husbands.\textsuperscript{246}

She was feminist in the sense that she believed that women should get all the opportunities to develop themselves fully, but she did not believe in creating a division between men and women. Rather, she felt, they were complementary to each other. She also believed that women's organisations should not confine themselves only with the welfare of women, but should also concentrate on the uplift and welfare of the entire society. Her role as Minister was not above criticism. But in her defence it can be argued that the complex nature of the refugee problem and lack of central support did not permit her to perform in her full capacity. She was also flexible in her ideas. During the Constituent Assembly days, she opposed any reservation for women. But with time she dropped her opposition to it. Some of her ideas were also put into practice. The mid-day meal scheme running all over India in all government supported schools till date is a testimony to the fact. She would have been happy to know that teachers in India now receive a much better pay packet than what they used to get during her times. She lost many of her near and dear ones prematurely, but the zeal to serve the society, which she inherited from her grandmother and mother was never failing, till her death in 1997.

\textsuperscript{246} My Reminiscences, p.245.