

The Establishment of Refugee Squatters' Colonies and Camps in Calcutta: 1948 – 1950: An Assessment of Refugee Movement in West Bengal

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Abstract

In this article, we shall discuss how the East Pakistani refugees established camps and squatters' colonies in Calcutta, during the years 1948 – 1950. The colonies struggled to form their own homes. Inside the colonies, they created roads, schools, medical facilities, markets, and a type of sanitation. The colonists were successful in getting employment in the nearby areas. Despite that, the camp life was in a way purgatory-like in nature. The government did not provide any proper sanitation or medical aid. Moreover in the camps, the refugees depended on government doles. These refugees could not provide for themselves any proper livelihood. In this article, we shall discuss the plight of the refugees in camps and colonies in details. The role of women refugees has been excluded from this present article.

Keywords: Calcutta, East Bengal, Economy, Refugees, Sanitation, Squatters' colonies.

Introduction

The historians of partition of India broadly acknowledged that the demographic upheaval that followed in its wake permanently altered the faces of the capital cities of South Asia. Karachi and Dhaka were transformed overnight into national capitals. Delhi changed from a Mughal city to a Punjabi one; while Calcutta which had been always a city of migrants, rapidly earned the character of 'city of refugees'. It is not the fact that the refugees from East Pakistan exceeded the number of locals in Calcutta.¹

The problems of the city of Calcutta were aggravated by lack of the space for the refugees. The governments provided accommodation to the refugees in Delhi and Karachi. But unlike these two cities, the Congress government at the center was unable to transfer the evacuee properties to the refugees. It also could not use it as compensation pool for the purpose of rehabilitation. In addition to it, the crises accompanied Calcutta because of the theory of saturation that gained currency in West Bengal. The refugees in Calcutta received no aid or assistance from the government. Further there was no provision of large scale housing in Calcutta was made for the refugees. Thus in the post-partition India, Calcutta was evidently the only metropolis which received large number of refugees but the government had no real plan for rehabilitation. This combination of factors formed the background of the unauthorized occupation of land.² In the next sections we shall discuss the 'forceful' occupation of the lands by the refugees and the growth of squatters' colonies in West Bengal.

Existing Historiography

Hironmoy Bandyopadhyay's book, *Udbastu* stressed upon the refugees' life in West Bengal.³ Prafulla K. Chakrabarti's book *The Marginal Men* may be treated as the pioneering work in the field of refugee studies of West Bengal.⁴ Nilanajana Chatterjee's article 'The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson of Survival' focused

¹Uditi Sen, 'Building Bijoygarh, A Micro History of Refugees, Squatting in Calcutta', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (eds.), *Calcutta, the Stormy Decades*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2015, pp.407 – 433. Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee, Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p.164.

² Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee, Forging the Indian Nation After Partition*, p.164.

³Hironmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, Kolkata:Sahitya Samsad, 1970.

⁴Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men, Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Kalyani: Lumier, 1990.

on the nature of exodus and rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees.⁵ Her subsequent work focused on rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees.⁶ We must mention Urbashi Butalia's work *The Other Side of Silence*, focused on the women and the Punjab refugees.⁷ The next important work *Refugees in West Bengal*, was a compilation of articles. It focused on the refugees in West Bengal.⁸ T Y Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya edited work *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, focused on the refugee identity.⁹ Gargi Chakraborty's book *Coming out of Partition*, dealt with the refugee women.¹⁰ *Spoils of Partition* by Joya Chatterji must be mentioned here. It has referred to the migration of East Bengal refugees.¹¹ Joshodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta edited book *Trauma and Triumph*, focused on partition related problems, especially in case of women.¹² Sekhar Bandyopadhyay penned the book *Decolonization* which referred to some aspects of refugee life.¹³ Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited work *Calcutta the Stormy Decades* is a compilation of articles focusing on the developments in pre and post-partition days in Calcutta.¹⁴ Debjani Sengupta focused mainly on partition as reflected in literature in her work *The Partition of Bengal*.¹⁵ Shibaji Pratim Bose wrote the article 'Mobilising the Migrants' focused on the role of United Central Refugee Council and other related developments in Calcutta.¹⁶ The present author also penned her book *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, which mostly dealt with the camp refugees of West Bengal.¹⁷

Proposed Intervention and Objectives

In this article, the present author would like to depict the picture of refugee life in camps and colonies of West Bengal. The earlier scholars had focused mostly on the refugee colonies of West Bengal. The present author had worked on the refugee camps. In this article, I have tried to show that the government of West Bengal had opened a number of refugee camps. However instead of rehabilitating these hapless refugees, the government intended to disperse them to other parts of India where the terrain and climate were unfriendly and unknown; the local people were hostile. The refugees kept coming back to West Bengal. In another book, the present author had shown how caste played a role in dispersing the refugees. The author would like to show that there were lands available in West Bengal. Some of the barracks belonged to the Americans and some of the lands belonged to the evacuees, Muslims and the *zamindars*. After multiple agitations and demands for proper rehabilitation the refugees had to forcibly occupy some of these lands and construct colonies. Some of the political parties assisted them. But despite constructing these colonies with their efforts, their lives did not get better. They were not given compensation or even citizenship. They remained on the fringes.

Methodology

The present writer has used a number of sources. Newspapers and archival data (Intelligence Bureau) from the West Bengal State Archives have been abundantly used. Secondary sources and unpublished theses too have been utilized in this article. The author has been able to shift away from the earlier works.

⁵Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson of Survival' in S.Chaudhuri ed., *Calcutta the Living City*, Vol. 2, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁶Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children, East Bengal Refugees, Politics of Rehabilitation', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Brown University, 1992.

⁷Urbashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 1998.

⁸Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *The Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practises and Contested Identities*, Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group, 2000.

⁹T Y Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (eds.), *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London New York: Routledge, 2000.

¹⁰Gargi Chakraborty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women in Bengal*, New Delhi Calcutta: Bluejay Books, 2005.

¹¹Joya Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition, Bengal and India, 1947 – 1967*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹²Joshodhara Bagchi, and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, *Trauma and the Triumph, Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Vol. 2, Kolkata: Stree, 2009.

¹³Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia, Meaning of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947 – 1952*, London New York: Routledge, 2009.

¹⁴Tanika Sarkar, and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (eds.), *Calcutta the Stormy Decades*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2015.

¹⁵Debjani, Sengupta, *Partition of Bengal, Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

¹⁶Shibaji Pratim Bose, 'Mobilising the Migrants: The Role of UCRC in the Indian State of West Bengal – A Critical Assessment', *Vidyasagar University Journal of History*, 6, (2017 – 2018) pp. 20-31.

¹⁷Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal Camp Refugees, Dispersal and Caste Question, 1950 – 1965*, Kolkata: Sreejoni, 2019.

Refugee Life in West Bengal: The Growth of Squatters' Colonies

There were some refugees who lived on the pavements or the railway platforms. But these refugees were different from the refugees who built up squatters' colonies. The latter were mainly educated, middle-class refugees who belonged to three upper castes such as *Brahmans*, *Vaidyas*, and *Kayasthas*. Moreover they contributed to history by writing their autobiographies.

In official parlance, the term squatters' colonies indicated those unplanned colonies within the existing corporation or municipality, or close to the limits of such bodies. Inside the city limits, the squatters' colonies sprung up besides railway tracks, in marshy lands, and in abandoned World War II army barracks. The colonies were always named after great nationalist leaders such as Netaji, Gandhiji or C R Das. But the colonies lacked civil services. In 1954, the Deputy Mayor of Calcutta, rued publicity that refugee living at the Sealdah Station, the pavements nearby, and on Strand road formed a great stress on the administration. But the basic development plan for the Calcutta Municipal Development (1966 – 1986) recorded this dissatisfaction, especially regarding the crises in housing. Basic Development Plan described Calcutta as a 'metropolitan in crisis'. But West Bengal government till 1954 could not realize that urbanization of the colonies was of utmost importance.¹⁸

Now one may raise the question – who needed the squatters' colonies? The refugees who arrived after 1947, can be divided into three categories. The first group had no place to stay but was otherwise well off. Their need was a suitable accommodation. The second group was completely dependent on government aid for livelihood as well as accommodation. The third group was the largest in number whose rehabilitation could not be taken up by the government at all. These refugees were forced to establish squatters' colonies.¹⁹

We may treat this question of squatters' colonies from another vantage point. During the period 1947 – 1970, most of the refugees largely and solely established themselves with their own efforts. At first, they stayed with their friends or found roof over themselves in the camps. But these were temporary shelters. Refugees needed a place which would give them dignity and privacy. Moreover they wanted to live close to the city in order to find work there. But such space was in short supply. The government did not help them but used their dependence to force them out.²⁰

It was a complex pressure that forced many refugees to grab any free land to squat. This process started from 1948. Some of the lands privately belonged to the *zamindars*. Others were owned by the government, requisitioned from landlords, during the time of the WWII. Other lands grabbed by the refugees used to belong to the Muslim families who had fled from their homes during the riots.²¹

As the case of the Hindus in East Bengal, different Muslim families responded in different ways. Some had assets and thus could easily earn their livelihood. But leaving West Bengal for East Pakistan, was a natural factor for a large number of the Muslim families.²²

Gradually the squatters' colonies spread over Calcutta. This factor turned consolidated Metropolitan Calcutta into a cluster of discreet settlements, a single gigantic chaotic Megalopolis.²³ In the next segment we shall discuss some of the agitations that took place for the rehabilitation of the refugees within West Bengal.

Agitations and Demands for Refugee Rehabilitation within West Bengal

Soon refugee agitations started. In September 1948, veteran Congress leader Amritalal Chatterjee convened the All Bengal Refugee Conference at Naihati. He presided over the conference. In this conference, All Bengal Refugee Council of Action was formed (NVBKP). The President was Amritalal

¹⁸ Press Statement by Parliamentarians Meghnad Saha, Tridib Choudhury on the question of rehabilitation in eastern region. Dr Meghnad Saha called the colonies slums of the suburbs, cited in Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal, Fragile Borders and New Identities*, p.124.

¹⁹ Shibaji Pratim Basu, 'Mobilising the Migrants: The Role of UCRC in the Indian State of West Bengal – A Critical Assessment', p.21.

²⁰ Joya Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition*, p.141.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p.165.

²³ Pranati Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal, A Study of Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlements Within the CMD', Occasional Paper No. 55, Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta, 1983, p.36, cited by Joya Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition*, pp.143 – 144.

Chatterjee. Nagen Das was the Vice-President, Mahadev Bhattacharya was the Secretary. In the Executive Committee, most of the members were Congressmen but Communists such as Bijoy Majumder and Binoy Roy were also present. The NVBKP demanded that the refugees should be permanently rehabilitated within West Bengal. The members at this conference decided that Amritalal Chatterjee, Mahadev Bhattacharya, and Nagen Das should attend the Jaipur Session of All India Congress Committee and submit a memorandum to Prime Minister Pandit Nehru. Nehru called the refugees 'foreigners' and asked the *Karma Parisad* to talk to Foreign Bureau of All India Congress Committee. The *Karma Parisad* leaders came back from Jaipur Session, completely disillusioned. The *Karma Parisad* realized that there was no other way but to take the path of agitation. At this point, Amritalal Chatterjee resigned because he was a Congressman and a relation of Gandhiji. In December 1948, New Executive Body of NVBKP was formed. The refugees began their agitation from January 1949. Gradually Bijoy Majumder and some others began to play important roles. Some Communist Party of India students' leaders became active in NVBKP. During this period, NVBKP leaders decided that to ask the Chief Minister of West Bengal Dr Bidhan Roy to resign. The CM assured them that he would look into the question of refugee rehabilitation. But the refugees at that time were convinced that nothing could be achieved without a sustained struggle. The Anti-Communist stand was gone from their minds. A new chapter started between 14th and 31st January 1949.²⁴ NVBKP played a crucial role in this era.

The Role of NVBKP and the Forceful Occupation of Lands for the Construction of Refugee Colonies

NVBKP remained an authentic refugee organization till the beginning of 1949. In January 1949, the agitation provided them with a new awareness of power. The refugees gradually grew accustomed to communist leadership. It was the time when the refugees chose to take the daring step of occupation of unauthorized land in and around Calcutta. NVBKP leadership decided that unless the government dropped its policy of dragging, the refugees would be prepared to move along the path of forcible occupation of land. By April 1949, Bijoy Majumder had placed the proposal before the Executive Committee of NVBKP for forcible occupation of fallow lands of government and absentee landlords. The Executive Committee accepted this proposal. For the CPI forcible occupation of land, meant the establishment of liberated area. The first squatters' colony was established at Sodepur, 15 kms from Sealdah. It was called Deshbandhunagar. The second colony was established at Naihati called Bijornagar. Shahidnagar colony was established at Kanchrapara in 24 Paraganas. Thus it is evident that initially the squatters' colonies were established in northern part of Calcutta.²⁵

After their success in the north, the NVBKP turned its attention to south. But their first attempt was a failure. Gradually in 1950, Poddarnagar colony was established under their aegis. Most of the colonies were established between January and May 1950. In order to keep the colonies close to each other, *Dakshin Kolkata Shahartali Bastuhara Samhati* was formed. Sukumar Banerjee of Congress was its president. Deb Banerjee of Revolutionary Socialist Party was its secretary. RSP dominated colonies remained outside DKSBS. When United Central Refugee Council came into being, Communist Party of India leading colonies joined DKSBS.²⁶ We shall discuss the government's policy toward the refugees.

The Government's Actions: A Policy of Dispersal

Meanwhile the government of West Bengal sent 500 refugee families to the village of Jeerat, Hooghly district, in September 1950. The government intended to build a camp at Jeerat for the refugees. It was part of their dispersal policy. After 1947, educated middle-class refugees began to concentrate in Calcutta. In some respects they had some favorable situation in Calcutta. They had friends and relatives in the city. But when the number of refugees soared in Calcutta, the government took up the plan of dispersing the refugees out of Calcutta. They wanted to resettle them in empty tracks or send them outside West Bengal.

²⁴Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, pp.50 – 55.

²⁵Ibid., pp.60 – 65.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 60 – 66.

With this end in view, the refugees were sent to Jeerat. A large number of refugees depended on government dole. They thus had to succumb to the government's dispersal policy.²⁷ The refugees who came to Jeerat belonged to the privileged sector. But they were utterly destitute when they arrived to Calcutta. They had no friend or relative in the city. When they came to Jeerat, they had to clean the dense forests under the supervision of the camp super. The able-bodied men were engaged in cutting and felling the trees. The government gave them Rupee 1 as their daily wage. These refugees also received Rs. 500, a house building loan from the government. The government provided them with corrugated sheets for roofs. After the construction of the building the government also provided them with business loan of Rs. 500 to the head of the family. But the dole was stopped. There was a scarcity of agricultural land. The refugees hence could not survive by cultivating lands. Some refugees did try to find other means of employment. But only 22 of them succeeded.²⁸ There was in reality a lack of employment opportunities for the refugees in Jeerat. The government could not find the real cause of the problem faced by the refugees in Jeerat camp. Anthropologists put the blame on the refugees themselves.²⁹

The Government's Decision to Close All Camps of West Bengal

The Jeerat camp refugees could not find proper employment. Hence, the government could not rehabilitate them. On the other hand, the refugees who formed the squatters' colonies were more successful. Joya Chatterji compared the question of Azadgarh Refugee Colony, with Jeerat refugee camp. Azadgarh was a case of 'do it yourself' rehabilitation. Those who made their homes in the 'bastion of freedom' came interestingly from the same social categories like the ones who were sent to Jeerat camp. They belonged to the *Brahman, Vaidya, Rishis, Kayasthas*, and some *Namasudras*.³⁰

Azadgarh colonists migrated to West Bengal in a peaceful atmosphere. Some of them came before partition and others immediately after partition. These colonists decided that to leave East Pakistan with order and fashion. They arranged for temporary shelters with friends and relatives. They selected to rush to Calcutta. They brought some cash and valuables with them.³¹

At that time, the government was following the policy of repatriation. Later they adopted the policy to free the Metropolis from the refugees. Thus the government decided to adopt a policy of dispersal. During this period, the Azadgarh Colony was established. In its backdrop, there was the government's decision to close all camps by December 1948.³² But the refugees fought back and established colonies in various pockets of Calcutta.

The Refugees Fight Back: Their 'forcible' Occupation of Lands

The main organizers of the Azadgarh Colony stayed in the Tallyganj area of Calcutta. Since partition, they met each other at local Taltala Club. Indu Ganguly, one of the organizers, had selected a vacant 6 acre plot which was supposed to be the base of a new colony. Then supported by a group of friends, they occupied, empty plots adjacent to this 6 acre area. After the riot of 1950, Muslim families fled from this area. The refugee leaders occupied the empty Muslim property. The colonists expanded the whole area and divided it into equal size. It was decided that plots would be given to the refugees.³³

Azadgarh was one of the similar occupations by the refugees. The government's reaction was as predicted. They deployed Police forces but the refugees still rushed to occupy the plots. But some refugees failed to get any.³⁴

²⁷ Joya Chatterji, *Partition's Legacies*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2019, pp.323 – 325.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.333.

²⁹ B S Guha, *Memoir*, No.1, p.6, 1954, *Studies in the Social Tension among the Refugees from East Pakistan*, cited in Joya Chatterji, *Partition's Legacies*.

³⁰ Joya Chatterji, *Partition's Legacies*, p.338.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.339.

³² WBSA, IB File – 1838/1948.

³³ Joya Chatterji, *Partition's Legacies*, p.340.

³⁴ B S Guha, *Memoir*, No.1, p.51, 1954.

At Azadgarh, the refugee discovered sites for themselves. According to Joya Chatterji, this colony of Azadgarh was founded by 4 'ringleaders' as police described them. They were refugees of high caste, literate, but impoverished, who had met by chance. One of these men was Indu Ganguly. He was already squatting (as were 1000s of refugees) in a building on a large plot of land owned by an absentee landlord, almost certainly a Muslim. Those, who rushed to the colony, were still living on the streets by 1950. This suggests that they were lesser *Bhadralok*, class of proletariat by partition, artisans and good number of people lower down the social order. The fact was that women and younger girls were larger in number in the colony. It was a novel and striking feature. According to Chatterji, feminization of urban space had begun. But the main leaders were all male. They organized the male members and able-bodied amongst the refugees. They worked covertly at night. But early 1950, they annexed almost an acre of land. Together they made pathways, leveled agricultural lands, removed shrubs and jungles, and eventually created a colony of almost 400 plots of equal size.³⁵

White Town and Black Town: The Metamorphosis into a Settlement

In the Raj era, White Town had tended to consist of 4 separate zones, connected to each other, by large roads, each supplied by Municipality with water, electricity, roads, and sanitation services. In Calcutta, it had housed the civil lines, the key office of government – Writers' Building, the Grand Post Office, and the Belvedere (The Governor General's House), courts and Municipal, other official buildings, libraries, clubs, universities, and churches.³⁶

In contrast to the zoned White Town with its wide boulevards and green spaces, colonial Black Town appeared anarchic. Kipling was obsessed by its stench. He described it as resembling essence of corruption that had totted for the second time – the clumsy odor of blue slime.³⁷ Yet the Black Town as an arena of 'teeming, chaotic, stinking', Indian life was misleading. Calcutta and other big cities, and even smaller towns, had distinctive neighborhood (*Mahalla*), modes of organization. Members of some occupational groups inhabited these *Mahallas*. These *Mahallas* were more or less self-regulating. Calcutta's poorer neighborhoods whether Hindu or Muslim, housed distinct enclaves for particular occupational groups such as bookbinders, candle-makers, and *Kumors*. The leadership in the neighborhood was provided by a large range of *Mahalla Sirdaars* who were usually senior craftsman and heads small production units or *Karkhanas*: sometimes factory *Sirdars*. There were *Bariwalas* who made a tidy living by renting rooms. With the coming of the refugees, the most far-reaching changes took place in the areas previously known as the Black Town. In this connection, it may be mentioned, before the advent of the WWII, the Black Town areas, distinct parts of the city, were separated from each other. They were often surrounded by large inhabited lowlands, marshes, or drainage canals. According to Chatterji when the refugees came to Calcutta, Black Town morphed into the unplanned city. Three new kinds of settlements emerged within it—squatters' colonies, ghettos, and the slums.³⁸ But the plight of the refugees continued.

The Plight of the Refugees in West Bengal: The Eventual Construction of Squatters' Colonies

The refugees who stormed the cities, felt entitled to citizenship, even compensation. According to Chatterji, neither India nor Pakistan had the will or capacity to attend to them. The refugees therefore grabbed what they could wherever they could.³⁹ The refugee squatters' colony represented more than any part of the old Black Town. The case of Azadgarh Colony has been already discussed. Unlike the neighborhoods and *mahallas* of old Black Town, the people from various castes and regions lived in Azadgarh Colony. The leaders of the Azadgarh community were critical of the community. Hence they set-up elected central committee and three ward committees. They raised funds by subscription from the plot-holders—Rs.15 per plot at the start. The committee members often met to discuss the infrastructure

³⁵ Joya Chatterji, *Shadows at Noon, The South Asian Twentieth Century*, Gurugram: Penguin Viking, 2023, pp.354 – 355.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.347.

³⁷ Kipling's view was cited by Joya Chatterji in *Shadows at Noon*, p.349.

³⁸ Joya Chatterji, *Shadows at Noon*, pp.348 – 351.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.352.

needed for the community. A community doctor, a homeopath was appointed. He was paid no fees. Each household fed him each day. Similar arrangement was made for the school teacher. Quoting Chatterji 'it would mean a man of high caste; a doctor ate in the house of much 'lower' caste. Unlikely. Many sources do however speak of the breakdown of caste barriers between young men and women in refugee colonies. So the space itself seemed to galvanize social change". Apart from these two men, the rest had to fend for themselves. Most of them worked in the workshops of Calcutta and sold straw baskets and other homemade articles. Women hawked vegetables grown on their tiny plots. Some men set themselves up as electricians and mechanics.⁴⁰

Life in Azadgarh and Other Colonies

Azadgarh Colony's inhabitants did well because the colony became a part of greater Calcutta. It afforded the colonists with jobs and markets for trade. They were absorbed in the matrix as provider of cheap goods and services, to the city. By the same process, Netajinagar Colony was absorbed in the city.⁴¹ Moreover Azadgarh's success was matched by other squatting refugees.⁴² It was concluded by Joya Chatterji that colonies set up by refugees which were in effect adjuncts to the existing large, urban towns had fared better as they had been able to settle down themselves by getting gainful employment in factories, commercial farms, offices near colonies. Or they had started small business or industry established on their own. Many of the colonies were situated in the vicinity of Calcutta. It is clear that refugees did best in the places where they had settled of their own volition.⁴³

One of the most important squatters' colonies was Bijoygarh Colony. Prafulla K.Chakrabarti called the squatters' colonies *Jobordokhol* colonies. Bijoygarh Colony was founded in 1948. Udit Sen dealt with the question of Bijoygarh Colony in her article 'Building Bijoygarh'⁴⁴ The status of Bijoygarh Colony as a *Jobordokhol* colony is a disputed one. Chakrabarti did not consider it as a *Jobordokhol* colony. Later others also followed him. But many residents of the said colony, claimed it to be the first successful squatters' colony in the southern suburbs of Calcutta. It became a role model and an inspiration for the refugees. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, as Principal Secretary and Chief Commissioner of Rehabilitation Department spoke about Bijoygarh from two vantage points. According to him, it differed from other squatters' colonies. According to Bandyopadhyay, the families of Bijoygarh, under the leadership of Santosh Dutta, proposed establishing a colony to the government. There were some indications that they got consent from the authorities. Hence, it cannot be considered as an ordinary *Jobordokhol* colony.⁴⁵ The Bijoygarh Colony had established schools in the larger military halls. The colony had got areas for parks and playgrounds. For this, Bandyopadhyay had deep respect for the Colony. According to Chakrabarti, Bijoygarh got verbal consent from the government.⁴⁶ According to Indubaran Ganguly, Bijoygarh was far from being a Squatters' colony. It was closer to being a government sponsored colony. The freedom fighter Santosh Dutta, liaise with the Chief Minister and the residents of Bijoygarh Colony.⁴⁷ The refugees of the Squatters' colonies needed to associate with politics. The early leaders were largely the supporters of Congress Party, various socialist parties, such as Revolutionary Socialist Party, Socialist Party and Praja Socialist Party. Gradually the squatters' colonies had to take more radicalism in the sphere of refugee organization. As a result, typical squatter colony gained a particular meaning. The squatters' colonies were

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 354 – 355.

⁴¹ Manash Roy, 'Growing up Refugees', in P K Bose ed., *Refugees in West Bengal Institutional Process and Contested Identities*, Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group, 2000.

⁴² D. Sinha, 'The foundation of Refugee Market: A Study of Self Reliance' in P. K Bose ed., *Refugees in West Bengal Institutional Process and Contested Identities*,. See also, A Sen, 'Life and Labour in Squatters' Colony', Occasional Paper No.138, Calcutta, Centre for Studies in Social Science, Memograph, 1992. Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children: 'East Bengal Refugees and Politics of Rehabilitation', 1992.

⁴³ Joya Chatterji, *Partition's Legacies*, p.351.

⁴⁴ Udit Sen, 'Building Bijoygarh, A Micro-history of Refugee Squatting in Calcutta', p.410 – 411.

⁴⁵ Hironmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, p.123.

⁴⁶ Prafulla K.Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, p.36.

⁴⁷ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colony Smriti: Udbastu Colony Pratisthar Gorar Kotha(1948 – 1954)*, Calcutta: No Publisher's Name Available, 1997, pp.28 – 29.

expected to be the hotbeds of anti-establishment agitation. But Bijoygarh led by Santosh Dutta held back from overt opposition to Congress.⁴⁸

Dakhin Kolkata Shohortoli Bastuhara Sanhati was founded at a conference of refugee leaders from squatters' colonies in the southern suburbs of Calcutta, held in April 1950. The representatives of Bijoygarh Colony attended this conference. But they did not agree to be part of the organization. Santosh Dutta expressed that Bijoygarh Colony would not be able to agree with the method of agitation taken up by *DKSBS*. By virtue of being the leading colony, Bijoygarh became a source of inspiration for other colonies. Other colonies received benefits from the institution, amenities, such as schools, markets, from Bijoygarh. But Bijoygarh leaders kept itself aloof from the contemporary refugee organization and refused to participate in the movement for regularization. For this reason, the relationship between Bijoygarh and other colonies became bitter. In the context of contemporary refugee politics, the position of Bijoygarh can be explained. The other colonies fought against the establishment and there were cases of martyrdom and sacrifices to legalize the squatters' colonies. Hence, the name of Bijoygarh was dismissed as a squatters' colony on account of its proximity to congress government.⁴⁹

From the history of Jadavpur camp to eventual transformation into Bijoygarh colony, is characterized by constant attention by the refugees to obtain government aid, or legal recognition. The reminiscences of the residents suggest that residents were not marginal to the political and bureaucratic order of West Bengal. It was their familiarities with the system that made the founders, to give permanence to their illegal settlement.⁵⁰

In spite of the fact that squatters' colonies were established by the educated middle-class, it was often found that the colonies were guided by different political colors. But their success depended on their own efforts. The colonists established their colonies in the areas which were near markets and offices. These centers provided them with livelihood. But the camp dwellers differed in this respect. Joya Chatterji showed the difference. Moreover the camps of Calcutta revealed how the camp dwellers depended on government and suffered.

The Sufferings of the Refugees in West Bengal

The refugees from East Pakistan came to Sealdah Railway Station and suffered a lot. The refugee organizations repeatedly demanded shifting of the refugees to the camps.⁵¹ The government took no measures to deal with the refugees in a humane manner. But the influx increased from the second half of 1948. Gradually the government established camps. The government opened 389 relief camps in various districts of West Bengal.⁵² Mainly four camps were established in Calcutta— Ghushuri, Kahsipur, Ultodanga and Daspara.⁵³

According to Nilanjana Chatterjee, although accommodation, water-supply, electricity, and sanitation were free, but all these were more on paper than in reality. Interviews with the camp refugees and their autobiographical works testified the fact that sanitation and health were largely neglected in the camps.⁵⁴ Jatin Saha's (a camp inmate) experience at Ultodanga camp revealed that the government had in fact neglected the camp life. The camp was totally polluted. The condition of the courtyard and the sole tube-well area were in such condition that anyone who wanted to use the lavatory had to walk on the human excreta.⁵⁵ In the month of July 1950, a large number of people died in the camp, including a pregnant

⁴⁸Uditi Sen, 'Building Bijoygarh, A Micro-history of Refugee Squatting in Calcutta', p.418.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp.418 – 421.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.423.

⁵¹ Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal*, p.41.

⁵² Report of Relief Department, 1989.

⁵³ WBSA, IB Files.

⁵⁴ Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Midnight's Unwanted Children', p. 171.

⁵⁵ Swati Sengupta Chatterjee, *West Bengal*, p.44.

woman and infants. Students of Campbell Hospital treated 7000 – 8000 people on 16 and 19th July 1950.⁵⁶ Lilabati Dutta of Kashipur camp recalled that child-death was extremely high in these camps.⁵⁷

Manindra Biswas, the pediatrician commented ‘what help can you provide to them? With no air to breathe, you can provide them with air, and can you provide them with a place to live. They are dying of suffocation’. It is worth mentioning that Biswas was a famous pediatrician. There were 5000 inmates in the Kashipur camp but only three doctors were there to look after them. Manikuntala Sen raised the issue of child mortality at the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. She pointed out that in 1950 580 died, of which seventy five were from Kashipur camp and twenty five were from Maniktala.⁵⁸

According to a report of the newspaper *Swadhinata* (Independence) 1951 – 14 and 17 January 1951, fifty nine inmates including children died at Ghushuri camp. At the Daspara camp, 15-20 tuberculosis patients were confined to a three storied building along with other families. Only a form of sheet separated the rest from the infected.⁵⁹ There were a large number of TB patients in the Ghushuri camp. The government had withdrawn the dole of the refugees in order to starve the refugees and to let the TB patients die without any medicine and food.⁶⁰

Concluding Arguments

The earlier scholars had worked mostly on the Punjabi refugees from West Pakistan. Some of them had focused on the women refugees. For the want of space, I had to leave out the role of women in constructing the squatters’ colonies in West Bengal. Scholars such as Prafulla K. Chakrabarti had worked on the camps of West Bengal. Some of the eminent scholars had dealt with the government’s rehabilitation policy toward the refugees. But I have focused on the role played by the refugees in curving out a space for themselves in the abandoned lands and how they constructed squatters’ colonies there. I have also mentioned the role played by NVBKP, CPI, DKSBS, and UCRC. I have also mentioned how the government tried to force them out and how they used the police forces to do so.

From the primary sources, it is visible that the colonies struggled and formed their own homes. Inside the colonies, there were roads, schools, medical facilities, markets, and a type of sanitation. The most interesting factor here was that the colonists were successful in getting employment in the nearby areas. However the camp life was in a way hellish in nature. There was no proper sanitation or medical aid. Moreover in the camps, the refugees depended on government doles. These refugees could not provide for themselves any proper livelihood. The government failed to properly assist them in their endeavors. In fact they withdrew the doles as a coercive measure. Thus these refugees remained on the fringes of the society for a long period of time.

⁵⁶ Joya Chatterji, *Spoils of Partition*, pp.10 – 15.

⁵⁷Subhasri Ghosh, and Debjani Dutta, ‘Forgotten Voices in PL Camps’ in Bagchi and Dasgupta (eds.), *Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern Region, Vol. II*, Kolkata: Stree, 2003, p.199.

⁵⁸Tusshar Sinha, *Maranjayi Sangrame Bastuhara* (Refugees’ Struggle for Survival), Kolkata:Dasgupta’s, 1999, pp.23 – 24.

⁵⁹ *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, Dated 23 August 1957.

⁶⁰ West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol. 20, No.1, 1958, p.590.