

**BANGLADESH LIBERATION AND REFUGEE INFLUX IN WESTERN ASSAM: STATE
RESPONSE AND RELIEF MEASURES****Dr. Habib Fazlul Basid**Assistant Professor,
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salmayasmin220@gmail.com**Abstract**

This research paper deals with the refugee influx from the East Pakistan to the different areas of western Assam during Bangladesh liberation movement. In case of Bangladeshi refugees, the Indian states responded with alacrity in order to come to terms with a grave crisis. During the Bangladesh liberation war with West Pakistan, an estimated ten million people of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) crossed the international border, fled the country and took refuge in India particularly in the Indian states of West Bengal and Indian North East region, especially Tripura and Assam. The Government of Assam's approach towards these refugees in terms of providing shelter and relief will be of prime emphasis in this research paper.

Keywords: Migration, relief, refugee, demonstration etc.

Partition of India on the basis of religion on August 1947 and the efforts to create homogenous nations made some subjects into minority class who find themselves 'wrong' side of the newly demarcated border or in a wrong nation with wrong identity, ethnicity, culture and religion. The minorities were compelled to feel that they should belong somewhere else and they should be nationals of other nations which was made up for people like them with the majority of the people of their community. They can no longer call the 'New Nation' as their own, with the choice of having to seek shelter somewhere else or stay in a nation where they are as second-class citizen. Millions of peoples were forced across frontiers and compelled them to become refugees in the other nations.ⁱ The partition of Indian sub-continent left millions of Hindus, Muslims, Shikhs on the wrong side of the fence and led to an exodus of people from Pakistan to India and India to Pakistan. Many millions of Hindus crossed Indo-Pak Eastern border and entered into West Bengal, Assam and Tripura between August and December 1947. The reign of terror unleashed by the Pakistani forces and the large-scale killings, rape and arson in the wake of the Liberation Movement of Bangladesh led to the flight of more than 9 million peoples to the different states of India and 3 to 10 lakh peoples are reported to have been killed.ⁱⁱ The government of India adopted an open-door policy regarding the East Pakistani migrants and immediately instructed to the Government of Assam, West Bengal and Tripura to provide shelter to the refugees unconditionally. From 15th March to 15th December 1971 almost 9.891 million East Pakistani refugees entered into the

different states of India.

In the first phase, it was envisaged that a population of about one lakh of people will be taking shelter in the state of Assam and Meghalaya. The government took every possible step to provide immediate assistance to the refugees in the camps. Arrangements were made for the regular supply of essential commodities and the supply of wheat, rice, pulse, salt, edible oil, match boxes were made available through the Food Corporation of India. The new depots had opened at Goalpara, Shillong, Tura, Kokrajhar, Dhubri and Karimganj in the state of Assam. ⁱⁱⁱSteps had been taken to set 20 transit camps in the different parts of the states. In 20 transit camps, the migrants will be received and given immediate relief including cooked food and then they will be dispersed to the relief camps within 12 hours. ^{iv} But it was due to the heavy flood in the end of the year of 1971 that the regular supply of the essential food stokes to Assam, Tripura and North Bengal got seriously disrupted. Therefore the supply of the most important items like the medicine and food were made available through the airlifting for three months in the refugee camps of Assam, Meghalaya, North Bengal and Tripura. ^v

Table- C.7

Expenditure of Transit Camps in 1971

Purpose	Rate in Rupees	Number of refugee in 20 camps	Rate x Quantity
Feeding Charge	1.5	100000	RS = 150,000
Structure	2500 per camp	20 camps	RS = 50,000
Total			RS = 200,000

Source- Government of Assam: Home Confidential Department: *Note on the Influx of Refugees from East Bengal into Assam in 1971*, File No- PLB-313/ 1971, Part- (1), Assam State Archive, p. 1.

Table- C.8

Relief Camp in Assam and Meghalaya in 1971

State of Assam and Meghalaya									
Cachar		U K and J Hills		Garo Hills		Goalpara		Mizo Hills	
1	Patherkandi	1	Balat	1	Dalu	1	Golakganj	1	Marpura
2	Fakir Bazar	2	Dawki	2	Baghmara	2	Agomoni	2	Demagiri
3	Mahakal	3	Ukiang	3	Ampati				
4	Kaliganj	4	Shella	4	Mahendraganj				
5	Gumra	5	Gumakhat						

Source- Government of Assam: Home Confidential Department: *Note on the Influx of Refugees from East Bengal into Assam in 1971*, File No- PLB-313/ 1971, Part-1, p. 1.

The government fixed the rate of monetary ceiling for the supply of food grains to the refugees in the camp at the rate of 1 rupee for adults per head per day, 60 *paise* for children and 20 *paise* for every refugee children under the age of one year. For the children bellow one year of age baby foods and milk powders were supplied out of the funds provided by the international volunteer organisations. ^{vi} The monetary ceiling for clothing was also provided to the refugees at the scale of 14 rupees and 10 rupees for adults and children respectively. Arrangements were made for the supply of cotton and woollen

blankets to the refugees in the camps at the rate of 1 blanket per adult and maximum 3 blankets per family. In the given billow table amount of ration under this monetary ceiling was given.^{vii}

Table- C.9

Amount of Ration for refugees in Camp 1971

Food Items	for Adults, (in grams)	for Children
Pulse	100	50
Wheat	100	50
Rice	300	150
Sugar	25	15
Oil	25	12

Source: Samadar Ranvir (Ed) 2003: Ibid: p. 227.

All the existing vehicles of the Relief Rehabilitation Department were mostly out order and needed to perfect repair which would bear a cost of rupees 75,000/-. Every relief camp required one truck, one Jeep and one pick-up van for the purpose of transporting goods for the camps. This includes requirements of the police and administrative stuffs. Therefore, the Director of Health Service had to make arrangements for the appointment of the additional persons to administer the whole process. The cost of these additional vehicles (one truck, one jeep and one van per camp) involved 50,000+25,000+30,000 x 20 (camps) = RS 21.4 lakhs.^{viii}

Medical care facility had been provided to the refugees sheltered in all the border estates of the East Pakistan. In all the border estates (West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya, Assam and Bihar) the total number of functioning camp was 940 where the number of in-camp refugees of current influx was 5703000. Detail statistic has been given bellow.^{ix}

Table – C.11

Refugees of Current Influx Accommodated in State Camps and Living Outside
(Up to August 1971)

States	Number of Camps Functioning	In Camps	Outside Camps	Total
West Bengal	615	4367000	1971000	6338000
Assam	28	174000	80000	254000
Meghalaya	20	341000	49000	39000
Tripura	273	812000	484000	1296000
Bihar	4	9000		
Total	940	5703000	2584000	8287000

Source- Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation Department of Rehabilitation Branch: Relief Rehabilitation Department: *Statistical Digest on the Influx of Refugees from East Bengal into India till 31 August 1971*: 1971: File No-RHR-130/71: Part-I: 25A Shakespeara Sarani Calcutta-17: p. 7.

The government instructed the Central Government medical store depots at Guwahati and Calcutta to store sufficient number of drugs and vaccines so that it could be used in case of medical emergency.^x Accordingly the medical depots at Guwahati stored sufficient quantities of anti-malaria drugs, anti-

Cholera vaccines, bleaching powders and necessary antibiotics in order to provide adequate medical care facilities to the refugees.^{xi} To facilitate the health care service, four sub medical stores were opened at Karimganj, Agartala, Tura and Dhubri of Goalpara district. In order to solve the problem of the shortage of the doctors and paramedical personnel, State public health organizations appointed good number of doctors and other medical officers.^{xii}

Medical care facilities also provided to the expected mothers.^{xiii} The supply of milk to the mothers was made available through some of the voluntary organisations like the Indian Red Cross Society. For the infant's good milk and baby foods were provided. In spite of all such medical care, a terrible cholera outbreak spread in the different camps of the state which caused the life of thousands of refugee in the September month of the 1971. There were reports of 46,751 cases of Cholera all over the country by the September 20th of 1971 and among them 5,835 were reported to had been died in the different health care centers, hospitals and the refugee camps.^{xiv} Considering the problem of malnutrition among the refugee children in the camps, government of India launched a scheme called Operation Life Line. Under this scheme the government looked after the life of the 2 million refugee children at the cost of about 3 crore rupees.^{xv}

Conclusion:

Government of India undertook humanitarian approach towards the refugees of East Pakistan who were victimised by the military junta of West Pakistan. Even the partition refugees of 1947 were also offered welcome for their settlement on the soils of India. Government camps were established to provide them immediate shelter. Thousands of refugees were sheltered on the different government camps of western Assam. On July 18, 1950 the Rehabilitation Minister to the Government of Assam Matiram Borah, visited Goalpara to study the problem of a planned rehabilitation of refugees in Assam. He visited the refugee camps situated both in Goalpara and Dhubri and made a discussion with the representatives of Goalpara town regarding the various problems of the displaced peoples in the district.^{xvi} He further says: *"The Hindu refugees from East Pakistan had been settled in the lands since vacated by the Muslim emigrants during the Communal Riots of 1950. The later returned earlier than was expected. The majority of Hindu refugees were not inclined to go back to East Pakistan and they already cultivated and grew jute and paddy at places or tended and harvested sessional crops since abandoned by the Muslims during the disturbances. Therefore, distribution of share of crops between the real owners and occupiers of land as well as planned settlement of abandoned holdings and the reinstatement of the claimants had created good deal of difficulties."*¹⁷

Baidenath Mookharjee, former Finance Minister of Assam in his presidential address to the 14th annual session of Assam Chamber of Commerce held in Shillong on July 1 1950 said that:

"So long Pakistan continued to remain as a theocratic State, Hindus could have no feelings of security there. Although the Assamese peoples are not naturally like to welcome these Hindu migrants but one thing cannot be overlooked that these migrants have not come to invade Assam as some other people did few years back, under the patronage of the League Government when the country was not partitioned. They have come to live in Assam as peaceful citizen and to call Assam as their homeland. They have not come to wrest power or to encroach Assam's property. They have not come to destroy Assam's culture and language. In return they will improve the economy of Assam and will contribute in the development of Assam. Though it would be difficult to accommodate these peoples in the economy

of the state but in forming an economic policy the cause of these marooned people can be kept in view”.^{xvii}

In spite of the Government efforts to the rehabilitation of the refugees, there were frequent protests from the refugees demanding their basic needs. The All Assam Refugee Association played a very important role in solving certain problems faced by the refugees in different areas of the State.^{xviii} On 11 August, 1956 a large number of East Pakistani refugees demonstrated at the Dhubri, shouting slogan for their demand of proper rehabilitation. Later AARA president Ramkrishna Bose held meeting with the demonstrators and presented their demands to the Governments.^{xix} On 18 August another meeting was held by AARA at Bongaigaon subdivision with same objectives of discussing certain issues related to the refugees of Goalpara.^{xx}

A memorandum had been submitted by the Arabinda Gosh, General Secretary and Kalipada Ghatak, Secretary, AARA to the Government of Assam on July 5, 1955 regarding the rehabilitation of the refugees settled in the Goalpara district. It was pointed out in the memorandum that the Government of Assam was not following the policy of the Central Government in organizing refugee colonies on a big scale, comprising the rehabilitation of 1000 families in each colony. Most of the colonies had been setup in the places where the refugees could not adjust themselves to the culture, atmosphere, linguistic and the social structure of the surrounding places.^{xxi} Agricultural colonies had been set up in the dense forest areas where there was no availability of water supply. The agricultural colony of Bishnapur under Bijni police station was situated in a dense forest without any source of water. The business colony of Balijana had been organized in a place which was not a commercially important place.^{xxii} The demonstrations by the refugees indicate about the inadequate relief and economic assistance from the government in solving the issue of the refugee rehabilitation in post-colonial times.

Notes and References:

ⁱ Chatterji Joya, *Spoils of Partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*: 2007, New Delhi, p. 105.

ⁱⁱ Roy A. C., *International Relations since 1919*, The World Press Private Limited, Kolkata, Reprinted 2010, p. 472.

ⁱⁱⁱ Samaddar Ranabir (Ed), *Refugees and the State, Practices of Asylum and Care in India 1947-2000*, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2003, Samaddar, p. 226.

^{iv} Government of Assam: Home Confidential Department: *Note on the Influx of Refugees from East Bengal into Assam in 1971*: Assam State Archive, 1971 File No- PLB-313/ 1971, Part- (1), 1.

^v Samaddar Ranbir (Ed), *op.cit.*, p. 226.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 227.

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} Government of Assam: Home Confidential Department, File No- PLB-313/ 1971, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

^{ix} Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation Department of Rehabilitation Branch Secretariat: Relief Rehabilitation Department: *Statistical Digest on the Influx of Refugees from East Bengal 1971*, Calcutta, 1971, File No-RHR-130/71: Part-I, p. 10.

^x Samaddar Ranbir (Ed), *op.cit.*, p. 228.

^{xi} *Ibid.*

xii *Ibid.*

xiii *Ibid.*, p. 228.

xiv *Ibid.*

xv *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹⁶ *Hindusthan Standard; Assam News Section*; Calcutta; July 21, 1950; p. 3.

¹⁷ *Hindusthan Standard*; July 3; 1950, Monday: p. 3.

¹⁸ *Hindusthan Standard*: 1951: December 19: p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1956, August 15, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, August 18, p. 3.

²¹ *Hindusthan Standard*; July 6: Assam News Part: 1955; p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*