

## THE FIRST REFUGEE CAMP IN WEAT BENGAL AFTER PARTITION

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### ABSTRACT

*At the time of independence of India in 1947, India was divided and separate Pakistan was created. Bengal and Punjab province was divided at the time of partition. East Bengal and West Punjab were included in Pakistan and West Bengal and East Punjab remained in India. The minority Hindus of East Bengal becomes refugees and they had been coming to the different adjoining border provinces of India for having shelter since the partition of India. The majority of the refugees of East Bengal took shelter in West Bengal. The Govt. of West Bengal had to take responsibility for these refugees. The Government took initiatives to establish some camps for the shelter of these refugees. The establishment of Cooper's Camp and some more camps in the district of Nadia were the first step of this initiative of the Government.*

**KEYWORDS:** *East Bengal, Minority Hindu, Nadia, Ranaghat, Refugee Camp, Cooper's Camp, Chinese Mission Camp, Rupashree Pally, Dhubulia Camp, Relief, Rehabilitation, Dandakaranya, Andaman*

### INTRODUCTION

#### The First Refugee Camp in West Bengal after Partition

At the time of independence of India in 1947, a large part of the Muslim-inhabited region of India has seceded and a separate state came into being PAKISTAN by name. In connection with the afforested secession, two provinces of India, Bengal and Punjab were divided. East Bengal and West Punjab were included in Pakistan and West Bengal and East Punjab remained in India. The minority Hindus of East Bengal becomes refugees and they had been coming to the different adjoining border provinces of India for having shelter since the partition of India. The majority of the refugees of East Bengal took shelter in West Bengal. The Govt. of West Bengal had to take responsibility for these refugees. The Government took initiatives to establish some camps for the shelter of these refugees. The establishment of Cooper's Camp and some more camps in the district of Nadia was the first step of this initiative of the Government.

Before the partition of India communal riot occurred at Noakhali in 1946 and consequently, the repressed refugees of Noakhali began to arrive at Ranaghat in Nadia district. In the month of November, 1946 twenty-three refugee families took shelter at first in 'Chinese Mission Camp' of Ranaghat. But after the partition of India a large number of started to arrive at Ranaghat every day. As a result from the aforesaid period the Govt. took initiations to shelter the refugees. Having been authorized by the Govt., Jamini Sarkar as a Deputy Dispersal officer and some higher officers as his assistants arrived at the Chinese Mission camp of Ranaghat on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of November in 1948. Phani Bhusan Chakraborty was an important assistant of Janimi Sarkar among the assistants who were entrusted to look after the encamped refugees of Ranaghat. When the pressure the said Chinese Mission Camp was converted into a Transit Camp. The dimension of the land possessed by the Chinese Mission Camp was twenty-two bighas and the said area which was 'full of shawl,

Simul tree, through bushes and kush plants were surrounded by prickly iron were under the direction of the intruded Govt. offices.<sup>1</sup> It may be remarked that thus the captive life of the refugees sheltered at the Chinese Mission Camp surrounded by prickly iron was ensured.

It became urgent to take the permission from the Principal of the camp for entrance into the Chinese Mission Camp' surrounded by the prickly iron way. There were three ways for entrance into the Chinese Mission Camp and those ways were under constant guards surveillance. The Govt. offices, who were entrusted to look after the refugees living into Chinese Mission Camp, decided to name of the Camp anew. *"East Bengalis a variegated complexion of the glamorously beautiful land of a folktale. The presence of the sign of beauty or the handsome complexion of the beauty of East Bengal is also noticed in body, mind, education and culture of the refugees coming from the different districts. The Govt. authority has upheld the precedence of their likings in the case of naming the Transit Camp. The person, who has chosen the name of the Transit Camp by which the memory of East Bengal infect through the naming of the said camp and the life of the transit camp can be forgotten, have unfolded their artistic outlooks. In the month of December, 1948 the Chinese Mission Camp was named 'Rupashree Pally'."* In such a way the naming of other camps and different Blocks was started by producing harmony between the natural resources of East Bengal and their deeds of naming- e.g.- 'Meghna', 'Padma', 'Yamuna' etc.<sup>2</sup> After 1949-1950 the flux of refugees in Nadia district became more intensive and under such circumstances other refugee camps including Ranaghat, Dhubulia gradually came into existence. From the afforested point of view, it may be said that the refugee camp of Rupashree Pally established first in Nadia district was the pioneer of the initial resort of the uprooted displaced persons in West Bengal. *"Rupashree Pally was the transit camp or the elementary center for kerning or displaced persons. Before completion of the elementary learning of refugees life, they were sent to the different camps came into being in West Bengal. The refugees of Rupashree Pally were sent to the rehabilitation center of Gayeshpur, Katagunge of Nadia for rehabilitation. Many refugees were also sent to Andaman from Rupashree Pally. Up to 1949 coming and going from Rupashree Pally had been running at a stretch."*<sup>3</sup>

When the pressure of refugee population began to increase at the refugee camp of Rupashree Pally, the Govt. acquired more adjoining land of the camp with a view to enlarging the dimension of the camp. About the year 1950, the total land of Rupashree Pally stood seventy acres. But the advent of the minority Hindu community from the vast area of East Bengal had been on the move under such precarious living of refugees few refugee camps came into existence at Ranaghat, Dhubulia, Chandmari, Chamta and soon in Nadia district. Simultaneously refugee camps at Dudhkundi, Shalbani, Bhadrakali, Ghosuri and soon in some district of West Bengal came into being. In the meantime, the refugee camp of Rupashree Pally was divided into two sections- male and female. The number of refugees became to increase gradually at Rupashree Pally and consequently, some selected refugee families were shifted to Cooper's refugee camp near Rupashree Pally. Those who between eligible for rehabilitation were shifted to Cooper's transit camp as per the decision of the Govt.<sup>4</sup>

The Cooper's camp of Ranaghat was another important refugee camp. In 1944 an outpost for foreign military came into possession by a settlement on the land of measuring to thousand and a thousand acres towards the south-East direction which was existed about one and a half miles away from Ranaghat Railway Station. In regard to the aforesaid mother, Harinarayan Adhikary has written that *"the American Soldiers mainly used to reside at the military outpost of Ranaghat. There lived a higher officer equivalent to the Head of them Henry Cooper by name. Subsequently the vast are of the military outpost was named 'Cooper's camp' after the name of Henry Cooper. The Chinese Mission Camp was*

founded on the land of Rupashree Pally (naming of Rupastree Pally was not yet made) with a view to rendering medical treatment to the wounded and sick soldiers. Immediately after the end of the World War II i.e. by the year 1946 the foreign soldiers of the Chinese Mission Camp left their barracks. The region, which was once full of the great noise of soldiers' activities, became desolate. The said lonely military barrack was gradually converted into a camp for a shelter of the shelter-seeking persons mistaken about a direction since the month of November, 1947.<sup>5</sup>

The Cooper's refugee camp of Ranaghat founded by the Govt. of West Bengal started its function on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of March, 1950. The following news was published in the Ananda Bazar Patrika. "The introduction of the camp was made by erecting tent on the abandoned land of military barrack located between the extreme part of the railways and the 'Longorkhana' (Charitable distribution center of cooked food etc.). As to the light it may be said that there were in total eighteen hurricane-light and about one thousand hurricane-lantern in camp. There were forty tube wells per seven hundred and fifty refugees. There were temporary lavatory and open drain. Cooked rice dal, atta, clothes and one rupee for pocket expense par head or 'dole' were donated from the 'Longorkhana'. At the initial stage only twenty two refugee families were sheltered in the newly introduced camp."<sup>6</sup> In the beginning the refugee families, which were sheltered in that refugee camp, were shifted to the different refugee camps of Bihar and Orissa subsequently. After the said transfer not a single family was shifted because the Govt. of Bihar and Orissa were unwilling to shoulder the excess responsibility as the agreement was already fulfilled. As a result the refugee families sheltered at the Cooper's Camp were compelled to stay here for many days before their rehabilitation at the particular place.<sup>7</sup>

The Cooper's Camp was the largest refugee camp in West Bengal. From here the refugees were sent for rehabilitation at the different places. The aforesaid camp was started combined with the tent erected by the said of the railway line, shops and 'Longarkhana' etc. In the beginning of the year 1950 refugee Gauranga Das took shelter at the Cooper's Camp and later on the narrated his acquired experience of the encamped life in the following way. He told that his family was one of the twenty-two families sheltered first at the Cooper's Camp. During the said period they were given rice, pulses, wheat, clothes and one rupee in cash.<sup>8</sup> The aforesaid refugee families could not maintain their livelihood by dint of the dry dole (dry food) received from the Govt. Therefore, they were compelled to purchase rice from outside with the cash dole received. Some refugee families were fortunate to bring money with them in secret at the time of leaving the country. They would purchase food and other essential commodities from outside with the aforeside money for want of insufficient Govt. Assistance.<sup>9</sup>

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of April 1950 central Minister J.P. Narayan came to visit the Cooper's Camp. In the meantime Dr. Rajendra Prasad, president of India wanted to visit the different refugee camps of West Bengal in the month of October 1950. Headers of almost each refugee camp among more than one hundred refugee camps of West Bengal tried their almost to get enlisted the names of their own refugee camp in the schedule of the visit of the President. At last the authority of the Refugee Department selected the names of two refugee camps to be visited by the President. One of them was the then largest refugee Camp named Dhubulia and the other was the second largest refugee camp, named the Cooper's Camp of Ranaghat. It is to be mentioned here that the Dhubulia refugee camp was conducted by the Govt. of West Bengal the Cooper's Camp of Ranaghat was conducted by the central Govt. directly. But the said two refugee camps were situated in the district of Nadia. President Dr. Rajendra Prasad was accompanied by Dr. Kailashnath Katju, the then Governor of West Bengal, Shree Abani Bhusan Chatterjee, the gt. Secretary of the Rehabilitation Department, Govt. of India, Shree Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyaya, Refugee Commissioner of West Bengal and so on. At first, President Dr. Rajendra Prasad

arrived at the Dhubulia camp and delivered his speech in Bengali in the assembly of the encamped refugees. The speech of the President in Bengali touched the heart of every refugee of the Dhubulia camp. The President expressed his deep sympathy for the days of hardship with the refugees and he also consoled them that those who would not return to East Pakistan would be surely rehabilitated. A deep standstill situation reigned in the Dhubulia Refugee Camp after the death of a young refugee happened due to police firing some days ago, but the said situation became disappeared after the consolatory, the refugee greeted the President by shouting for victory on this way to Calcutta from Dhubulia, Dr. Rajendra Prasad came to the Cooper's Camp of Ranaghat and delivered his consolatory speech in Bengali in the shape of promise on behalf of the Govt. of India and the refugee present were charmed to hear the said promise of the President.<sup>10</sup>

About the year 1954-55 the refugee became endangered due to high price and scarcity of rice. During the aforesaid period, the black marketers would bring some rice from Burdwan to Berhampur, Devagram and other places. The price of rice of Burdwan was somewhat cheaper than the rice of Ranaghat. Many poor refugee families would go to the said distant places by the midnight train for Lalgola in order to purchase rice. The hints of miserable financial disposition of the refugees are easily inferred from the instance of coming and going to the distant places by the midnight train, remaining awake the whole of the night only to purchase of two to four kilos of rice for their families with a view to saving trivial two to four anna pice.<sup>11</sup>

Every refugee inhabitant of Cooper's Camp was bounded to record his name in the Relief office and in the Transit center Register of Ranaghat. A general hospital was established in the Cooper's Camp for the medical treatment of the refugees and the aforesaid hospital had been on the move till the year 1977. The supply of drinking water was very insufficient. Everywhere of the Cooper's Camp was full of temporary and must built lavatories without my shade and uncovered drainage. Within ten days after the establishment of the camp 126 refugees died of cholera.<sup>12</sup> The reference of the dreadful situation of the Cooper's Camp is also available in the disruption of the inhabitant of the said camp Harinarayn Adhikary. *"The environment of the Cooper's Camp was equivalent to infernal death agony. It became full of horror due to the foul smell of mud-built temporary lavatory, disorganized drainage system and increase of mosquitoes and house-flies. They were scanty of drinking water. There was no provision for the admission of refugee patients in both the Sub-divisional and Missionary Hospitals. The Military Hospital of Cooper's Camp was converted into the Refugee Hospital in order to render the medical service for the treatment of the patients suffering from cholera, smallpox and tuberculosis. The car donated by the 'Hindu Satkar Samity' for camping dead bodies to the cremation ground could not carry all the dead bodies in spite of maxing conservative trip round the clock. Therefore, temporary cremation ground was created under a banyan tree existed in the east side of the Cooper's Camp. The number of dead bodies brings too much, the funeral obsequies of dead persons were not properly performed in there two cremation grounds."*<sup>13</sup>

Refugee Pulin Biswas took shelter at the Cooper's Camp of Ranaghat from Sealdah Station accompanied by his other family members. The condition of the refugee families of Cooper's camp was actually indescribable in a word. Derangement and insufficiency in all the fields, including habitats, drinking water and medical treatment made the refugee camps in the extreme point of an intolerable situation. Passing through some hardships Pulin Babu became the leader of the refugees. He involved himself with the various social activates for the refugees living in West Bengal and its outside also. That is why Palash Biswas, young son of Pulin Babu became fortunate to visit the different refugee camps founded outside West Bengal. Palash Babu observed that the refugees, who were rehabilitated outside West Bengal, namely at Dandakaranya, Andaman and in another provinces, were on the whole, passing their days more happily than that of the

refugee living in the refugee camps of Nadia district in West Bengal. In the year 1964, he went to visit the Rudrapur Transit camp of Nainital. Palash Biswas observed that in comparison with the refugee camps of Bengal the Rudrapur Transit camp was as like as heaven in regard to the arrangement for lavatory and supply of water, etc. Though the refugee families of Bengal remain unrehabilitated for many days in Nadia and other districts, the arrangement for habitats of the refugee of the Rudrapur Transit camp was done very fast. He could not realize the reason for the hardship of refugees living in Bengal in his tender age though there were well-arrangement for the refugees living outside Bengal.<sup>14</sup> Present inhabitant of Taherpur Dilip Chaki has informed that the means for protection of self-prestige were not noticed in the refugee camp of Ranaghat. There was a mud-built temporary lavatory for some families and always there would remain someone standing in a queue before the entrance of the lavatory. The similar situation would have been faced by the female refugees during bathing in the tube wells because of the presence of bathers in a crowd. That is why they sincerely wanted to be rehabilitated elsewhere from Cooper's Camp very soon.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, the first shelter for the East Bengali refugees was established and developed at Ranaghat in the district of Nadia. But the flow of migration began to increase gradually. So the Government had to establish more camps in Nadia and outside Nadia district. Later on, many refugees were rehabilitated outside West Bengal, such as Dandakaranya, Nainital, and Andaman etc. A large part of the refugees of Cooper's Camp was to send Dandakaranya where the atmosphere was very unfavorable for the refugees. Anyway, thus the Bengali refugees were included in the main stream of West Bengal.

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