

Settlement of East Bengal Refugees in Tea Gardens of South Assam on Historical Perspective (1947-1960)

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Abstract: After partition of India in 1947, large number of refugees, victims of communal riot in East Bengal, took shelter in Barak valley of Assam as it was socially, culturally and geographically adjacent to Sylhet. The condition of these uprooted people was very miserable who left behind their ancestral property. It was a very difficult task on the part of the Government to provide rehabilitation of the refugees. However with the effort of the Central Government colonies were established for the rehabilitation of the refugees. Indian Tea Association (ITA) extended their helping hand in this regard and allotted surplus land for the settlement of the refugees. In Barak Valley initially in 83 tea gardens refugees were given rehabilitation. The paper will deal in depth with the rehabilitation of the refugees in ITA colonies in South of Assam based on primary and secondary sources.

Key words: Communal riot, Refugee, Rehabilitation, ITA, Development, partition

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I. INTRODUCTION

Southern most area of Assam occupies three districts of the state namely Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi collectively known as Barak Valley. On the eve of partition Karimganj was a part of Sylhet. At the time of partition when the Redcliff Commission was demarcating the boundary of India, three and half thanas of Sylhet viz, Ratabari, Patherkandi, Badarpur and a part of Karimganj remained in India and later on this portion was included in the district of Cachar. After partition Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi happened to be the three subdivisions of the Cachar district.

On 15 August, 1947 when India achieved independence followed by partition on the basis of two nation theory, a large number of people crossed the border of India and Pakistan. Many Muslims fled to Pakistan and Hindus took shelter in India. The people, who took refuge in India after partition following the communal riot, for fear of being persecuted and those among them who registered themselves seeking relief and rehabilitation were called as refugees. Immediately after partition East Bengal became the hot bed of riot and there was continuous anti Hindu activities, lootings, decoities, forced conversion to Islam, harassment of women etc which compelled these Hindu people to take shelter in the nearby province. In May 1949 it is estimated that the number of Refugees in Assam were 114500. Among them sixty thousand were in Cachar. (Census of Assam, 1951 p. 359)

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To study the settlement of East Bengal refugees in tea gardens of South Assam during 1947-60
2. To study the role of Governments and Indian Tea Association in refugee rehabilitation.
3. To study the development of refugees rehabilitated areas.
4. To study the problems faced by the refugees.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study will be based on primary, secondary and oral sources. The primary source includes government records, letters, reports etc preserved in National Archives of India, Assam State Archives, District Record Rooms, National Library and others. These will be collected and discussed. As regards secondary sources books, articles, newspapers, internet materials etc will be studied. Besides interview of partition victims and its families will be taken.

Government policies and Settlement issues

Day by day the Refugee problem became very critical and it was a huge burden on India. The Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Gopinath Bordoloi was very much worried about the large scale influx in Assam because it could affect the economy of the state and wrote a letter to the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in

February 1948 to take the matter of Assam seriously. Nehru also responded to this request of Bordoloi. In May 1948, Nehru wrote to Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam saying that

Migration either of Hindus or Muslims into Assam on any large scale should be avoided. In India at present it is disturbing factor and more specially in Assam. (*Saikia Amarjyoti*, 2015)

He assured about every kind of help from the end of the Central Government. But he also did not support to impose bar upon the small scale migration from East Pakistan rather the Assam Government had the right to control the regular large scale influx. (*Saikia Amarjyoti*, 2015)

The violent communal riot in 1950, led to the displacement of approximately 120,148 people in various camps of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. When this bloody communal riot was going on, Nehru-Liaquat pact was signed and both the Governments agreed to provide shelter and security to the minority section in their own countries. From 15th August 1947 to April 1950 refugee population in Cachar increased upto two hundred thousands but after the Nehru-Liaquat pact it came down to 93177 in 1951. (*Census 1951, Assam p 51*) The terms and conditions of the pact were fully honoured in India. About 1 million displaced Muslims returned to India from Pakistan. The migrants who were unable to sell or exchange their properties had been given financial assistance as loans for house building. A small number of Pakistani Hindus went to Pakistan but the condition was not favourable there and it was not very easy to sell the properties in the unstable condition of this country, no body was willing to buy properties of the Hindus because it could be easily confiscated. (*Assam State Archives, Guwahati File no-171/55 /Influx of new refugees*) They were also bound to return with empty handed.

Due to large scale influx from East Pakistan to Assam during 1951-71 Assam's population increased to 34.95 per cent where as normal rate was 19.93 per cent. (*Dutta Nabojyoti pp. 30-32*) According to 1961 census in Cachar refugees were 1, 56,307 in number. The Central Government headed by Jawaharlal Nehru felt very helpless. Actually the country was overburdened at that time as the migrants were entering from West Pakistan also. The Central Government was very much concerned about the West Pakistan refugees.

The Congress Government of Assam headed by Gopinath Bordoloi opposed to settle the refugees in Assam on the plea that sufficient land was not there in this state for rehabilitation scheme. The Bordoloi Ministry very cleverly denied providing settlement to the Bengali refugees from East Bengal and the non Assamese natives also. When during a period of crisis of humanity the other states Government of northern India viz., West Bengal, Tripura and even Bihar extended their helping hand with very much sympathetically towards the evacuees, the Congress Government of Assam was playing a dirty political game to fulfil its own sentiments of Assamese nationalism.

However, the Government of India temporarily made arrangements for sheltering the refugees. It established Relief and Rehabilitation Department to provide food, shelter, medical treatment etc to the partition victims. The Central Government started the assessment of land by a committee under the leadership of Dorab Gandhi which reported that 18 million acres of land was available in Assam for rehabilitation of the displaced persons. This information had also similarities with the census report of 1951 and the Assam Governments report on the problem of Agricultural Development of Assam. (*Choudhury Sujit, 2002*) According to the Government policy, land meant for rehabilitation purposes should be allotted in a 'planned manner'. As such a Land Settlement Advisory Committee (L.S.A.C.) was formed by the Government to ensure effect of speedy settlement and so as to relieve the Deputy Commissioner (DC)s and Sub Divisional Officer(SDO)s of their heavy responsibility and also to avoid public criticism. (*Assam State Archive, Guwahati, File no: RA 123/55*)

In the meantime Assam Government passed the following acts:-(*Bhattacharjee Nabanipa p. 124*)

1. **Assam Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Amendment Act 1949** for requisition and speedy acquisition of land for displaced persons.
2. **Assam Forest Products (Acquisition) Act 1950**, to enable the Government to acquire forest products for the purposes of rehabilitating the refugees
3. **Assam Displaced Persons (Rehabilitation Loan) Act 1951**, for the grant and recovery of loans from displaced persons for their rehabilitation.

In Cachar the relief camps were first started by the Deputy Commissioner but it was handed over to the Controller to the Relief and Rehabilitation on 1st May 1950. (*Census of Assam 1951 p. 361*) Since 1st May 1950 the Central Government took the responsibility of the refugees in Cachar. (*Choudhury Mousumi P. 140*) Central Refugee Board later on CRBC was established in Silchar and in three subdivisions of erstwhile Cachar at present Barak Valley separate committees were set up to work together for the cause of the refugees. Not only the Government workers but some non Government organizations were also entrusted to look after the matter. Mention may be made of Ramakrishna Mission, Marwari organization, Congress committee etc. Many local people also helped the evacuees, UNICEF helped by sending rice for feeding children; free milk was also received for displaced children. (*Census of Assam 1951 p. 362*) Udvastu Seva Samity was formed where local people donated money to provide food to refugees in Barak Valley. (*Choudhury Mousumi p. 164*)

When Central Government took over the responsibility of relief and rehabilitations in Barak Valley it did not get any cooperation from the State Government. In 1949 the Central Government wanted land from the State Government which had been kept for landless people for refugee rehabilitation. But the Revenue Minister Bishnuram Medhi did not agree to this proposal, so the Indian Rehabilitation Minister, Mohonlal Saxena in 1950 adopted an alternative way and made an agreement with the Indian Tea Association for unused land of tea gardens of Barak Valley to rehabilitate the refugees. (*Talukdar Mrinal p. 19*) According to the plan of the Central Government, an officer was appointed to look after the matter but he was unable to issue any order to the tea garden authority to donate land for the refugees. In this situation Cachar Refugee Association continued their demand for the proper rehabilitation of the refugees and grant of 'patit' land, Government land, land of private ownership and unutilised land of tea garden to the migrants. It was because of the strong demand of Cachar Refugee Association that 17500 refugees were given rehabilitation in various tea gardens of Cachar. (*Dutta Debashree p.183*) For the settlement of the refugees three types of colonies were established-

1. ITA Colonies, 2. Government Colonies, and 3. Non Government Colonies

Rehabilitation in ITA Colonies

Besides, many refugees settling with their own initiatives, non official colonies were also set up where the refugees took refuge without any registration. Some of the migrants who had the capacity to earn stayed in rented house in town areas. Thus, as a result of concentration of refugees in towns like Silchar, Karimganj, Badarpur etc density of population increased rapidly. To reduce the burden of the refugees in town areas the Government adopted ITA scheme. It had been decided that three acres of cultivable land would be allotted to each family. In addition to this ration was to be given up to first fifteen days free of cost and each family was provided the opportunity to take loan at Rs 45 up to 5 ½ months until their crops rippled. (*Dutta Debashree p 182*)

The Government sanctioned necessary financial help but the ITA refrained from donating land according to this bilateral discussion though they had one hundred thousands acres of barren land. (*Chanda Rajdeep p. 265*) It was mainly because the garden authorities were not willing to provide their land. Ultimately after a long tug of war refugees were rehabilitated in the tea estates of Cachar. 88 ITA colonies were originally established in Cachar. Five colonies were subsequently abandoned for the same having been deserted by the refugees. 83 ITA colonies remained and steps were taken later on for issue of patta to the ITA colonist. (*District Record room Cachar, File No: Rehabilitation under second Five year Plan 112/55*) Initially 1726 families were allotted lands, later on more families had been accommodated in various ITA colonies. The name of the ITA colonies so far built exclusively for displaced persons from East Pakistan under the various rehabilitation schemes are as follows:

Table: 1.1.(List of ITA colonies in Silchar Subdivision)

Sl.No.	Name of the ITA colonies	Number families	Sl.No.	Name of the ITA colonies	Number families
1	Pani bhora (Derby T.E.)	22	29	Majagram	20
2	Kumbha T.E.	23	30	Tilka T.E.	22
3	Chingioor T.E.(Didarkosh)	20	31	Subong T.E.	1
4	Chincoorie T.E.(Indragarh)	10	32	Pathicherra	3
5	Bicrapur(Hathimara)	32	33	Burton	5
6	Bicrapur(Nilcherra)	17	34	Marticherra	2
7	Binnakandi T.E.(Alicherra)	10	35	Amaranagar(Indranagar)	1
8	Binnakandi T.E. (Chotamanda)	19	36	Dilkosh T.E.(Monkoosh)	10
9	Jirighat T.E.	25	37	Kalain Tea Estate (Magenta)	24
10	West Jalinga T.E.	23	38	Kalaincherra	12
11	Borakhai T.E. (Awal Tilla)	16	39	Haricherra	42
12	Rukhni T.E.(Kirthol)	8	40	Jalalpur	25
13	Dewan T.E. (Thailoo)	52	41	Dilkosh T.E. (Nagatilla)	11
14	Pallorbond T.E.(Dubabeel)	14	42	Lavoc T.E.	42
15	Dalugram (Bhanga basti)	21	43	Kalain (Main)	25
16	Barjalina	28	44	Palurbond T.E. (Baligong)	28
17	Chandighat (Khagarbund)	31	45	Larsing T.E.	18
18	Chandighat (Nogor)	12	46	Srikuna T.E.	1
19	Doyapur T.E.	15	47	Urnabond T.E.	19
20	Arcutipur	10	48	Derby T.E.	20
21	Cossipur T.E.	10	49	Kuttal T.E.	7
22	Craigpark	5	50	Dwarbond T.E.	21
23	Salacherra	19	51	Rosekandui T.E.	42
24	Daloo T.E.(section 79)	17	52	Chincootie(kanchanpur)	15
25	Daloo (Boula)	15	53	Bag-o-Bahar(Basthi)	17
26	Kurkuri	1	54	Ratanpur	5
27	Bhubendar	17	55	Noarbond	3

28	Khoreel T.E.	12	
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Source : Parliament / Assembly Question File No RR/PAR/1/55 , District Record Room, office of the District Commissioner Cachar, Silchar accessed on October 2019

Table: 1.2.(List of ITA colonies in Karimganj Subdivision)

Sl.No.	Name of the ITA colonies	Number families	Sl.No.	Name of the ITA colonies	Number families
1	Pathini	N/A	11	Maniknagar Banglatilla	44
2	Champabari	8	12	Kalacherra	
3	Karkhana Vasti	21	13	Ishancherra	
4	Sephinjuri	81	14	Goombhera T.E.	52
5	Isabeel	22	15	Eraligool	19
6	Solgoi T.E.	50	16	Ramnagar	37
7	Longai	31	17	Bidyannagar,Purba harinagar	31
8	Bubrihat T.E.	19	18	Chanithigol	N/A
9	Dullabcherra	85	19	Singlacherra	25
10	Chargola	11			

Source : Parliament / Assembly Question File No RR/PAR/1/55 , District Record Room, office of the District Commissioner Cachar, Silchar accessed on October 2019

Table: 1.3.(List of ITA colonies in Hailakandi Subdivision)

Sl.No.	Name of the ITA colonies	Number families	Sl.No.	Name of the ITA colonies	Number families
1	Manipur T.E.	21	9	Appin T.E.	12
2	Dholai	18	10	Katlicherra	9
3	Koyah	31	11	Aanakhal	15
4	Vernerpur	24	12	Sarespur	10
5	Gaglacherra	18	13	Kanchanpur	10
6	Lallacherra	5	14	Chandipur	5
7	Lalamukh	8	15	Burnie Brees	2
8	Appin T.E.	12	16	Rupacherra	45

Source : Parliament / Assembly Question File No RR/PAR/1/55 , District Record Room, office of the District Commissioner Cachar, Silchar accessed on October 2019 .

Table: 2.1(List of ITA colonies with area of land allotted for rehabilitation purposes)

Sl. No	Name of Tea garden/ITA Colony	Area Allotted	Source(Cachar District Record Room ,Silchar)
1	Craigpark	80 Bigha 4 Khatta	RHH/85/59
2	Kalain Tea Estate (Magenta)	104 Bigha 2 Khata 12 Chotak	RHH/85/59
3	Lavoc Tea Estate	141 Bigha 1 Khata 8 Chotak	
4	Dwarbond Tea Estate	886 Bigha 15 Khatta 11 Chotak	
5	Isabeel	540 Bigha	RRC/65/59
6	Solgoi Tea Estate	1259 Bigha 3 khata 15 Chotak	RRC/65/59

The rest of the area of land allotted to these displaced families in different tea garden could not be made available from the ITA authorities or Government files.

An economic survey of ITA colonies of district had been held by the Extra Assistant Commissioner (EAC) in 1955. The proposals of the Deputy Commissioner based on the recommendations of the EAC had also been submitted to the government, in certain cases, sanctions had been received. The proposals include grant of house building loans to all the colonist and business or agricultural loans according to the avocation pursued by each schemes for development work had also been submitted. Negotiations were done with the Chairman and Secretary, ITA Surma Valley Branch, on the questions of conferment of status on the displaced persons. (*Assam State Archives, File no-197/55/Inspection report dt.16-18, February, 1955*).

A scheme for planned settlement of the requested area of Dudpatil tea garden was taken under the supervision of Deputy Commissioner Cachar, Silchar. Accordingly tillah land measuring 1209 Bigha 8 chatak and flat land measuring 503 Bigha 15 Khatta 3 Chottak within Sadar Sub Deputy Collectors (SDC) had been allotted for rehabilitation of 80 to 100 no of families. (*District Record Room Cachar, File no RCC 106/55*)

In Haticherra Tea Estate in mauza Dudpatil grant, Choto Dudpatil grant and Dudpatil part VIII under Pargona Barak Par 1418 Bighas 13 Khatta 1 chottak land was allotted for rehabilitation of displaced persons from East Pakistan. From this land, an area of 13 Bigha 3 Khatta 15 Chottak of tillah land and 85 Bigha 16 Khatta 2 Chottak of flat land was under the possession of 24 displaced families. An area of 9 Bigha 1 khata 11 chotak tillah land and 7 Bigha 1 khatta 14 chottak of flat land were under the possession of 14 no of displaced families. (*District Record Room Cachar, File no RCC 106/55*)

988 Bigha 2 khatta 8 chottak of tillah land was allotted amongst 591 displaced families. Remaining land were earmarked for construction of LP Schools, well & tanks, fisheries, road, market and allotted for grazing of cattle. (*District Record Room Cachar, File no RCC 106/55*)

In September 1955 Union Rehabilitation Minister announced that 379 displaced families of East Pakistan having agriculturist and non-agriculturist had been screened under Indian Tea Association Scheme in Cachar District of Assam, and Rs 52 lakhs allocated for the scheme. All the 379 families would be granted house building loan to the extent of Rs 95000. One hundred and sixty agriculturist family would be given Rs 80000, an additional loans, the remaining 219 non-agriculturist family would also be granted loan of Rs 500 each exceeding Rs 1 lakh.

In addition Rs. 32000 had been sanctioned for construction 20 ring wells in 14 different tea estates under the scheme, improvement of existing tank of Hatimara, and additional tanks at Jalapore, Chotmamda and Pallurbond. Money was also sanctioned for purchase of 5 big boats for the benefit of displaced families belonging to fisherman communities. (*Assam Tribune 13 October, 1955 accessed from National Library, Kolkata*) Home loan was provided only to those families whom land was allotted with legal right because according to the Government rules only the person can be provided home loan who has ownership of land. Rs. 1745000 was allotted by the Central Government as grant and Rs 1493200 as loan for the refugees of ITA colonies. State Government also spent Rs 877425/- as loan to the refugees. (*Government of Assam File 1958, cited in Choudhury M. pp 194-95*). Total Rs 4115425 had been spent by the two government upto 1958.

The people suffered from many problems in ITA colonies. Many of them died in malaria, cholera and other diseases. Though some medical help was provided by the Government but it was not sufficient. People had acute sufferings. Moreover land allotted were mainly steep tillah land and full of jungles without proper roads and communication facilities. On the other hand some low laying lands were flood affected. Flood water damaged their crops and pushed them in front of starvation. There was also scarcity of proper drinking water. The unorganised plan became one of the main causes of the sufferings of these refugees. Thus refugees were aggrieved and the refugees of the Roopacherra, Burnaurpore, Gaglacherra, Lalamukh and Lalacherra ITA colonies sat on hunger strike for fulfilment of following demands:

1. To arrange for the adequate flood relief to the refugees of above mentioned ITA colonies.
2. To arrange for immediate payment of loans as per ITA schemes.
3. To arrange for shifting of the ITA families of these gardens from the flood affected place to alternate areas of the garden and also to settle the families with 3 acres of land per family both for cultivation and homestead.
4. To settle the refugee families residing in the gardens who are not covered by the ITA scheme with 3 acres of lands per family to grant rehabilitation benefits as per scheme. (*Assam State Archives, Government letter Ref. no HRI 3/57/208 dated December 1959, office of the SDO R/R branch Hailakandi*).

Thus knowing the plight of refugees the Government adopted some measures for the development of the I.T.A. colonies.

One pucca well was constructed at rate Rs 1600/- each in the following tea gardens Khareel, Dalu, Dayapur, Bidyanagar, Maniknagar(kalacherra), Maniknagar(Ishancherra), Chargola, Singlacherra, Putni(Champabari), Manipur, Koiya, Vernapur, Gaglacherra, Lalacherra, Rupacherra, Burnibres, Chandipur, Seispur, Kanchanpur, Katlicherra and Lalamukh. (*District Record room cachar, File no RHH 88/57*)

Two pucca wells each were constructed in the tea gardens of Larsing, Dullavcherra, Eraligoal, Gambhira, Manik nagar (Banglatilla), Echhabeel, Putni(Karkhana), Dholai and Ainakhal and 4 ring wells were constructed in Sepinjuri tea garden. More over one tank each was constructed in longai, Solgoi and Dalu Tea estate. These ponds were constructed at Rs 5000/- each. (*District record room cachar, File no RHH 88/57*) Some of these pucca well and tanks still remain functional in rural Barak valley and these are known as 'Sarkari Kua' & 'Puskarini'.

For providing connectivity and communication facilities in Larsing, Dalu, Bidyanagar, Gambhira, Eraligool, Lalamukh and Katlicherra tea estates construction work for road was under taken. One to two miles of road were constructed in these gardens at rate Rs 1500-1600/mile. In Bidyanagar one bridge had been constructed for Rs 750/- and embankment had been provided to prevent flow of flood water in ITA colonies of Dalu and Khareel tea estates. In Larsing tea estates a scheme of wire fencing sugarcane field had been undertaken where refugees could cultivate sugar cane and earn their livelihood. (*District Record Room Cachar, File no RHH 88/57*)

One well constructed in the tea estates at Borakhai, Bhubander, Rukni., Jirighat, Dalugram, Udarbond, Kathal, each Dwarbond, Bag-o-Bahar and Chandighat, while two wells each were constructed Borjalenga, Kumbha, Rosekandi and chandighat. (*District Record Room Cachar, File no RHH 88/57*)

Sylhet was the main source of English educated work force for both Government and private sector in Assam. Many persons from East Bengal were employed as 'babu' staffs before partition in different tea gardens of Barak Valley. They shifted their families after riot broke out. Many tea garden labourers from East Bengal

also migrated to India during partition. But few of them registered themselves or sought Government support. Majority of them disperse among their own community. Tea gardens were also benefited by employing them at low wages.

IV. CONCLUSION

In these hilly areas of tea gardens, full of wild animals, mosquitoes, poisonous insect etc people could not imagine to settle. But these helpless people were bound to live there by clearing jungles. In spite of efforts of the Government many refugees died without treatment and also in starvation. Government constructed road and bridge for communication, ring well and water tank for drinking and sanitation purposes, embankment to prevent flood water, established schools for education, dispensaries for rendering medical facilities and thus these jungles areas became gradually habitable. Roads which were constructed in ITA colonies paved the way for economic development of this area. But in spite of all these efforts of the Government some of the ITA colonies had to be derequisitioned for its steep hills, unsuitable for dwelling purposes. Many refugees had to shift the places due to water scarcity and want of cultivable lands and other problems. Land issued to an allottee was neither saleable nor transferable. Moreover if the land was not used by allottee for the purposes it meant, Government could take away land. Beneficiaries of ITA colony also deprived from receiving Government home loan, repairing grants etc because title of the land was not indefeasible to them. Majority of garden allowed refugee to stay but did not provided legal rights of the land. Till today resident of ITA colonies of many tea gardens does not possess patta or legal rights of the land and Government of Assam also kept a blind eye or indifferent to the issue even after 70 years of settlement.

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