

**The Myths Refugees Live By:
Memory and History in the making of Bengali Refugee Identity**

Short Title: Myths Refugees Live by

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Abstract

Within the popular memory of the partition of India, the division of Bengal continues to evoke themes of political rupture, social tragedy and nostalgia. The refugees, or more broadly speaking, Hindu migrants from East Bengal, are often the central agents of such narratives. This article explores how the scholarship on East Bengali refugees portrays them either as hapless and passive victims of the regime of rehabilitation, or eulogises them as heroic protagonists who successfully battle overwhelming adversity to wrest resettlement from a reluctant state. This split image of the Bengali refugee, as victim/victor, obscures the complex nature of refugee agency. Through a case-study of the foundation and development of Bijoygarh colony, an illegal settlement of refugee-squatters on the outskirts of Calcutta, this article will argue that refugee agency in post-partition West Bengal was inevitably moulded by social status and cultural capital. However, the collective memory of the establishment of squatters' colonies systematically ignores the role of caste and class affiliations in fracturing the refugee experience. Instead, it retells the refugees' quest for rehabilitation along the mythic trope of heroic and masculine struggle. This article reads refugee reminiscences against the grain to illuminate their erasures and silences, delineating the mythic structure common to popular and academic refugee histories and exploring its significance in constructing a specific cultural identity for Bengali refugees.

Introduction

The helpless people of East Pakistan who arrived destitute in West Bengal in 1948-49, the pitiable and vulnerable condition of the shelterless refugees who regularly overran Ranaghat, Bongaon, Sealdah- as a young student witnessing this massive waste of human resource, I had felt an unbearable and unexpressed pain. I was assailed by many questions, but none could provide me with satisfactory answers.¹

Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay introduces his history of East Bengali refugees, *Shikorer Sandhane* (Quest for Roots) with this confession of empathy. As an amateur historian, Mukhopadhyay's relationship to his subject matter extends far beyond that of a sympathetic investigator or eyewitness. His book is not simply an attempt to historically locate the Bengali refugee's quest for roots. It is a personal search for closure, for answers to questions which plagued him not only as an eyewitness, but also as a migrant from East Bengal. His family relocated to western Bengal seven years before partition, but, according to the author, could not 'escape its curse'. Loss of ancestral property in Dhaka forced the family into acute and prolonged economic hardship. Mukhopadhyay dedicates his book to the memory of his parents, whose early death he attributes

¹ From the author's introduction in Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for Roots)*, Calcutta, 2002.

to the trauma of partition.² In its eclectic admixture of memory, hearsay, anecdotes and historical records, Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay's book is far from unique. It is typical of an entire genre of popular history of East Bengali refugees, written in Bengali, which has proliferated since the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence in 1997. These texts are frequently autobiographical, authored largely by migrants who were actively involved in the unfolding crisis of rehabilitation.³ Besides autobiographies, numerous local and community histories have been authored by second-generation migrants, which rely heavily on refugee reminiscences.⁴ Scholars of cultural history have contributed relatively late to this growing corpus of popular history, largely through recording and publishing refugee reminiscences.⁵ This article explores how the history of the foundation and growth of Bijoygarh colony is represented in a range of such popular narratives, which span autobiographies, amateur histories and refugee voices 'recovered' by amateurs as well as by academics. Through this case study, it attempts to understand how a dominant narrative regarding the foundation of squatters' colonies in Calcutta emerges through the interaction between memory and history. This essay thus approaches memory and history as distinct, albeit related means of representing the past. The exact nature of this distinction is an unresolved debate within history and philosophy⁶ and this essay does not attempt to further explicate it. For the purposes of analysis, the primacy of emotive resonance, the possibility of non-narrative forms and the absence of institutional validation, which often imparts an authoritative voice to history, are seen as the primary features which distinguish memory from history. The primary concern in this text is to explore the inter-relationship between refugee memory and history, to explore *how* some memories feed into history while others are forgotten and also to illustrate how the very act of remembering can also be permeated by existing historical knowledge.

Popular memory regarding the genesis of Bijoygarh colony, as reflected in numerous memoirs, reminiscences and popular histories, corresponds quite closely to a standardised

² Dedication, *Ibid.*

³ Indubaran Ganguly's *Colonysmriti: Udbastu colony pratishtar gorar katha, 1948-1954, (Memories of colonies: An account of the early period of the establishment of refugee colonies)*, Calcutta, 1997 and Tushar Sinha's *Maranjayee sangrame bastuhara, (Refugees in a death-defying battle)*, Calcutta, 1999 are examples of such autobiographical narratives marking the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. However, several autobiographies and biographical accounts of individuals who contributed to refugee rehabilitation were also published in the earlier period. For example, see Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu (Refugee)*, Calcutta, 1970 and Kanailal Datta, *Madhyamgram-Navabarakpore Punarbasan O Haripada Biswas (Rehabilitation in Madhyamgram-Navabarakpur and Haripada Biswas)*, Nababarakpur, 1984.

⁴ For example, see Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh: Ekti udbastu upanibesh (A Refugee Colony)*, Calcutta, 2001. For an excellent self-reflexive and analytical account of life in a refugee colony by a second generation refugee see Manas Ray, 'Growing up Refugee' *History Workshop Journal*, 53, 2002.

⁵ For example, see the translated interviews published in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds.), *The trauma and the triumph: gender and partition in eastern India*, Calcutta, 2003 and Tridib Chakrabarti, Nirupama Ray Mandal, Paulami Ghoshal (compiled and eds.) *Dhangsa-o-Nirman: Bangiya udbastu samajer svakathita bibaran (Destruction and creation: Self-descriptive accounts of Bengali refugee society)*, Calcutta, 2007.

⁶ Within the scholarship on partition and its refugees, different scholars have conceptualised the distinction and the interaction between memory and history in different ways. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, the narrative structure of memory, especially the memory of trauma, emphasises the inexplicability of events or experiences, thus functioning according to a principle opposite to that of history. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling' in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the wake of Subaltern Studies*, 2002, pp. 115-37. Ranabir Samaddar, in 'The Historiographical Operation: Memory and History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 3, 2006, 2236-40, draws upon Paul Ricoeur's landmark work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago, 2004, to argue for a relationship of complementarity between memory and history. He argues that far from being structurally incompatible, memory is a constitutive element of the historiographical operation.

historical narrative of how refugees from East Pakistan rebuilt their lives in Calcutta. The common core of both consists in celebrating the agency of ‘self-settled’ refugees, who built full-fledged refugee settlements out of overnight squats. This correspondence is the result of a pattern of interaction between refugee memory and history, both popular and academic. In post-partition West Bengal, each has reinforced and permeated the other to produce a shared perception or ‘dominant memory’ of rehabilitation.⁷ But individual reminiscences, unlike the more homogenised dominant memory, are often contradictory and retain more clearly the marks of the omissions and erasures crucial to the production of any shared past. The numerous accounts regarding the genesis of Bijoygarh provide many such points of rupture, where personal reminiscences destabilise dominant histories. Critically analysing these narratives, this article not only provides a rich micro-history of a prominent refugee colony of Calcutta, but also illustrates how celebratory narratives regarding the establishment of squatters’ colonies more often than not obscure the nature of refugee agency.

Locating Bijoygarh: the significance of squatting in post-partition West Bengal

Bijoygarh colony, one of the earliest refugee squats of West Bengal, today sprawls between two of the busiest roads of south Calcutta, namely, Raja Subodh Mullik and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Road. However, in 1948, when the colony was established, it was one of the many refugee settlements which mushroomed on the outskirts of a much smaller city.⁸ Bijoygarh was born as the unauthorised occupation of a wireless centre and barracks built for Allied soldiers during the Second World War in the Jadavpur region of 24 Parganas. The squat was initially called the Jadavpur refugee camp. The families who moved into the abandoned military huts organised themselves into a committee, called the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association. Such unauthorised occupation of abandoned houses, military structures, warehouses or closed factories was standard practice amongst displaced persons in the large cities of India and Pakistan in the aftermath of partition. However, in this era of forced occupation and illegal squatting, the pattern that evolved in Calcutta was somewhat distinct.

The independent Government of India adopted a policy of resettling Hindu refugees from Pakistan in the lands and houses of Muslim ‘evacuees’.⁹ However, this policy was not

⁷ Dominant memory, following the Popular Memory Group’s analysis of the relationship between history and popular memory, can be understood as group of society’s shared perception of its past which gains dominance through public rituals such as commemoration, institutional backing, such as ‘official’ histories promoted by the state and last, but not the least, the utility of the dominant representation of the past in fostering formal political alliances. See Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular memory: theory, politics, method’, Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz and David Sutton (eds.), *Making histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*, London, 1982, pp. 205-52.

⁸ The city of Calcutta, renamed Kolkata in 2001, is defined as the urban areas governed by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. However, throughout history, urban life has spilled out of the official boundaries of the city into neighbouring suburban and rural areas in the district of 24 Parganas. This has resulted in repeated redefinition of the limits of the city, and constant incorporation of additional areas into the remit of the Calcutta (now Kolkata) Municipal Corporation. The post-partition influx of refugees into Calcutta was a driving force for rapid urbanisation of surrounding areas. In 1984, this led to the second official extension of the boundaries of the city to include the municipalities of South Suburban, Garden Reach and Jadavpur. <<https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/jsp/KMCAAboutKolkataHome.jsp>>, Last accessed 7 July 2010.

⁹ In theory, ‘evacuee property’ was the property left behind by Muslims who fled India and Hindus who fled Pakistan. In practice, minority communities were treated as ‘intending evacuees’ and forced out by a conjunction of refugee belligerence and state complicity. The ‘evacuee property’ they left behind provided the ‘shock absorbers’ enabling the new states to house their refugees. For a detailed study of state complicity in the displacement of

implemented in the eastern states of India which hosted refugees from East Pakistan, including Assam, Tripura and West Bengal, largely because in the divided province of Bengal there was also no state-sponsored exchange of population. Unable to solve the refugee 'problem' by resettling them on 'evacuee' land, the government of West Bengal complained bitterly of the burden of providing for the steadily increasing numbers who sought refuge in the already over-populated state.¹⁰ Calcutta, as the capital city as well as the commercial hub of West Bengal, rapidly gained the dubious distinction of receiving the largest number of partition refugees while possessing no clear plan of rehabilitation.¹¹ This combination of circumstances led to a veritable movement of unauthorised occupation of not only abandoned buildings, but also of all available fallow land in and around Calcutta. Groups of refugees got together to form a *dal* or association based on familial ties, connections from a past life in East Bengal and political contacts. Once a suitable patch of land was identified, its occupation followed a standard pattern. The land was measured, divided into plots and parcelled out amongst refugee families. The occupiers of each plot had to erect a thatched shelter overnight and move into it. By the time the landlords or the authorities arrived on the scene, they had to contend with a full-fledged illegal settlement. These overnight occupations more often than not managed to survive as refugee colonies. This particular form of illegal land-grabbing came to be known as *jabardakhal*. Literally meaning 'acquisition by force', it mirrored the current terminology for government requisition of properties: *hukumdakhal*. These refugee settlements were eventually categorised as squatters' colonies by the authorities for the purposes of administration.

This history of squatting was first narrativised by Prafulla Chakrabarti as an organised *jabardakhal* (forced acquisition) movement in his seminal work on the policies and politics of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal.¹² Bijoygarh, though enumerated as a squatters' colony in government records, is dismissed by Chakrabarti for not being a true type.¹³ Numerous autobiographical accounts regarding refugee rehabilitation, such as Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay's *Udbastu (Refugee)* and Indubaran Ganguly's *Colonysmriti (Memories of Colonies)* concur with Chakrabarti's assessment. In their reminiscences, the residents of Bijoygarh have contested this rebuttal, indicating that identification as a *jabardakhal* or squatters' colony was, to them, a matter of considerable importance. This dispute over the status of Bijoygarh colony is indicative of the complex interaction between history and memory in the creation of refugee identity. Within the socio-cultural milieu of post-partition West Bengal descriptive categories born of administrative needs, such as the division of refugee colonies into squatters', privately-owned,

Muslim and Hindu minorities in India and Pakistan, respectively, see Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The long partition and the making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, boundaries, histories*, New York, 2007 and Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (eds.) *The aftermath of partition in South Asia*, London and New York, 2000, pp. 163-203.

¹⁰ Estimates of East Bengali refugees who entered West Bengal between 1947 and 1971 vary widely between 5.8 million (Pran Nath Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, New Delhi, 1972) and 4.1 million (Committee for Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, *Report of the working group on the residual problem of rehabilitation in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1976).

¹¹ According to the Census of 1951, 433,000 of West Bengal's total refugee population of 2,099,000 went to Calcutta alone. Another 527,000 settled in the contiguous district of Calcutta, 24 Parganas. See Republic of India, Census of 1951, vol. VI, part III, *Calcutta City*, p.305.

¹² Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, *The marginal men: The refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1999, pp. 33-66.

¹³ The first enumeration of squatters' colonies in 1952 led to the list of 149 Group of Squatters' Colonies, Calcutta Corporation Area. This can be found in various government publications on rehabilitation, including *Manual of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation, Vol. I*, Government of West Bengal, 2000, p. 63. Bijoygarh is the fifteenth colony in this list.

and government-sponsored, took on specific cultural meanings. By self-identifying as squatters, the residents of Bijoygarh were in effect refashioning their history so as to aid in the creation and perpetuation of a carefully-constructed refugee identity. In order to fully grasp what self-identification as a squatter could mean for the residents of Bijoygarh, it is essential to explore the cultural meanings that accumulated around the figure of the Bengali refugee, and the spatial construct of the refugee colony in post-partition West Bengal.

Unlike Punjab, where various factors including the sheer scale of the refugee crisis led the state to approach the issue of relief and rehabilitation on an emergency footing, in Bengal, government response was characterised by acute reluctance.¹⁴ Paltry relief and initial refusal to provide rehabilitation eventually gave way to grossly inadequate and wrong-headed rehabilitation policies.¹⁵ The government's insistence on resettling Bengali refugees in marginal, remote and often barren lands ensured the spectacular failure of most state-led schemes of rehabilitation.¹⁶ Predictably, the responsibility for these failures was shifted upon the refugees by highlighting the supposedly flawed character of the Bengali refugee.¹⁷ In government reports, surveys and correspondence, a negative stereotype of the Bengali refugee took hold. B.S. Guha's comparative study of 'social tensions' amongst two different refugee populations, the self-settled colony of Azadgarh and the government sponsored-settlement of Jirat,¹⁸ is a typical example of this blame-game. The inevitable failure of the refugees at Jirat to produce adequate crops from patently unsuitable land and to obtain employment in a hostile social environment was theorised away, in pseudo-scientific language, as the 'regression' of the refugees into 'a lower level of simplification'.¹⁹ According to this study, the refugees became beings 'childishly dependant on the Government support'.²⁰ U. Bhaskar Rao's official account of rehabilitation, published in 1967, lends full force to the stereotype of the Bengali refugee as a 'creature apart'.²¹ A collection of unflattering attributes of the 'typical' Bengali refugee - 'an object of derision and contempt',

¹⁴ For a study of the governmentality of refugee rehabilitation in post-partition India see my unpublished PhD dissertation, *Refugees and the Politics of Nation Building in India, 1947-71*, Cambridge, 2009.

¹⁵ Numerous studies have criticised the dismal failure of the Government of West Bengal to deal with the refugee crisis. For example, see Prafulla Chakrabarti *The marginal men*, 1999 and Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947-67*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 105 – 158.

¹⁶ This failure is well-documented in official publications as well as later scholarship. See, for example, B.S Guha, *Memoir No. 1, 1954, Studies in social tensions among the refugees from Eastern Pakistan*, Calcutta, 1959, S. L. De & A. K. Bhattacharje, *The refugee settlement in the Sunderbans, West Bengal : a socio-economic study*, Calcutta, 1972, Alok Kumar Ghosh, 'Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation', Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.) *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional practices and contested identities*, Calcutta, 2000, pp. 106-29 and 'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41, 5, September 2007, 995-1032.

¹⁷ Joya Chatterji has illustrated how imported European attitudes demeaning recipients of charity were amalgamated with more recent colonial caricatures of the effeminate and weak Bengali male to produce these potent stereotypes. She argues that in government discourse on rehabilitation, Bengali refugees were *by definition* victims and recipients of charity. See Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-1950' in Suvir Kaul (ed.) *Partitions of memory: The afterlife of the division of India*, Delhi, 2001, pp. 74 -110.

¹⁸ 'Rehabilitation' at Jirat consisted of the re-location of largely literate camp-dwellers unaccustomed to hard labour to a malarial village, in an area disconnected from urban settlements where agricultural labour was already abundant. See B.S Guha, *Studies in social tensions*, Calcutta, 1959, also cited in Joya Chatterji, 'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation', *MAS*, 2007.

¹⁹ B.S Guha, *Studies in social tensions*, Calcutta, 1959, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ U. Bhaskar Rao, *The story of rehabilitation*, New Delhi, 1967, p. 141.

‘a bundle of apathy’, ‘rebellious’ and ‘obstructive’ - is tempered only by an appeal to readers to consider the peculiar circumstances which might have produced such traits.

Historians of Bengal’s partition have long been alive to the bias against Bengali refugees in official records. However, few have paid close attention to the parallel creation of an opposite stereotype of the Bengali refugee in popular discourse. Pro-refugee political propaganda and sympathetic press coverage in post-partition West Bengal frequently celebrated a section of the refugees from East Pakistan for proudly refusing government handouts and authoring their own rehabilitation. The ‘self-settled’ refugee was in every respect opposite to the much-maligned figure of the Bengali refugee that pervaded contemporary administrative discourse - assertive, resourceful, fiercely independent and too proud to be subjected to the demeaning and dehumanising conditions of government camps. It became a key element of the self-perception of Bengali refugees in West Bengal and eventually, through their memories, found its way into the histories of rehabilitation.

One of the earliest examples of this positive stereotype of the self-settled Bengali refugee can be found in *Udbastu*, the autobiographical account of Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay’s experiences as the Commissioner of Rehabilitation and Secretary of Relief for West Bengal, between 1949 and 1955. Bandyopadhyay outlines a three-fold categorisation of displaced persons based on the reserves of money and will-power they could command. He describes those who did not look towards government aid and succeeded in resettling themselves as ‘relatively well off and energetic’.²² A second psychological type consisted of those who were not as well-off, but did not lack in initiative. These were the refugees who refused to go to government camps and instead occupied abandoned houses, and built temporary shelters on fallow land. They, according to Bandyopadhyay, took responsibility for their own upkeep. The third category of refugees consisted of those who were poor, but more significantly, ‘lacked the will to stand on their own two feet’.²³ These were the refugees who took shelter in government camps. In this curious psychological-economic taxonomy of refugees, those living in camps were depicted as the rump of the refugee population and as dependant creatures lacking initiative. Though Bandyopadhyay no doubt compliments those who did not enter government camps for their self-sufficiency, his classification was primarily designed to limit governmental responsibility to the third ‘type’ of refugees. However, for the refugees who blatantly broke the law to squat on fallow land, the positive image of a ‘self-settled’ refugee was a vital weapon in their battle to carve out social space and respectability in a socio-political climate largely hostile to the refugee ‘influx’. In the memoirs, autobiographies and reminiscences of refugees, squatting became synonymous with self-reliance. Thus, a clear act of breaking the law was reframed as a marker of self-reliance, which distinguished the refugees of squatters’ colonies as those who had too much self-respect to enter government camps. In Prafulla Chakrabarti’s *Marginal Men*, Bandyopadhyay’s three-fold categorisation is radically transformed into the means for an uncritical celebration of the achievement of the second ‘type’ of refugees – the founders of the *jabardakhal* or squatters’ colonies. Eulogising his refugee heroes as partitioned Bengal’s ‘*deus ex machina*’, Chakrabarti heaps praise on them for being ‘determined to carve out their own place in West Bengal and earn their own livelihood’.²⁴

Thus, in Bengal’s partition literature, camps and colonies have become representative of two pre-existing types of refugees, instead of different locales of rehabilitation. Within this

²² Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu (Refugee)*, 1970, p. 31.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1990, p. 33.

narrative, all refugees who entered government camps and relied on the state for rehabilitation are portrayed as inherently dependant creatures. While amongst contemporaries, the stereotype of the passive victim was born largely of the tendency to blame the refugees for the failure of rehabilitation, historians have reinforced it by reading the hardship weathered by refugees in camps as evidence of victimhood.²⁵ It follows that only those refugees who rejected government munificence could claim self-sufficiency and independent agency. Thus, being the resident of a *jabardakhal* or squatters' colony eventually became synonymous amongst the refugees in West Bengal with being self-settled and resourceful. It is perhaps because of this radical reconfiguration of meanings that being recognised as a squatters' colony assumed considerable importance for the residents of Bijoygarh.

Whether included within the category of 'squatters' colony' or not, Bijoygarh was undoubtedly one of the earliest attempts by refugees to build a full-fledged urban settlement in Calcutta. As a result, the colony features prominently in several histories of rehabilitation. However, the scope of these accounts and the location of Bijoygarh colony within them vary widely. In Hiramnoy Bandyopadhyay's *Udbastu* and Prafulla Chakrabarti's *Marginal Men*, Bijoygarh is mentioned as one of many squatters' colonies. Though an important detail, it is not central to the narrative. In contrast, Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay's *Shikorer Sandhane (Quest for Roots)*²⁶ and an edited volume entitled *Dhangsa-o-Nirman (Destruction and Creation)*²⁷ devote large sections to interviews of refugees who built the Bijoygarh colony. Like Mukhopadhyay, the editors and interviewers of *Dhangsa-o-Nirman (Destruction and Creation)* have strong empathy for their respondents, but are not refugees themselves. The volume aspires to narrate the history of Bengali refugees in 'their own voices', unmediated by analysis. This is an impossible ambition as oral history interviews, by their very nature, are co-authored by the interviewer and the interviewee. Nevertheless, when subjected to reflexive analysis, this collection of interviews provides valuable insight on the early history of Bijoygarh. In contrast, *Bijoygarh: ekta udbastu upanibesh (a refugee colony)*²⁸ deals exclusively with Bijoygarh's history and is authored by the son of Santosh Dutta, the veteran freedom fighter who is at times described as Bijoygarh's founder. Indubaran Ganguly's eyewitness account of the proliferation of colonies in the area surrounding Bijoygarh between 1948 and 1954, offers an onlooker's perspective on the influence of Bijoygarh in the neighbourhood.²⁹ This multiplicity of accounts and the diversity in authorial intentions and contexts of production facilitates the attempt to recover, from largely oral and inevitably subjective accounts, a coherent, albeit incomplete narrative of the genesis of Bijoygarh. Through comparisons and cross-referencing, it is possible to arrive at the bare bones of a historical narrative which is common to these diverse texts. This synthetic account provides the necessary background for analysing the diverse patterns of remembering Bijoygarh.

History, memory and foundation myth: the victorious squatters of Bijoygarh

²⁵ For example, Prafulla Chakrabarti describes camp refugees as 'a shapeless mass of humans huddled together like beasts with all the sap squeezed out of their battered frames' in *The marginal men*, 1999, p. 14.

²⁶ Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for Roots)*, Calcutta, 2002.

²⁷ Tridib Chakrabarti, Nirupama Ray Mandal, Paulami Ghoshal (compiled and eds.) *Dhangsa-o-nirman: Bangiya udbastu samajer svakathita bibaran (Destruction and creation: self-descriptive accounts of Bengali refugee society)*, Calcutta, 2007.

²⁸ Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh: Ekta udbastu upanibesh (A Refugee Colony)*, Calcutta, 2001.

²⁹ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti (Memories of colonies)*, 1997.

Bijoygarh colony began as a squat of twelve refugee families in an abandoned military camp at Jadavpur. In November 1947, they travelled ticketless from Sealdah to Jadavpur station under the leadership of a group of local residents who hailed from East Bengal but had either migrated earlier, or had managed to find jobs and housing in Calcutta after partition. Shombhu Guha Thakurta, Kalu Sen, Ashish Debray and Shantiranjan Sen were a close-knit group of young East Bengali men who decided to help their less fortunate brethren stranded on railway platforms. The refugees transported their meagre belongings, such as utensils and sleeping mats, by hand-drawn cart from the railway station to the abandoned huts. As news of the squat spread through word-of-mouth amongst the thousands of displaced families pouring into Calcutta, a steady stream of refugees started to arrive in the military camp. The founders and residents formed the *Jadavpur Bastuhara Samiti* or Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association to promote co-operation amongst the refugees and to work towards providing the basic amenities. As the military barracks filled to capacity, latecomers started building thatched shelters on neighbouring fallow land. There seems to have been little organisation or co-ordination behind this first phase of squatting. Shanti Sen, the General Secretary of the refugee association, stressed on its spontaneous nature. 'At that time, none heeded the other. People squatted wherever they could.'³⁰ Nevertheless, the Association attempted to preserve a modicum of order, demarcating household plots measuring up to a maximum of 4 *kottahs*³¹ for each family and registering them in lieu of a contribution of two rupees.

The squatters were acutely aware of the vulnerability of their position and resorted to various strategies to gain legitimacy and government aid. A common practice was to invite leading scions of Calcutta society, especially those who enjoyed close ties with the Congress in West Bengal, to be the president of their refugee association. Thus, Basanti Debi, the widow of the veteran Congress leader Chittaranjan Das was President of Jadavpur Refugee Association for a few months.³² Following this pattern, leadership passed to freedom-fighter Santosh Datta in 1948. The residents of the growing refugee settlement had hoped to gain the favour of the Congress Government of Dr. B.C. Roy through Datta's political connections. Though the exact date is not recorded, there is little doubt that this change in leadership was the driving force behind the transformation of a sprawling refugee squat into a planned settlement. The period from late 1948 to late 1949 marked a crucial period in the history of Bijoygarh. In the middle of 1949, the landlord, Layalka, hired goons to evict the refugees. This erupted into a pitched battle, which the refugees won. To commemorate this victory, the residents renamed their refugee camp as Bijoygarh colony. The transformation from camp to colony indicated the determination of the refugees to build a permanent settlement in the area, while the name, literally meaning fort of victory, evoked a militant spirit as the driving force behind the establishment of the colony.

The subsequent history of the colony is an impressive litany of the rapid proliferation of institutions. By 1952, Bijoygarh could boast four schools, one college, a market, a post-office, a temple, and even a hospital. Certain philanthropists, residents or groups of residents are credited with the foundation of specific institutions. For example, Nalinimohan Dasgupta is credited with establishing the first school in the colony, the *Jadavpur Bastuhara Bidyapith* (Jadavpur Refugee School); while Dr Aparnacharan Dutta is remembered as the driving force behind the

³⁰ Interview with Shantiranjan Sen, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for roots)*, 2002, p. 48.

³¹ *Kottah* is a popular unit of measuring land in Bengal. One *kottah* roughly equals 720 square feet.

³² Despite retiring from active politics after the death of C.R. Das, Basanti Devi continued to be associated with Gandhian social reconstruction in East Bengal. She commanded great respect amongst politicians and social workers in Calcutta.

establishment of *Prasuti Sadan* (Maternity Home), a maternity hospital.³³ Though the vicissitudes of memory coupled with differential political affiliations of respondents and authors often lead to contradictory accounts, this rudimentary outline of Bijoygarh's genesis holds water across party lines and perspectives. The consensus breaks down over the nature of the colony, with popular myths, perceptions and perspectives beginning to inform its inclusion within or exclusion from the category of *jabardakhal* colony.

Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay first mentions Bijoygarh while speaking of the tendency amongst refugees to occupy abandoned Allied military barracks in the southern suburbs of Calcutta. Initially, the squat at Jadavpur camp was one of many contemporary refugee squats on abandoned military facilities in and around Calcutta. However, the sheer scale of the occupation and the fact that a permanent refugee settlement emerged from it, set Bijoygarh colony apart.³⁴ Bandyopadhyay credits the residents of Bijoygarh with a high degree of organisation and foresight. Planned initiatives, such as reserving open areas for parks and playgrounds, won his respect despite their patent illegality. He nevertheless insisted that Bijoygarh was far from an ordinary *jabardakhal* colony because 'evidence can be found suggesting that they received some indications of consent from the authorities'.³⁵ Prafulla Chakrabarti seconds this characterisation of Bijoygarh as being in a class by itself. He too speaks of 'evidence' of verbal consent by the government.³⁶ Neither Bandyopadhyay nor Chakrabarti provided any details regarding the nature or content of this evidence. Chakrabarti nevertheless points to the crucial role played by Bijoygarh in the *jabardakhal* movement. According to him, since only a select few were privy to Santosh Datta's success in obtaining government approval, contemporaries saw the emergence of Bijoygarh as a success story which could be replicated. 'When the colony which apparently sprang out of unauthorized occupation of land was allowed to exist, there were many amongst the refugees who believed that if only they could take an organized plunge, they could easily get away with the land.'³⁷ In other words, the real significance of Bijoygarh colony lay in the inspiration it provided to refugees. The refusal to describe Bijoygarh as a true *jabardakhal* colony is taken one step further by Indubaran Ganguly. He claims that far from being a squatters' colony, Bijoygarh actually approximated to a government-sponsored one. He claimed that Bijoygarh enjoyed covert official support, with Santosh Datta providing the vital link between the residents of Bijoygarh and the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr. B.C. Roy.³⁸

Ganguly's explanation of the reasons compelling Dr. Roy to keep his support secret are worth quoting at some length as they provide an insight into the contemporary world of rumours and hearsay which coloured the actions of refugees.

Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy had started trying to change official policy towards the East Bengali refugees. The land on which the Jadavpur military camp stood belonged to the Government of India. So, until and unless the central government changed its policy towards refugees, it was not possible for the state government to openly support an initiative of building a refugee colony on this land. Yet, he was unshaken in his belief that he would eventually be able to change the Nehru administration's policy towards refugees. That's why he remained in the background and

³³ Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh*, 2001, p. 28. Also see interview of Shanti Ranjan Sen and Gouranga De Chowdhury in Mukhopadhyay's *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for roots)*, 2002, pp. 46-66; and interview with Manindra Pal in *Dhanga-o-Nirman (Destruction and Creation)*, 2007, pp. 123-4.

³⁴ Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu (Refugee)*, 1970, p. 23

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 35.

³⁶ Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1990, p. 36.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37.

³⁸ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, p. 28.

provided patronage to Santoshbabu in his initiative to establish Bijoygarh. It's a matter of note that Santoshbabu too was careful to keep this matter of patronage from Dr Roy a secret.³⁹

It is unlikely that Indubaran Ganguly, a dissident member of the Communist Party of India and the founder of Azadgarh colony, actually enjoyed the confidence of the Chief Minister of West Bengal. A careful reading of his account betrays his claim as little more than imaginative speculation. In an account based entirely on personal memory, while speaking about Bijoygarh's origins, he falls back upon citing texts.⁴⁰ He had clearly not witnessed the establishment of Bijoygarh, and was not acquainted with the leaders, whose intentions he expounded on with such confidence. Nevertheless, his speculation on Santosh Datta's secret pact with Dr. B.C. Roy is significant as it reflects the general belief amongst the residents of neighbouring refugee colonies regarding the special status of Bijoygarh. This belief was born of the respect Santosh Datta commanded within the Bengal Congress in particular and in political circles of West Bengal in general. He was famous for his exploits as the second-in-command of Faridpur district's Jugantar cell, one of colonial Bengal's famous revolutionary terrorist organisations.⁴¹ On one hand, his celebrated status as a national hero gave him access to the contemporary luminaries of West Bengal. On the other hand, he was a refugee and a squatter. This no doubt enabled him to champion the cause of Bijoygarh amongst bureaucrats and politicians. However, his methods were not of open confrontation or political agitation against the government; but of negotiation and judicious exploitation of influence. It seems that these differences in method as well as in political allegiance lay at the core of Bijoygarh, under the leadership of Santosh Datta, falling foul of being a 'true' squatters' colony.

The need for associative politics was urgently felt by the refugees of squatters' colonies. The early leaders had largely been supporters of the Congress or of the various socialist parties, such as Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Praja Socialist Party. However, the obduracy of the authorities in upholding public order and property ownership in the face of an unprecedented crisis forced the squatters' to take up a more radical anti-establishment stand. This radicalisation of refugee organisations was coupled by a shift in leadership to the Communists and other left parties. As a result, particular attributes were associated with the typical squatters' colony of Calcutta. It was seen as a hotbed of anti-establishment agitation and a fertile recruiting ground for the Communist Party. In this respect, Bijoygarh colony was indeed an exception. In the 1950s, when increasing militancy amongst the residents of squatters' colonies led to the emergence of 'refugee power' as a new player in the complex political milieu of post-partition West Bengal, Bijoygarh, under Santosh Datta's guidance, held back from overt opposition to the Congress. Indubaran Ganguly has described this rift vividly.

In April 1950, a conference of refugee leaders from all the squatters' colonies in the southern suburbs of Calcutta was organised with the express purpose of launching a new umbrella organisation, the *Dakshin Kalikata Sahartali Bastuhara Samhati* (DKSBS) or the South

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Indubaran Ganguly quotes entire sections of Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay's *Udbastu (Refugee)*, 1970 and verbatim summarises Prafulla Chakrabarti's *The marginal men*, 1999.

⁴¹ A scattered group of revolutionary terrorists who joined the Indo-German Conspiracy came to be known as the Jugantar group. For a history of Jugantar see Arun Chandra Guha, *Aurobindo and Jugantar*, Calcutta, n.d. Also see David M. Laushley, *Bengal terrorism and the Marxist Left: Aspects of regional nationalism in India, 1905-42*, Calcutta, 1975.

Suburban Calcutta Refugee Association.⁴² Though the representatives of Bijoygarh colony attended the conference, they refused to be a part of the organisation. Santosh Datta supported the cause of regularisation of the squatters' colonies, but voiced his inability to participate in the methods of agitation which were likely to be adopted by the DKSBS.⁴³ Bijoygarh colony thus occupied a contradictory position within the history of the *jabardakhal andolan* or movement. On one hand, by virtue of being the first colony born of illegal squatting, it provided a model to be mimicked by refugee colonies subsequently set up in the area. These colonies not only looked to Bijoygarh for inspiration, but also benefitted from the institutional amenities developed by its residents, such as schools and markets. Nevertheless, Bijoygarh's leaders held themselves aloof from contemporary refugee organisations and refused to participate in the growing movement for the regularisation of squatters' colonies. This soured its relations with other squatters' colonies and fed rumours of a 'secret pact'.⁴⁴

The relevance of this contradictory position of Bijoygarh can only be understood within the context of contemporaneous refugee politics. The ill-devised 'Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation of Land Bill', drafted by the government of West Bengal in 1951 to 'reconcile the demands of the law with the needs of the refugees'⁴⁵ was viewed by the refugees as an elaborate scheme to demolish the squatters' colonies. It provided the catalyst for the heydays of belligerent refugee politics under the leadership of the UCRC. As meetings, processions and often violent demonstrations drove protesting refugees into a collision course with the authorities, the Government of West Bengal increasingly saw the refugees as a political 'problem'. The typical squatters' colony in Congress-ruled West Bengal was re-configured as a settlement of militant underdogs. There is little doubt that the inhabitants of squatters' colonies led a severely marginalised life. Besides having no access to the basic amenities of urban life, such as water and electricity, the squatters also had to combat repeated police raids and private eviction operations of landlords using hired muscle. The target of these operations would often be the shanties built by the refugees rather than the refugees themselves. Nevertheless, these clashes occasionally took the form of pitched battles and at times, refugees died defending their new homes.⁴⁶ However, far more significant than the actual details of these clashes was its representation in the public sphere of refugee politics.

⁴² Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999, p. 66; and Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, pp. 28-29.

⁴³ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti (Memories of colonies)* 1997, pp. 28-9.

⁴⁴ In the absence of any documentary evidence, it is impossible to conclusively prove or disprove this theory of a 'secret pact'. Besides rumours and speculation, later accounts faithfully reproduce Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay's unsubstantiated reference to evidence of government consent. (*Udbastu [Refugee]*, 1970, p. 23). However, taking into account all the available interviews of the residents of Bijoygarh, it is clear that Dr. B.C. Roy was far from pleased with the actions of the refugees at Bijoygarh. The unofficial support might have come from lower down, i.e., from the Rehabilitation Commissioner and Secretary of Rehabilitation in Dr. Roy's government, Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay himself. Dhirendranath Raychowdhury, alias *Kalabhai*, and Shantiranjan Sen repeatedly allude to the sympathetic response of Bandyopadhyay in their interviews (*Dhangsa-o-Nirman [Destruction and Creation]*, 2007 and Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer Sandhane [Quest for Roots]*, 2002). Kalabhai claims that Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, in response to a memorandum submitted by the refugees, had promised to legally acquire the colony's lands for regularisation if he ever became the Rehabilitation Commissioner. He had apparently kept his word, though given the proliferation of colonies by 1950, Bijoygarh's claim for special consideration had become impossible to implement. (Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer Sandhane [Quest for Roots]*, 2002, p. 90) If this is true, then it could also explain Bandyopadhyay's uncharacteristically vague allusion to 'evidence'.

⁴⁵ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 March, 1951.

⁴⁶ For details, see Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999, pp. 80-1.

As local leaders inspired by the revolutionary ideology of the Left sought to organise the refugees and champion their cause, the brutality of the police in evicting refugees became the standard rhetoric of anti-establishment speeches. Every single clash between the refugees and the police was portrayed as an organised campaign. Repeated evocation of unity and militancy amongst the refugees in fiery speeches, pro-refugee editorials, pamphlets and public meetings gradually produced a standardised mythic narrative of the battle between the refugees and the establishment. For example, at mass public meetings organised by the UCRC, local refugee leaders such as Madhu Bannerji of Jadavpur colony urged refugees to establish armies of volunteers in all colonies and convert them into ‘impregnable fortresses’.⁴⁷ Editorials in the *Swadhinata*⁴⁸ catalogued these battles and the price paid by refugees in terms of loss of shelter, injuries, imprisonment and death.⁴⁹ In the public theatre of refugee politics, those who fell to police bullets were memorialised as martyrs and heroes of the refugee movement. For example, Binapani Mitra, a pregnant woman killed by the police in their attempt to clear Jadabgarh squatters’ colony was mentioned repeatedly in the public meetings of refugees. Her death became a symbol of the suffering and fortitude of the refugee squatters. The *Sanjukta Bastuhara Sammelan* (Joint Meeting of Refugees) of Hooghly district, organised by the Communist Party of India and the Forward Block on 28 January 1951, named one of the main gates for the open-air event Binapani *toran* (gate), thus memorialising her death as martyrdom.⁵⁰ As a result, chronicles of anti-establishment politics and direct clashes with the police were privileged over all other aspects of the lived experience of refugees. While remembering their pasts, the residents of the squatters’ colonies frequently fall back upon the tropes of struggle, martyrdom and sacrifice. In history and memory, this standardised narrative plays the role of a foundation myth, which both explains and legitimises the origin of squatters’ colonies. Bijoygarh colony was dismissed from the ranks of squatters’ colonies on account of its leaders’ proximity to the Congress government and their refusal to engage in stereotypically militant struggle. Yet, the residents of Bijoygarh rely on a similar myth of origin to lay claim to the radical identity of self-settled refugees.

The standardised model of refugee resistance which coalesced out of the multiple representations of refugees as militant underdogs envisions the entire refugee colony as a mobilised machine of war against the establishment. In uncertain times, all colony residents had the responsibility of keeping watch. At any sign of the police or suspicious outsiders, the women raised an alarm by blowing on conch shells and by beating steel utensils together. This was the signal for every able-bodied man present to rush out to battle, armed, literally, with sticks and stones. Children also played a vital role in this idealised armed community. ‘There was an informal information network at place which signalled their arrival (mostly done by young boys). Men resisted as women blew conch.’⁵¹ Thus, within moments, a settlement of respectable refugees would be transformed into a militant army of resistance. At times embellishing these

⁴⁷ Extract of the report by the commissioner of police, Calcutta, for the week ending 7/4/51, File no:- 321/22 (KW), SI No: 46/1922, Government of Bengal, Intelligence Bureau, henceforth GB IB.

⁴⁸ The Bengali daily, *Swadhinata* (Independence), was first published in 1946 as the mouthpiece of the Bengal Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of India. It fell victim to the severe factional fights within the Communist Part during the early sixties and ceased publication by 1965.

⁴⁹ For example see *Swadhinata*, 22 February, 1951.

⁵⁰ Report on the Proceedings of the Hooghly District *Sanjukta Bastuhara Sammelan* (Joint Meeting of Refugees) held at Masirbari Maidan, Mahesh, P.S. Serampur on 28 January 1951, File no:- 321/22 (KW), SI No: 46/1922, GB IB.

⁵¹ Manas Ray, ‘Growing Up Refugee: On Memory and Locality’, in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional practices and contested identities*, Calcutta, 2000, p. 166.

accounts would be accounts of the bravery of refugee women, who fought at the vanguard,⁵² or the strategic use of women and children as shields against the police.⁵³ These battles, more often than not, ended in refugee victory, though the invaders did manage to destroy a few shanties before they left. With exemplary fortitude, the refugees rebuilt their shelters and continued their struggle for rehabilitation and legitimacy within the socio-economic and political milieu of West Bengal. The hold of this standardised origin myth of squatters' colonies upon popular imagination in West Bengal has led it to mould not only the way in which refugees remember and represent their past, but also the production of refugee histories. Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay's *Shikarer Sandhane* illustrates this starkly when the author asks Shantiranjan Sen:

So there had not been any clashes over the land? Then why did the people live in terror? The women were instructed to raise an alarm blowing conch shells and beating upon tin, etc. – why had these precautionary measures been taken?⁵⁴

Having immersed himself in refugee folklore, Kaliprasad aggressively sought confirmation of his pre-conceived notions from his respondents, once he set out to interview the residents of Bijoygarh.

For Bijoygarh, this standardised folklore was combined with the memories of an actual clash between the residents and hired goons sent by Layalka, the landlord, to produce the foundation myth of the colony. However, Manindra Pal,⁵⁵ Shantiranjan Sen and Dharendraanath Ray Chowdhury's⁵⁶ memories of this clash do not fit the mythologised pattern of refugee warfare. The residents of Bijoygarh colony were largely taken by surprise by truckloads of hired musclemen who drove into the area. They strategically chose to attack in the afternoon, hoping that the men of the colony would be away at work. This strategy paid off, as initially the refugees were heavily outnumbered and several sustained heavy injuries. According to Manindra Pal, a resident named Badal had been given the responsibility of keeping watch with a bugle at hand for raising the alarm.⁵⁷ Of the crowd which assembled in response, a fraction actually offered resistance. The students of Jadavpur Engineering College, who shared close ties with the founding members of Bijoygarh due to their common socialist affiliations, came to the rescue of the colony. However, in 1950, when the residents commemorated this victory by renaming Jadavpur Refugee camp as Bijoygarh or victory-fort; few chose to credit the role played by 'outsiders'. By suggesting the new name, Shombhu Guha, who was a member of the Congress Socialist Party and played an active role in various constructive ventures within the colony, claimed this victory and its attendant self-image of victorious underdogs, for all the residents of the colony.⁵⁸ It fed into the squatters' self-image of proud and independent East Bengalis, who

⁵² The first attempt of establishing a squatters' colony under NVBKP leadership in south Calcutta, though a failure, was made memorable by the dogged fight put up by refugee women against the police. For details see Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999, p.65.

⁵³ The suburban squatters' colony at Mahesh evolved this strategy under the leadership of a local CPI student activist. For details see Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999, pp. 81-2.

⁵⁴ Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for Roots)*, 2002, p. 54.

⁵⁵ For the full text of Manindra Pal's interviews see *ibid.* pp. 112-5 and *Dhangsa-o-Nirman (Destruction and Creation)*, 2002, pp. 117-34.

⁵⁶ For the full text of Shantiranjan Sen and Dharendraanath Roy Chowdhury's interviews, see Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for Roots)*, 2002, pp. 46-93.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁸ Interview with Manindra Pal, *Dhangsa-o-Nirman (Destruction and creations)*, 2007, p. 123.

relied on little other than a combination of wit and physical valour to wrest rehabilitation from an unsympathetic state. With the proliferation of popular and autobiographical accounts in Bengali from the mid nineties, these themes of physical courage, militant organisation and struggle against the establishment have found their way into refugee histories.

The stereotype of the militant refugee obscures more than it reveals of the micro-history of the squatters' colonies. As mentioned earlier, the community leaders of Bijoygarh colony had close ties with the Congress party. Their reminiscences are littered with numerous incidents of non-confrontational interaction with the authorities, such as memorandums, deputations, appeals and unofficial conversations leading to equally unofficial understandings with members of the police and the bureaucracy. Such negotiations were by no means unique to Bijoygarh. In other words, confrontation, especially violent confrontation with the authorities, was only one of the many modes in which the refugees dealt with the state. The significance of the mythic battle waged by refugees lay in its ability to produce a homogenised refugee identity in opposition to the external 'other', i.e., the state and the host society, as embodied in ruthless landlords. It papered over differences in caste, class and cultural capital, which not only divided the refugees from East Bengal, but also moulded the kind of rehabilitation which particular refugee families had access to.

Deciphering 'refugee power': the micro-history of rehabilitation

Large numbers of refugees took to political agitation in their quest for rehabilitation, signalling their presence and predicament with slogans of 'Amra kara? Bastuhara!' (Who are we? Refugees!)⁵⁹ Numerous scholars have read their processions and slogans as the sign of the arrival of a new 'power in the land', who derived political clout from 'their number, their completely expropriated condition and rootlessness, their poverty and hunger'.⁶⁰ There is little doubt that the radicalisation of refugees irretrievably altered the political balance in West Bengal.⁶¹ However, the brute force and determination of desperate men, which is the most common understanding of 'refugee power', is a poor explanation for the resilience of refugees. Through the micro-history of Bijoygarh colony it is possible to develop a more nuanced explanation of the ability of the refugees to challenge government policies. Scattered throughout the reminiscences of the squatters are anecdotes of everyday resistance, negotiation and accommodation, which together provide a far richer and complex understanding of refugee power.

Constant attempts by the refugees to obtain government aid or legal recognition characterised the foundation of Jadavpur Refugee camp and its eventual transformation into Bijoygarh colony. The reminiscences of the residents suggest that far from being marginal to the political and bureaucratic order of West Bengal, it was their familiarity with the 'system' which enabled the founders of Bijoygarh to give permanence to an illegal settlement. Old ties of caste, class and locality often aided the quest for new roots in an alien milieu. The affinity borne of a shared past, of living in the same district in East Bengal, of belonging to particular educational

⁵⁹ See Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence', Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, n.d., <www.swadhinata.org.uk/misc/chatterjeeEastBengal%20Refugee.pdf>, Last accessed 18 July 2009.

⁶⁰ Prafulla Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, 1990, p. 48. He equates the first refugee rally in Calcutta, organised on 14 January 1949, as the city's 'first taste of a new power in the land' (p. 53).

⁶¹ For a detailed analysis of the political fallouts of partition and the role played by refugees in changing political calculations in West Bengal see Joya Chatterji in *Spoils of Partition*, 2007, pp. 209-309.

institutions, political parties or cultural movements, provided not only the building blocks of new communities but also markers for identifying potential sympathisers within the government and the bureaucracy. Though illegal, the initial occupation of the Jadavpur military camp met with little opposition from the government. According to Indubaran Ganguly, Kamalkrishna Ray, who was West Bengal's Relief Minister during Dr. P.C. Ghosh's brief tenure as Chief Minister, opened all the abandoned military camps and barracks in and around Calcutta for the refugees. Ganguly suggests that since Kamalkrishna Ray came from Myemensingh in East Bengal, his actions were impelled by his empathy for fellow East Bengalis.⁶² While it is not possible to verify Ganguly's claim, it would be a mistake to underestimate the role played by East Bengali solidarity, born quite recently of a shared displacement wrought by partition, in moulding the course of rehabilitation in West Bengal.

Some of the earliest migrants from East Bengal and the only ones encouraged, even welcomed, by the Indian state, were the 'optees.' They were government employees, including the educated middle-class Hindus who had staffed the vast majority of posts at various levels of administration in East Bengal. With partition, they availed of special provisions made for government servants and 'opted' for India. Though assured an income, most were forced to abandon their ancestral homes and property in East Bengal. Most optees had to negotiate a sharp drop in their standard of life, though few claimed refugee status. In the years after partition, the East Bengali optees maintained a conscious social distance from the squalor and desperation of the refugee colonies and camps.⁶³ Nevertheless, the reminiscences of refugees suggest that post-partition West Bengal also saw the affirmation, perhaps even the creation, of bonds of empathy between optees and refugees who hailed roughly from the same socio-cultural milieu, and often from the same district or town. The bureaucrats and officials who served the cause of rehabilitation beyond the call of duty were often from East Bengal. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay and Jashoda Kanta Ray⁶⁴ are two such individuals who feature prominently in refugee narratives, though no special credit is reserved for them in the state's archives. The more enterprising amongst the refugees specifically appealed to bureaucrats, administrators and lawyers from East Bengal for help, hoping to exploit these affective ties. The middle-class refugees of the squatters' colonies viewed optees within the administration of West Bengal as possible allies in their quest for rehabilitation. It is possible that for the elite amongst the optees, who were also dealing with loss and dislocation, patronage of destitute East Bengalis offered a means of rebuilding social status and influence in West Bengal.

Several references to such interactions with authorities and appeals to individual bureaucrats or government officials can be found in the reminiscences of the leaders of Bijoygarh. One such incident which illustrates the role played by personal and social ties in Bijoygarh colony's struggle to gain recognition was the 'battle' with the hired goons of Layalka. Though in the skirmish the residents of Bijoygarh came out on top, it was, in fact, only the beginning of their troubles. The police swiftly issued warrants for the arrest of all the refugees involved in the fight and for all the committee members. Moreover, Layalka, unwilling to give up his land, took the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association to court. Desperate to avoid

⁶² Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, pp. 25-6.

⁶³ For a literary representation of this social distance see Amitav Ghosh, *The shadow lines*, Delhi, 1988. Also see MD. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem Van Schendel, 'I Am Not a Refugee': Rethinking Partition Migration', *Modern Asian Studies*, 37, 3, 2003, 551-84. It is only of late that the popularisation of the heroic trope of the self-settled Bengali refugee has made refugee identity a mantle worth wearing amongst the '*bhadraloks*' of Calcutta.

⁶⁴ Jashoda Kanta Ray was the Deputy Commissioner of Relief and Rehabilitation with the Government of West Bengal.

imprisonment and conviction for activities which were patently illegal, Santosh Datta and his cohort, Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury, *alias* Kalabhai, sought a meeting with Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay. The latter was then the District Magistrate of 24 Parganas, but had been a *khashmahal* officer in Barisal district of East Bengal before partition. As a result he was not a complete stranger to Kalabhai, who had been a local celebrity of sorts in Barisal on account of his participation in revolutionary terrorism and his role as the editor of a literary journal called *Sarathi*.⁶⁵ Kalabhai had met Bandyopadhyay at a cultural function organised by the Brahma Samaj in Barisal, where he had been extremely impressed by the latter's lecture on Vedic philosophy. Subsequently, he had invited Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay to be the chief priest at a cultural festival, *Kalidas Janmajayanti*,⁶⁶ at the town hall of Barisal. Kalabhai did not hesitate to remind the District Magistrate of their previous acquaintance, no doubt in the hope of eliciting sympathy for the squatters.⁶⁷

Bandyopadhyay directed the refugees to seek the help of yet another optee: the officer-in-chief of Tollygunj Police Station, Amulya Bannerjee. He had been a police officer at Keraniganj police station of Dhaka district before partition.⁶⁸ The vast majority of the squatters' colonies of south Calcutta, including Bijoygarh, came under his jurisdiction. Refugee reminiscences from Bijoygarh suggest that Amulya Bannerjee secretly helped them to exploit every possible loophole of the criminal procedure code, while publicly continuing to carry out his duty of evicting illegal squatters.⁶⁹ If Kalabhai's account is to be believed, Amulya Bannerjee came to a mutually-beneficial compromise with the refugees. He agreed to allow the named refugees to surrender at a pre-determined spot, and to immediately grant them bail. Thus, the refugee leaders were spared the ignominy of being locked up. Mr. Bannerjee, in return for his co-operation, was promised a plot or two of the illegally-occupied land.⁷⁰

Though the threat of harassment from the police had been averted, the case still had to be fought in court. As the hearing dragged on, the refugees again turned to their more accomplished East Bengali brethren for support. Girin Ray Chowdhury, the lawyer representing the refugees, was from Faridpur district.⁷¹ However, defeat and conviction seemed imminent until the refugees requested Chinta Haran Ray, a famous criminal lawyer from Subidra in Dhaka, to argue on their behalf. The colony dwellers could not afford the services of a renowned lawyer. It seems that ties of a lost homeland, coupled with a sense of obligation arising from personal familiarity with one of the refugees, prompted Ray to take up their case free of charge. 'He knew me', explained Manindra Pal, one of the many leaders of colony construction. 'I used to be his brother's classmate at Jagannath Hall in Dhaka.'⁷² Chinta Haran Ray's legal intervention finally forced

⁶⁵ *Sarathi* literally means the charioteer but in this context clearly evoked the role played by Krishna in the epic battle of *Mahabharata* where he had guided the mythical Pandava brothers to victory as the charioteer of Arjun.

⁶⁶ Literally this means the birth anniversary of the Sanskrit composer Kalidasa, however in fact it was more likely to be the opening ceremony of a literary and cultural festival.

⁶⁷ Interview with Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for Roots)*, 2002, p. 77.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mani Pal, *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶⁹ Himangshu Majumdar, a member of the central committee of Bijoygarh colony and its resident since December 1947 makes special mention of his aid. For details see Interview with Himangshu Majumdar in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane, (Quest for Roots)*, 2002, p. 103.

⁷⁰ Interview with Kalabhai, *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

⁷¹ Interview of Manindra Pal, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷² Interview with Manindra Pal, *Dhangsa-o-Nirman, (Destruction and Creation)*, 2007, p. 120-21. Also see interview with Manindra Pal in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane, (Quest for roots)*, 2002, p. 115.

Layalka to drop charges.⁷³ Thus, the battle with Layalka, which has been mythologised as a militant conflict won by the sheer muscle and grit of desperate refugees, was actually won in court.

This was followed by another coup based on East Bengali solidarity orchestrated by the colony committee. According to Kalabhai, the military camp at Jadavpur was the property of the army and in 1950, plans were afoot to auction it off. This precipitated a meeting between the leaders of Bijoygarh and the G.O.C Eastern Command, Satya Brata Sinha Roy or S.B.S. Roy.⁷⁴ Debabrata Datta provides a slightly different context for the meeting. According to him, the colony committee wanted to use the last extant military barrack, still controlled by the army, to establish a college. They requested Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay's help in the matter, who directed them to meet S.B.S. Roy.⁷⁵ However, both accounts place equal emphasis on the General's East Bengali origin. Kalabhai requested him to visit the colony in order to understand the compulsion of the refugees. 'You are after all from East Bengal' he implored; once more hoping to exploit the sentiments of East Bengali sub-nationalism.⁷⁶ Datta's narrative underlines this factor. 'He too was from East Bengal. Therefore, realising the difficulty of the refugees, he did not hold back in expressing a spirit of co-operation.'⁷⁷ The Commander-in-Chief visited Bijoygarh on August 21, 1950 and officially handed over the military barrack of Bijoygarh to the colony committee, to be used for 'educational purposes'.⁷⁸

The success of the refugees in negotiating the bureaucratic and legal maze of partitioned Bengal cannot be attributed to successful appeals to well-placed East Bengalis alone. To the colonies they inhabited, many refugees brought a measure of familiarity with associative politics. The founders of the Jadavpur Refugee camp, Shombhu Guha Thakurta, Sushil Sengupta and Ashish Deb Ray, besides being East Bengalis and residents of the small residential complex around Jadavpur University, shared in common their membership of the Jayprakash faction of the Congress Socialist Party.⁷⁹ The refugees who took the lead in establishing squatters' colonies usually proceeded only after forming an association or a committee.⁸⁰ These committees and associations were spontaneously formed through mutual consent. But they were invariably registered with the Registrar of Firms, Societies and Non-trading Corporations of West Bengal under the Society Act of 1886. They conformed to the institutional structure required of registered societies, framing a constitution and electing or nominating an executive committee consisting of a president, treasurer and secretary. This indicated not only a high degree of literacy, but also organisational skills typical to a bourgeois public sphere. This knowhow of popular associations provides a far more convincing explanation than mere willpower or enterprise, for the ability of a certain section of the refugees to resist official policies of eviction and dispersal.

⁷³ Since the records of criminal cases which do not reach the higher courts are routinely destroyed every ten years, the records of this case have not survived.

⁷⁴ Interview with Dhirendranath Roy Chowdhury, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, (*Quest for roots*), 2002, p. 81.

⁷⁵ Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh*, 2001, p. 59.

⁷⁶ Interview with Dhirendranath Roy Chowdhury, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, (*Quest for roots*), 2002, p. 81.

⁷⁷ Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh*, 2001, p. 59.

⁷⁸ The details of this visit are roughly the same in Debabrata Datta, *Ibid*, and Kalabhai's interview in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, (*Quest for roots*), 2002, pp. 80-82.

⁷⁹ Interview with Dr. Subrathesh Ghosh, *Dhangsa-o-Nirman*, (*Destruction and Creation*), 2007, pp. 97-98.

⁸⁰ Here, Bijoygarh was the exception rather than the rule, as a committee to regulate the day to day life of the Jadavpur Refugee Camp took shape after the abandoned military barracks had already been occupied.

A significant number amongst the squatters worked as clerks or lower level officials in the various departments of the government of West Bengal.⁸¹ This made the colony committees privy to an ‘insider’s’ knowledge of bureaucracy. Often, these contacts succeeded in obtaining government aid for a particular venture of the colony. A number of Bijoygarh’s constructive initiatives derived support and stability from such linkages. Shanti Sen worked at Writers’ Building, possibly as one of the many clerks employed at the seat of government in West Bengal. He saw himself as a facilitator of the first meeting between the refugees of the Jadavpur camp and the authorities at Writers’ Building. ‘I had gone with them (the refugee leaders) since they had never seen Writers’ Building before. I guided them and we met the Relief Minister.’⁸² Familiar with the idiosyncrasies of bureaucracy, Shantiranjan came up with an ingenious plan of exploiting the loopholes in administrative procedure in order to derive some official recognition for Bijoygarh.

There were several government employees amongst the refugees at Jadavpur camp who had ‘opted’ for government service in West Bengal. Sen instructed these men to address an official letter to their respective departments, asking for some land for resettlement. The letters further requested that if the authorities could not provide land, could they at least forward the application to the Jadavpur Refugee Association, along with a request to that association of a plot of land for the applicant. The point of the exercise was not to actually obtain land, but to trick the respective government departments into indirectly endorsing an illegal seizure of land.

This strategy of ours paid off. Every department approached in this manner forwarded the applications to our association. They did not know what value these had.... Later on, we could tell the government that they could not deem us to be trespassers, since their administrative departments had forwarded applications to the secretary of our association. This was a great safeguard for us in legal terms. Ten or twelve such applications were forwarded to us.⁸³

At other times, Bijoygarh colony enjoyed more direct benefits of having government employees amongst its residents. All respondents acknowledged Nalini Mohan Dasgupta as the driving force behind the establishment of the first secondary school for the children of Jadavpur camp. Local refugee leaders founded a school named *Jadavpur Bastuhara Banipeeth* on 6 January 1949. It was later renamed *Jadavpur Bastuhara Vidyapeeth* and with the rechristening of the camp as Bijoygarh colony, came to be known as *Bijoygarh Vidyapeeth*. At this stage, a permanent committee took over the administration of the boys’ section of the school and Nalini Mohan Dasgupta became the secretary of this committee.⁸⁴ Dasgupta earned his living as an employee of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department of West Bengal as was therefore, uniquely placed to obtain government recognition for the school, as well as the full package of

⁸¹ The East Bengali migrants’ ability to secure white collar jobs has been highlighted by Joya Chatterji in *Spoils of Partition*, 2007, pp. 141-50. Also see Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta: 1964, A social survey*, Bombay, 1968, p. 34. According to Bose, refugees from East Bengal tended to avoid manual labour and most found jobs as clerks. A statistical survey of refugees in West Bengal conducted in 1955 noted with alarm their high rates of employment in government and other services. For details, see State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, *Rehabilitation of refugees - A statistical survey, 1955*, Alipore, 1956, pp. 5-9.

⁸² Interview of Shanti Ranjan Sen, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, [Quest for roots], 2002, pp. 46-47.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 52.

⁸⁴ Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh*, 2001, p. 28.

benefits that refugee students were entitled to.⁸⁵ While writing the history of Bijoygarh, Debabrata Dutta made a direct connection between education and influence.

Through untiring efforts of Nalini Mohan Dasgupta and Santosh Dutta's influence in circles of governance it was possible to obtain government aid for every single refugee student. This is what enabled the refugee children of this area to continue their education.⁸⁶

Despite high aspirations, most refugees in squatter's colonies did not have the means to educate their children. Education and therefore social mobility amongst refugees depended upon the ability to obtain concessions from the government.

The importance of education in the social geography of the squatters' colonies cannot be over-stated.⁸⁷ Almost every colony boasted of at least one secondary school and several primary schools. These schools were not only vital to refugee aspirations of economic rehabilitation through training the next generation for employment; they also embodied the educated and cultured *bhadralok* identity the middle-class squatters clung to.⁸⁸ According to Manas Ray, the refugees believed that *shiksha* (education) would enable them to gain recognition as *bhadraloks* from Calcutta society, 'something we thought we rightfully deserved, but were deprived of.'⁸⁹ These schools also bound the refugee community together at a more practical level. Almost all the teachers of the schools were drawn from amongst local refugees. Manas Ray, in his autobiographical account, noted large number of school teachers among the early migrants to West Bengal.⁹⁰ Schools were popular as they provided local employment. Most schools were started by pooling together meagre funds. The teachers depended upon *chanda*, or donations, for their salary, which was paid irregularly, if at all.⁹¹ Yet, given the high levels of unemployment in contemporary Calcutta, the colony's schools seldom suffered from a dearth of teachers. Moreover, compared to regularisation of land ownership, which still awaits many refugees, it was comparatively easy to obtain government recognition for the schools. Once a school was registered, which the refugees were quick to organise through their network of connections, it provided regular government jobs to a significant number of refugees. It also became the first step towards gaining legitimacy from the authorities and recognition from the host society of Calcutta.

⁸⁵ According to Gouranga De Chowdhury, he was employed as the office superintendent in the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. See interview with Gouranga De Chowdhury, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, (Quest for roots), 2002, p. 61.

⁸⁶ Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh*, 2001, p. 29.

⁸⁷ For an analysis of the significance of education in the mind-set of the residents of refugee colonies see Dipankar Sinha's 'Adjustment and transition in a Bengali Refugee Settlement: 1950-1999' in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.) *Refugees in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 2000, pp. 147-151.

⁸⁸ Literally meaning 'decent people', the term was originally used to describe the landed and educated Hindu middle class of Bengal. However, with the radical decline of the *bhadralok* in the first half of the twentieth century, the term had increasingly come to represent a claim towards social respectability, bolstered by superior educational qualifications, lineage and cultural pursuits, which may or may not be reflected in economic status. For an exploratory survey of the decline of the Bengali *bhadralok* and their attempts to stem the rot, see Joya Chatterji, 'The decline, revival and fall of *bhadralok* influence in the 1940s: A historiographic review', in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal: rethinking history, essays in historiography*, Delhi, 2001, pp. 297-315.

⁸⁹ Manas Ray, 'Growing Up Refugee', in *ibid*, p.173.

⁹⁰ Manas Ray, 'Kata deshe ghorer khonj' (*The quest for home in a divide land*), in Tridib Chakrabarti, et al. (eds.) *Dhanga-o-Nirman*, (Destruction and creation), 2007, p. 254.

⁹¹ For a descriptive account of the foundation of numerous schools in Bijoygarh see Debabrata Datta, *Bijoygarh*, 2001, pp. 27-31.

Not all the residents of the squatters' colonies were middle class or educated. However, the self-image of the squatters was without an exception of the educated *bhadralok*. Their leaders, irrespective of political affiliations, represented the colonies as *bhadralok* communities, repeatedly stressing education and pursuit of bourgeois culture as markers which set them apart from the urban poor of Calcutta. Kalabhai's attempt to elicit support for the regularisation of Bijoygarh colony from the District Magistrate of 24 Parganas, discussed above, provides a relevant example.⁹² In this meeting, he described the squatters of Bijoygarh as 'members of that (East Bengali) erudite society'.⁹³ Sainen Chowdhury's play on the cultured identity of the squatters was far more spectacular. Once the chairman of Sherpur Municipality of Mymensingh in East Bengal, Sainen had joined the ranks of squatters in West Bengal and had helped to found Deshbandhu colony.⁹⁴ He succeeded in eliciting an impromptu meeting with the Governor of West Bengal, Dr. Katju, through a calculated display of cultural affinity. Young refugee girls dressed in saris, blowing conch shells and scattering flowers upon the Governor's car as he travelled along the main road bordering the colony proved to be far more effective than a road block. The Governor was ushered into a squatter's shack and felicitated with garlands, accompanied by songs and recitations by refugee children. Sainen Chowdhury wrapped up the session with an appeal for help.⁹⁵ This display had the desired effect upon Dr Katju. According to Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, who was his companion on this tour, the Governor was extremely impressed by the refugees' commitment towards preserving their cultural heritage despite poverty. He showed his appreciation by arranging for the resettlement of Deshbandhu colony on land legally requisitioned nearby. Naktala No. 1 colony, an island of legal settlement within the expanding mosaic of squats in south Calcutta, emerged as a result of Dr. Katju's determination to rescue these cultured families from a life of illegality.⁹⁶

Much of the enterprise and initiative of the squatters in rehabilitating themselves derived from their social and cultural antecedents. The refugees who built the squatters' colonies came from a socio-cultural milieu where education and white-collar jobs were highly valued. The East Bengali migrants who succeeded in rebuilding reasonably prosperous lives in West Bengal, either as well-paid professional or as officials in the national administration, remained connected to their poorer 'country cousins' through social ties born of common schools, colleges, socio-cultural forums, or through familial ties perpetuated by marriage. What the squatters around Calcutta lacked in economic means and urban sophistication, they sought to make up through judicious exploitation of social networks and familial ties. However, cultural capital alone was not sufficient to see the refugees through. They turned to politics in order to combat the might of the state, which remained stubborn in its attachment to 'law and order' and reluctant to concede space to the refugees. The 'infiltration' of refugee associations by the Communist Party of India, the relationship between refugee politics and the electoral success of Left parties in West Bengal, as well as the limits of CPI's commitment to the refugee cause has been discussed in vivid detail by Prafulla Chakrabarti.⁹⁷ It cannot be denied that Communist support played a crucial role in bolstering the refugees' demand for rehabilitation. But an overt emphasis on confrontational

⁹² See above, p 24.

⁹³ Interview of Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury, alias, Kalabhai, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikoror sandhane (Quest for roots)*, Bhasha O Sahitya, Calcutta, 2002, p.78.

⁹⁴ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonyismriti: (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, pp. 36-9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 39-41.

⁹⁶ Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu, (Refugee)*, 1970, p. 39. Also described in Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonyismriti: (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, pp. 36-9.

⁹⁷ Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999.

politics obscures the diverse strategies employed by refugees to find a foothold in Calcutta. The vast majority of the refugee families who unleashed the veritable movement of land-grabbing upon Calcutta had been reduced to bare subsistence levels by circumstances. Desperate to better their lot, they used every possible means, whether legal or illegal. At the micro-historical level, political agitation is revealed to be the most visible of the many strategies of wresting rehabilitation from a reluctant state; not the only, or even the most effective one.

The *bhadralok* refugee and paradoxes of refugee identity

The pattern of refugee experiences that comes to light from the above discussion suffers from a near-exclusive focus on the squatters' colonies and their *bhadralok* residents. The stereotypical Bengali refugee delineated in these narratives is both a victim and a survivor. Despite state apathy and abysmal conditions in government camps, they emerge triumphant in their quest for social and economic rehabilitation through the establishment of the squatters' colonies. The existing refugee narratives no doubt lament the tragedy of thousands who perished in the government camps or were dispersed to marginal lands in Orissa, Bihar, Dandakaranya and the Andaman Islands. Yet, this tragedy only serves to highlight the achievement of self-rehabilitation in *jabardakhal* colonies. Commemorative booklets, memoirs and popular histories are crowded with the names of leaders and pioneers, and descriptions of their achievements.⁹⁸ No such popular accounts exist regarding the inmates of government camps. Their voices and lived experiences of rehabilitation are conspicuously absent.⁹⁹ Two central assertions structure the reminiscences, amateur histories and autobiographies authored by squatters. First, the dehumanising conditions of government camps combined with the failure of the authorities to provide any shelter to the swelling tide of refugees provide the moral justification for illegal occupation of land. Second, is the constant reiteration of the respectable and educated character of the refugees despite their illegal activities. A paradoxical feature of these narratives is that despite the pervasive horror of a prolonged stay on railway platforms or in government camps, a lived experience of either site is completely absent in the reminiscences of squatters.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, on closer scrutiny, the respectability of middle-class refugees is seen to have a divisive impact.

⁹⁸ Though the majority of the refugee colonies in Jadavpur and Tollygunj regions have been regularised and integrated into the urban sprawl of greater Calcutta, most have retained the colony committees and membership of the UCRC. While the latter continues to highlight outstanding issues and grievances of refugee colonies, most colony committees now concentrate on organising communal yearly festivals, especially the *Durga Puja*. Between 1998 and 2000, the fiftieth anniversary was celebrated by a number of colonies, their schools or by the local *Durga Puja*. Most commemorated the occasion by printing a booklet which included a section on the foundation and history of the particular colony and its institutions. One such example is *Regent Colony Bastuhara Samiti, Subarna Jayanti Utsab, (Regent Colony Refugee Association, Golden Jubilee Celebrations), 1999-2000*, n.p., 2000.

⁹⁹ A handful of studies which have explored the lived experience of refugees in the various government camps and colonies reveal a far more complex world of everyday resistance and negotiations. See Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition narratives among Punjabi migrants of Delhi*, New Delhi, 2007 and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, 'Permanent refugees: Female camp inhabitant in Bihar', Philomena Essed, Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers (eds.), *Refugees and the transformation of societies: Agency, policies, ethics and politics*, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2004, pp. 81-93 and Udit Sen, 'Dissident Memories: Exploring Bengali Refugee Narratives in the Andaman Islands', Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds.) *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration during the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁰⁰ Of the fifteen interviews published in *Dhangsa-o-Nirman, (Destruction and Creation)*, 2007, none confess to the experience of living in government camps or on railway platforms.

All accounts of Bijoygarh's history mention a handful of refugee families from Sealdah Station as the colony's earliest residents. However, none of the respondents selected by three separate oral history initiatives fit this profile.¹⁰¹ Even the names of these early settlers elude most respondents. Dr. Subrathesh Ghosh could barely recall the name of one such family.¹⁰² Bharat Chandra Debnath's childhood memory of accompanying Shombu Guha to bring refugees from the railway station did not extend to actual familiarity with these families, or any concrete memory of them. 'But I don't remember their names', he said. 'They are dead... There was one who was a contractor - he lived in number one [ward].'¹⁰³ While collective memory in Bijoygarh had forgotten the first squatters who had come from Sealdah station, the popular histories of other colonies seldom mentioned any resident fleeing the squalor of railway platforms. In a booklet commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Regent colony, the customary summary of the horrors of the camps and platforms is followed by an explanation of the crisis of housing faced by displaced persons who already held jobs in Calcutta, but could not afford shelters for their uprooted families.¹⁰⁴ Indubaran Ganguly's description of the genesis of Deshbandhu colony openly admits that all the names included in the list of plot holders were the friends and relatives of the members of the founding committee.¹⁰⁵ This committee consisted of prominent refugee leaders living in neighbouring *jabardakhal* colonies and their confidants, such as the author himself, who at that time lived in a rented house nearby. Similarly, Manas Ray's account of the origins of Netaji Nagar colony identifies teachers and lawyers as members of the founding committee, and refugees 'known to the committee members' as the eventual residents.¹⁰⁶

Thus, the stereotypical refugee, driven to illegally occupy land to escape the degradation of living on pavements and railway stations, was historically a marginal figure in the squatters' colonies. The vast majority of the squatters either left rented accommodation, or the temporary shelter of friends and relatives, to lay claim to their own plot of land in the outskirts of Calcutta. None of the middle-class refugees, who waxed eloquent on the dehumanising congestion of camp life and the ignominy of weeks spent on the platform, had actually experienced either. The very real fear of being reduced to such destitution acted as a powerful motive for *jabardakhal* amongst refugees who had limited means. The actual experience of camps and platforms was reserved for the poorer refugees who lacked the cultural capital, education and bureaucratic knowhow that characterised the colony-dwellers. The inmates of government camps, especially those who arrived after 1950, tended to belong to the lower castes of East Bengal, especially the *Namasudras*. There is evidence to suggest that the *bhadraloks* of the colony were not only desperate to avoid entering government camps, but also eager to maintain a social distance from the refugees who did not live up to their standards of respectability.

The *bhadralok* identity of squatters' colonies was not limited to benign cultural terms. It was also used to justify the replication of social hierarchies within colonies. Indubaran Ganguly's account faithfully reproduces contemporary rumours of social segregation within colonies, such as the rumour of an 'exclusive' enclave of larger plots reserved for the founders of Gandhi

¹⁰¹ These include the fifteen interviews published in *Dhangsa-o-Nirman, (Destruction and creation)*, 2007; five respondents of Mukhopadhyay in *Shikoror sandhane (Quest for roots)*, 2002, and the various informants consulted by Debabrata Datta in *Bijoygarh*, 2007.

¹⁰² Interview with Dr. Subrathesh Ghosh, *Dhangsa-o-Nirman (Destruction and creation)*, 2007, pp. 98-9.

¹⁰³ Interview with Bharat Chandra Debnath, *Ibid*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ *Regent Colony Bastuhara samiti, subarna jayanti utsab, (Regent colony refugee association, golden jubilee celebrations)*, 1999-2000, n.p., 2000.

¹⁰⁵ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonyismriti (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, pp. 36-9.

¹⁰⁶ Manas Ray, 'Growing up Refugee' *History Workshop Journal*, 53, 2002, 149-79.

colony. Jadavpur Association¹⁰⁷ went one step further to announce that only *bhadraloks* would be allotted plots in the colony. An 'action squad' implemented this diktat by displacing refugees deemed to be '*chotolok*' or of low status to make room for suitably cultured, and substantially better-off *bhadraloks* of East Bengal.¹⁰⁸ If there is truth in this allegation, it might explain the complete disappearance of the families who had been brought over from the Sealdah platform by Shombhu Guha and his cohorts, not only from the geography of Bijoygarh colony, but also from its collective memory. Dr. Ghosh struggled to explain the absence of these families, vaguely alluding to a second displacement. 'Don't know if they are still here, as later they were displaced all over again. Either they sold off the place, or gave it away - I do not know. Except one or two, all the families left.'¹⁰⁹

Manas Ray's autobiographical account of growing up in Netaji Nagar colony speaks at some length of these internal divides, and is worth quoting at some length.

The vast majority of those who came were middle-class people with some urban exposure. Those who did not fall in this bracket - fishermen, carpenters, hut-builders, masons, barbers - tended to concentrate in two adjacent wards lying at one end of the locality.... In retrospect, it seems amazing how little I knew of that world, how subtle and comprehensive was the process of normalization of divisions.¹¹⁰

Thus, the refugees of the squatters' colonies who have long been feted as the sheet anchor of Left-wing politics in Calcutta, were at best partial towards including friends, relatives and acquaintances in their constructive ventures; and at worst, practised active social segregation in order to maintain social respectability. Caste was the most visible marker of respect amongst the refugees. The refugees marginalised within the social geography of Netaji Nagar, as well as the unfortunates who stagnated in camps or were dispersed to distant inhospitable lands, shared one thing in common - they inevitably belonged to the lower castes of rural East Bengal. The fishermen, carpenters, hut-builders, masons and barbers mentioned by Manas Ray are not merely names of occupations lacking social status, but also indicative of caste identities. This caste-based segregation also divided the refugee agitation for rehabilitation in West Bengal. When the UCRC attempted to take up the cause of the camp refugees who had deserted the Bettiah camp of Bihar, they ran up against the age old distrust of upper-caste Hindus amongst the *Namasudras* of East Bengal. Ninety percent of the deserters were *Namasudras* and were open only to the leadership of a certain Apurbalal Mazumdar. The latter had little say within the various refugee organisations of Calcutta, but exerted tremendous influence amongst the Bettiah deserters due to his *Namasudra* identity.¹¹¹ While highlighting the caste-based affiliations of the camp refugees, Chakrabarti fails to comment upon the absence of refugees from low-caste backgrounds in the various democratic refugee organisations that emerged in West Bengal during the 1950s.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ By Jadavpur Association reference must have been made to the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association- the Committee which established the squat which was renamed Bijoygarh Colony in 1950.

¹⁰⁸ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti: (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Dr. Subrathesh Ghosh, *Dhanga-o-Nirman (Destruction and creation)*, 2007, p. 99.

¹¹⁰ Manas Ray, 'Growing Up Refugee', *History Workshop Journal*, 53, 2002, 149-79.

¹¹¹ Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999, p. 171.

¹¹² Recent research has brought to light a sense of persecution amongst *Namasudra* refugees who clearly flag their low-caste identity as the basis of their marginalisation. For details see Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When tigers become 'citizens' and refugees 'tigerfood'', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 April 2005, 1757-62. Also see Ross Mallik, 'Refugee resettlement in forest reserves: West Bengal policy reversal and the Marichjhapi massacre', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58, 1, 1999, 104-21.

The movement demanding rehabilitation for Bettiah deserters failed, despite the support of all the Left-led refugee organisations.¹¹³ The primary reason for its failure was the lack of active public support. Tellingly, the people of the squatters' colonies could not be moved to participate in the movement. This was not for want of trying on the part of refugee organisations, which had organically grown out of these very colonies. This prompted Chakrabarti to move away from his celebratory narrative of the *jabardakhal* movement and speculate that 'the petty bourgeoisie squatters who had very little relationship with the lowly *Namasudra* peasant before migration felt no real concern for the fate of these agriculturists'.¹¹⁴ In other words, in the absence of social and cultural ties, an inclusive refugee identity did not emerge in West Bengal. Nor did any semblance of solidarity bind the refugees together. The discourse of respectability running through the refugee narratives and the emphasis on culture and education served to naturalise the recreation of caste and class hierarchies of rural East Bengal amongst the displaced Hindu population in West Bengal.

Refugee narratives regarding the genesis of squatters' colonies harp on the self-respect of middle-class refugees, which made it difficult for them to accept 'charity' from the government. This, coupled with a refusal to resign themselves to a life of dependence on state munificence, is presented as the driving force behind the East Bengali *bhadralok's* planned illegal seizure of land. For Indubaran Ganguly, living in camps and accepting the 'so-called government largesse' was no different from begging. By explaining the reluctance of colony-dwellers to accept government 'doles' in terms of their middle-class sensibilities, Ganguly introduces class background as the main distinguishing feature between camp refugees and colony-dwellers.

...it hurt the self-respect of many middle class and lower-middle class refugee families. To make the future of their children so dependent on others also jarred the sensibility of many guardians. It can be said, that it was the force of such circumstances that made the desperate refugees take the historic step towards authoring their own rehabilitation in fallow land. The result was the *jabardakhal* colony.¹¹⁵

A similar passage or sentiment can be discerned in every single refugee narrative emerging from the squatters' colonies, whether textual or oral. The cultural arrogance of a middle-class identity is clearly visible in these narratives. Squatters' colonies, besides providing their residents with shelter, also enabled middle-class Bengalis to maintain a clear social distance from the camp refugees, who by implication were seen to lack respectability and self-respect.

The self-sufficient refugee who scorned government charity and rehabilitated himself is a carefully-constructed cultural identity. It draws its strength from the origin myth of the refugee colonies, which runs through both refugee histories and reminiscences. However, it does not hold up to closer scrutiny. Reading between the lines of refugee narratives, it becomes evident that far from being averse to government aid, the squatters were adept at obtaining concessions and exemptions from the authorities. Even as the colony committees were caught up in a movement against the government to stall eviction, there were many amongst the residents who benefitted from the loans being distributed by the Ministry of Rehabilitation. Jatindranath Das of Bijoygarh colony obtained a loan of Rs 8,000 from the government, which he used to start a business.¹¹⁶ Jiten Datta of Bijoygarh set up a grocery shop in Bijoygarh's refugee market with a similar

¹¹³ For details of this agitation see Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, 1999, pp. 162-207.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 178-9.

¹¹⁵ Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonismriti: (Memories of colonies)*, 1997, p. 25.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Jatindranath Das, *Dhangsa-o-Nirman (Destruction and creation)*, 2007, p. 206.

loan.¹¹⁷ Official records suggest that their experience was far from exceptional. In 1960, Morarji Desai, the Finance Minister of India, wrote to Renuka Ray, the erstwhile Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation of West Bengal (1952-57), citing a comprehensive set of figures, which were designed to refute her allegation of state apathy towards the non-camp refugees in West Bengal.¹¹⁸ These figures suggest that contrary to their professed identity of 'self-settled' refugee, the residents of squatters' colonies benefitted significantly from a variety of government aid.

Renuka Ray sought to use her influence as an elected Member of Parliament to remedy, what in her opinion, were the ills that plagued the rehabilitation of Bengali refugees.¹¹⁹ Based on her experience as the Minister of Rehabilitation, she criticised as flawed and unfair the central government's policy of prioritising the re-settlement of refugees living in various government camps over and above the work of regularising and developing the squatters' colonies. Her repeated letters to Morarji Desai, insisting that the Government of India had given little or nothing to non-camp refugees were eventually silenced by a detailed response from the Finance Minister, marshalling facts and figures to prove that Ray's allegations had little basis.¹²⁰ According to the Minister of Finance, by August 1960, 21 lakh refugees had received a total sum of Rs 66.5 crores as rehabilitation assistance. Not only were the majority of the recipients, an estimated 15 lakhs, from 'outside camps' but also their share of government grants amounted to 48.5 crores. Desai proceeded to break up this total into its constituent types of rehabilitation benefits, illustrating that in each category, the 'non-campers' received a significantly larger proportion of government aid.

Out of 92,000 displaced families to whom rehabilitation loans have been advanced, 17,000 are campers and 75,000 non campers; all the 15,000 families to whom trade loans have been advanced by the Refugee Businessmen Rehabilitation Board and by the Rehabilitation Finance Administration are non-campers, out of 36,000 persons who have been given training under the Technical and Vocational Training Schemes, 3,500 are campers and 32,500 are non campers; practically all the displaced persons employed in the 300 sanctioned schemes of medium, small scale and cottage industries are non-campers; and almost all the 22,000 displaced families who have been given house-building loans (including the Contributory scheme) or accommodated in government built houses in West Bengal are non-campers.¹²¹

These non-campers were none other than the 'self-settled' refugees of West Bengal, the vast majority of whom lived in the various squatters' colonies. In other words, the avowedly self-sufficient squatters actually enjoyed the lion's share of the admittedly inadequate rehabilitation loans and grants in West Bengal.

Though the camp inhabitants and residents of squatters' or private colonies constituted two separate categories of refugees in West Bengal, what distinguished them was not their inherent nature or psychology. They were divided by their disparate socio-economic backgrounds. The pioneers of the *jabardakhal* colonies were those who had the requisite skills for such an enterprise - education, familiarity with the urban geography of Calcutta and social and cultural capital. The refugees who lacked this crucial set of attributes were either physically excluded from the colonies or, as Manas Ray suggests, segregated within them. Past inequalities were reproduced within the new milieu. While aggressively carving out a space for themselves in

¹¹⁷ Interview with Jiten Datta, *Ibid*, p.145.

¹¹⁸ Morarji Desai, Finance Minister, Government of India to Renuka Ray, MP, August 15, 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject File No 5, *NMML*.

¹¹⁹ Renuka Ray, *My reminiscences: social development during the Gandhian era and after*, Calcutta, 2005, p. 189.

¹²⁰ Morarji Desai to Renuka Ray, 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, *NMML*.

¹²¹ *Ibid*.

the society and politics of West Bengal, the *bhadraloks* who shunned camps also monopolised government schemes offering training, employment and loans to refugees. The patterns of rehabilitation in West Bengal recreated and deepened the rift between the educated middle-classes and the low-caste peasants that had historically divided the Hindus of East Bengal.

Conclusion

The self-settled refugee and his heroic struggle dominate the living memory of partition's aftermath in West Bengal. This dominant memory is born partly of years of Leftist political slogans and propaganda regarding refugee struggles and partly of refugee reminiscences which seek to fashion out of a deeply divided history a cohesive refugee identity. The mytho-history West Bengal's squatters' colonies has been further reinforced by the recent proliferation of commemorative texts.¹²² In the years since 1997, every enterprising refugee colony has produced its own booklet of community history, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the colony, its school or the local *Durga Puja*.¹²³ Through constant reiteration, a selective representation of refugee pasts, designed to foster political unity amongst refugees and to obfuscate the deep inequalities of class, caste and cultural capital amongst East Bengali refugees, has emerged as the dominant account of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal. The focus on refugee movements and political agitation obscures the socio-economic basis of 'refugee power' in post-partition West Bengal. In the process, it also distorts the nature of refugee agency in Calcutta, which derived much of its efficacy from cultural capital. The anti-eviction movement, wrangles over leadership, militant clashes with the police, eye-witness accounts of bleak destitution at the railway platforms or pavements and the 'coming-out' of refugee women as bread-winners are the familiar themes of refugee anecdotes and reminiscences. The refugees rehabilitated by the government in marginal lands at Gayeshpur and Habra, the refugee-settlers of the Andaman Islands, or the regimented life in Mana transit camp of Dandakaranya, are conspicuous by their absence.

A similar bias towards Calcutta-centric histories characterises the scholarship on East Bengali refugees. However, unlike popular histories, the fate of thousands of low-caste refugees who bore the brunt of government dispersal is not passed over in silence. Instead the residents of the government camps and rehabilitation sites are represented as victims of the regime of rehabilitation. These schemes are described as 'tragic' failures, and their 'beneficiaries' as a flattened mass of victimhood. The richness of detail which characterises histories of 'self-settled' refugees, gives way to a nameless and faceless homogeneity. This distorts the lived experience of camp-dwellers¹²⁴ and serves to further highlight the achievement of the refugee-

¹²² For a discussion on the mythic structure of oral history interviews see Jean Peneff, 'Myths in life stories' and Luisa Passerini, 'Mythbiography in oral history' in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds.) *The myths we live by*, London, 1990, pp. 36-50.

¹²³ The worship of goddess Durga celebrates her victory over the demon Mahisasura and has grown in importance over the last two centuries to emerge as the largest and most important annual festival amongst Bengali Hindus and a focal point of community life.

¹²⁴ Few studies which have explored the lived experience of refugees in the various government camps and colonies reveal a complex world of everyday resistance and negotiations, further highlighting the ahistoricity of such representations. See Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition narratives among Punjabi migrants of Delhi*, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 99-100, Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, 'Permanent refugees: Female camp inhabitant in Bihar', Philomena Essed, Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers (eds.), *Refugees and the transformation of societies: Agency, policies, ethics and politics*, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2004, pp. 81-93 and my forthcoming 'Dissident Memories: Exploring Bengali Refugee Narratives in the Andaman Islands', Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds.) *Refugees*

squatters. More importantly, the failure to interrogate the celebratory narrative of refugee self-help has prevented historians from fully exploring the divisive impact of caste and class differences amongst Bengali refugees. The existing scholarship on the rehabilitation of Bengali refugees largely replicates the biases inherent in popular histories and refugee reminiscences. In the process it lends credence to the dominant memory of rehabilitation in West Bengal, and the origin myths refugee communities live by.