The Myths Refugees Live By: Memory and history in the making of Bengali refugee identity

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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 paper explores how the scholarship on East Bengali refugees portrays them either as hapless and passive victims of the regime of rehabilitation, which was designed to integrate refugees into the socio-economic fabric of India, or eulogizes them as heroic protagonists who successfully battled overwhelming adversity to wrest resettlement from a reluctant state. This split image of the Bengali refugee as both victim and 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 paper 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 paper interrogates refugee reminiscences to illuminate their erasures and silences, delineating the mythic structure common to both 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 expression 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 locate the Bengali refugee’s quest for roots in history, it is a personal search for closure, for answers to questions that plagued him, not only because of what he witnessed, but because he was also a migrant from East Bengal. His family had 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 to the trauma of partition.2 In its eclectic mixture of memory, hearsay, anecdotes, and historical records, 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, written largely by migrants who were actively involved in the unfolding crisis of rehabilitation.3 Besides autobiographies, numerous local and community histories have been written by second-generation migrants, which rely heavily on refugee reminiscences.4 Scholars of cultural history have contributed relatively

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1 From the Author’s introduction, Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for roots)*, Calcutta, Bhasha O Sahitya, 2002.
2 Dedication, Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*.
3 Indubaran Ganguly, *Colonysmriti: Udbastu colony pratishthar gorar katha, 1948–1954 (Memories of colonies: An account of the early period of the establishment of refugee colonies)*, Calcutta, Published by the author, 1997; and Tushar Sinha, *Maranjyee sangrame bastuhar a (Refugees in a death-defying battle)*, Calcutta, United Central Refugee Council, 1999, are examples of such autobiographical narratives that marked the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. However, several autobiographies and biographical accounts of individuals who contributed to refugee rehabilitation were also published in an earlier period. For example, see Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu (Refugee)*, Calcutta, Sahitya Sansad, 1970; and Kanaialal Datta, *Madhyagram-Nababarakpur Punarbasan O Haripada Biswas (Rehabilitation in Madhyagram-Nababarakpur and Haripada Biswas)*, Nababarakpur, Haripada Biswas Baktrita Trust, 1984.
4 For example, see Debabrata Datta, *Bijaygarh: Ekti udbastu upanibesh (A refugee colony)*, Calcutta, Progressive Publishers, 2001. For an excellent self-reflective 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, pp. 149–179.
late to this growing corpus of popular history, largely through recording and publishing refugee reminiscences.5

This paper 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 an interaction between memory and history. This paper 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 paper does not attempt to explore it further. 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 that distinguish memory from history. The main concern of this paper is to explore the interrelationship 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 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 standardized historical narrative of how

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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, Stree, 2003; and Tridib Chakrabarti, Nirupama Ray Mandal and Paulami Ghoshal (comps and eds) *Dhangsa-o-nirman: Bangiya udbastu samajer svakathita bibaran* (*Destruction and creation: Self-descriptive accounts of Bengali refugee society*), Calcutta, Seriban, 2007.

6 Within the scholarship on partition and its refugees, different scholars have conceptualized 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, emphasizes the inexplicability of events or experiences. This is diametrically opposite to a goal of history that seeks to explain events. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Memories of displacement: The poetry and prejudice of dwelling’ in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of modernity: Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 115–37. Ranabir Samaddar, ‘The historiographical operation: Memory and history’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 June 2006, pp. 2236–40, draws upon Paul Ricoeur’s landmark work 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. See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, history, forgetting*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004.
refugees from East Bengal, which constituted the eastern wing of Pakistan, rebuilt their lives in Calcutta. The common core of both is to be found in the celebration of the agency of ‘self-settled’ refugees, who built fully fledged refugee settlements out of overnight squats. This similarity 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.\textsuperscript{7} Individual reminiscences, unlike the more homogenized 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 destabilize dominant histories. Critically analysing these narratives, this paper 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 squatter colonies of West Bengal, today sprawls between two of the busiest roads in south Calcutta, namely Raja Subodh Mullik and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose roads. However, in 1948, when the colony was established, it was one of the many refugee settlements that mushroomed on the outskirts of a much smaller city.\textsuperscript{8} Initially called the Jadavpur

\textsuperscript{7} Dominant memory, following the Popular Memory Group’s analysis of the relationship between history and popular memory, can be understood as a social group’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 least, the utility of the dominant representation of the past in fostering formal political alliances. See Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular memory: theory, politics, method’ in Richard Johnson, Gregor Mclennan, Bill Schwarz and David Sutton (eds), *Making histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*, London, Hutchinson in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982, pp. 205–52.

\textsuperscript{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
refugee camp, Bijoygarh started with the unauthorized occupation of a wireless centre and barracks built for Allied soldiers during the Second World War in the Jadavpur region of 24 Parganas. The families who moved into the abandoned military huts organized themselves into the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association. Such unauthorized occupation of abandoned houses, military structures, warehouses or closed factories was standard practice among displaced people 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’. However, this policy was not implemented in the eastern states of India, namely Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal, which hosted refugees from eastern Pakistan. This was largely because there was no state-sponsored exchange of population in the divided province of Bengal. Unable to solve the refugee ‘problem’ by resettling them on evacuee land, the government of West Bengal complained bitterly about the burden of providing for the steadily increasing numbers who sought refuge in the already overpopulated state. Calcutta, the capital city as well as the commercial hub of West Bengal, rural areas in the district of 24 Parganas. This has resulted in repeated redefinitions 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 the rapid urbanization 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. See: <https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/jsp/KMCAboutKolkataHome.jsp>, [Accessed 21 November 2012].

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 were forced out by a conjunction of refugee belligerence and state complicity. The ‘evacuee property’ they left behind enabled the new states to house their refugees. For a detailed study of state complicity in the displacement of 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 and Chichester, Columbia University Press, 2007; and Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (eds), *The aftermath of partition in South Asia*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 163–203.

10 Estimates of East Bengali refugees who entered West Bengal between 1947 and 1971 vary widely, from between 5.8 million (see Pran Nath Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, New Delhi, Publications Divisions, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 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, Ministry of Supply and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1976).
which rapidly gained the dubious distinction of receiving the largest number of partition refugees, had no clear plan for rehabilitation.\footnote{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 24 Parganas, the district bordering Calcutta. See Republic of India, Census of 1951, Vol. VI, part III, Calcutta City, Delhi, Office of the Registrar General, p. 305.} This combination of circumstances led to a veritable movement of unauthorized occupation not only of abandoned buildings, but also of all available fallow land in and around Calcutta. Groups of refugees got together to form \textit{dals} or associations based on familial ties, connections from a past life in East Bengal or 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 among 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 fully fledged illegal settlement. More often than not these overnight occupations managed to survive as refugee colonies. This particular form of illegal land-grabbing came to be known as \textit{jabardakhal}. Literally meaning ‘acquisition by force’, it mirrored the current terminology for government requisition of properties: \textit{hukumdakhal}. These refugee settlements were eventually categorized as squatters’ colonies by the authorities for administrative purposes.

This history of squatting was first narrated by Prafulla Chakrabarti as an organized \textit{jabardakhal} (forced acquisition) movement in his seminal work on the policies and politics of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal.\footnote{Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, \textit{The marginal men: The refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal}, Calcutta, Lumiere Books, 1990, pp. 33–66.} Bijoygarh, though enumerated as a squatters’ colony in government records, is dismissed by Chakrabarti for not being true to type.\footnote{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 \textit{Manual of refugee relief and rehabilitation, Vol. I}, Kolkata, Government of West Bengal, 2000, p. 63. Bijoygarh is the fifteenth colony in this list.} Numerous autobiographical accounts regarding refugee rehabilitation, such as Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay’s \textit{Udbastu (Refugee)} and Indubaran Ganguly’s \textit{Colonysmriti (Memories of colonies)}, concur with Chakrabarti’s assessment. In their reminiscences, the residents of Bijoygarh have contested this, indicating that to them identification as a \textit{jabardakhal} or squatters’ colony was 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, and government-sponsored camps) 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, the government’s response was characterized by acute reluctance.\(^{14}\) Paltry relief and an 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 to the Bengali refugees and their supposedly flawed characters.\(^ {17}\) In government reports, surveys, and

\(^ {14}\) For a study of the governmentality of refugee rehabilitation in post-partition India, see Uditi Sen, ‘Refugees and the politics of nation building in India’, 1947–71, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009.

\(^ {15}\) Numerous studies have criticized the dismal failure of the government of West Bengal to deal with the refugee crisis. For example, see Chakrabarti, \textit{The marginal men}; and Joya Chatterji, \textit{The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947–67}, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 105–58.

\(^ {16}\) This failure is well documented in official publications as well as later scholarship. See, for example, B.S. Guha, \textit{Memoir No. 1, 1954, Studies in social tensions among the refugees from Eastern Pakistan}, Calcutta, Manager of Publications, 1959; S.L. De and A.K. Bhattacharje, \textit{The refugee settlement in the Sunderbans, West Bengal: A socio-economic study}, Calcutta, Indian Statistical Institute, 1972; Alok Kumar Ghosh, ‘Bengali refugees at Dandakaranya: A tragedy of rehabilitation’ in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), \textit{Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional practices and contested identities}, Calcutta, Calcutta Research Group, 2000, pp. 106–29; and “Dispersal” and the failure of rehabilitation: Refugee camp-dwellers and squatters in West Bengal’, \textit{Modern Asian Studies}, 41, 5, September 2007, pp. 995–1032.

\(^ {17}\) Joya Chatterji has illustrated how imported European attitudes, which demeaned the recipients of charity, were amalgamated with more recent colonial caricatures of the effeminate and weak Bengali male to produce these potent stereotypes. She argues
correspondence, a negative stereotype of the Bengali refugee took hold. B.S. Guha’s comparative study of ‘social tensions’ among two different refugee populations—the self-settled colony of Azadgarh and the government-sponsored settlement of Jirat—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 explained away, in pseudo-scientific language, as the ‘regression’ of the refugees into ‘a lower level of simplification’. According to this study, the refugees became ‘childishly dependant on the Government support’. U. Bhaskar Rao’s official account of rehabilitation, published in 1967, reinforces the stereotype of the Bengali refugee as a ‘creature apart’. A collection of unflattering attributes of the ‘typical’ Bengali refugee—‘an object of derision and contempt’, ‘a bundle of apathy’, ‘rebellious’ and ‘obstructive’—is tempered only by an appeal to readers to consider the peculiar circumstances that 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 some refugees from East Bengal for proudly refusing government handouts and becoming authors of 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 dehumanizing conditions of government camps. It became a key element of the self-perception of Bengali refugees in

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, Permanent Black, 2001, pp. 74–110.

18 Rehabilitation at Jirat consisted of relocating largely literate camp-dwellers unaccustomed to hard labour to a malarial village in an area disconnected from urban settlements where agricultural labour was already plentiful. See Guha, Studies in social tensions, also cited in Chatterji, “‘Dispersal’.”

19 Guha, Studies in social tensions, p. 32.

20 Guha, Studies in social tensions, p. 32.

21 U. Bhaskar Rao, The story of rehabilitation, New Delhi, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Publications Division, 1967, p. 141.
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 threefold categorization of displaced persons, based on the reserves of money and willpower they could command. He describes those who did not look to 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 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 and 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 dependent creatures who lacked initiative. Though Bandyopadhyay was complimentary about the self-sufficiency of those who did not enter government camps, his classification was primarily designed to limit the government’s responsibility to the third ‘type’ of refugees.

This worked in favour of those 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 a 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 enabled the refugees in squatters’ colonies to distinguish themselves as people who had too much self-respect to enter government camps. In Chakrabarti’s *The marginal men*, Bandyopadhyay’s threefold categorization is radically transformed into an uncritical celebration of the achievement of the second ‘type’ of refugees—the founders of the *jabardakhal* or squatters’ colonies. Eulogizing his refugee heroes as partitioned Bengal’s ‘*deux ex machina*’,

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22 Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, p. 31.
23 Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, p. 31.
Chakrabarti heaps praise on them for being ‘determined to carve out their own place in West Bengal and earn their own livelihood’.  

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 narrative, those refugees who entered government camps and relied on the state for rehabilitation are portrayed as inherently dependent types. While among 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. 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 among the refugees in West Bengal with being considered self-settled and resourceful. It is perhaps because of this radical reconfiguration of meanings that being recognized as a squatters’ colony assumed considerable importance for the residents of Bijoygarh.

Whether included in the category of squatters’ colony or not, Bijoygarh was undoubtedly one of the earliest attempts by refugees to build a fully 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 Bandyopadhyay’s *Udbastu* and Chakrabarti’s *The marginal men*, Bijoygarh is mentioned as one of many refugee colonies. Though an important detail, it is not central to the narrative. In contrast, Mukhopadhyay’s *Shikorer sandhane (Quest for roots)* and an edited volume entitled *Dhangsa-o-nirman (Destruction and creation)* devote large sections to interviews with refugees who built the Bijoygarh colony. Like Mukhopadhyay, the editors and interviewers of *Dhangsa-o-nirman* have strong empathy for their respondents, but are not themselves refugees. 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

24 Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 33.
25 For example, Chakrabarti describes camp refugees as ‘a shapeless mass of humans huddled together like beasts with all the sap squeezed out of their battered frames’: Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 14.
26 Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*.
27 Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman*. 
interviews, by their very nature, are co-authored by the interviewer and the interviewee. Nevertheless, when subjected to reflective analysis, this collection of interviews provides valuable insight into the early history of Bijoygarh. In contrast, *Bijoygarh: ekti udbastu upanibesh (A refugee colony)* deals exclusively with Bijoygarh’s history and is written by the son of Santosh Dutta, the veteran freedom fighter who at times is 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 on the neighbourhood. 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 that is common to these diverse texts. This synthesis provides the necessary background for analysing the diverse patterns of remembering Bijoygarh.

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

Bijoygarh colony began as a squat of 12 refugee families in an abandoned military camp at Jadavpur. In November 1947, they travelled without tickets 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 among 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

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28 Datta, *Bijoygarh*.

29 Ganguly, *Colonysmriti*. 

Camp Association to promote cooperation among the refugees and to work towards providing basic amenities. As the military barracks filled to capacity, latecomers started building thatched shelters on neighbouring fallow land. There seems to have been little organization or coordination behind this first phase of squatting. Shantiranjan Sen, the general secretary of the refugee association, stressed 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 that measured 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 the Jadavpur Refugee Camp 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 hoped to gain the favour of the Congress government of Dr B.C. Roy through Datta’s political connections. 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 thugs to evict the refugees. This erupted into a pitched battle, which the refugees won. To commemorate this victory, the residents renamed their refugee camp ‘Bijoygarh colony’. The transformation from camp to colony indicated the refugees’ determination to build a permanent settlement in the area, while the name—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 boasted four

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\(^{30}\) Interview with Shantiranjan Sen in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 48.

\(^{31}\) Kottah is a popular unit of measuring land in Bengal. One kottah equals roughly 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 among politicians and social workers in Calcutta.
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, Nalini Mohan 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 being the driving force behind the establishment of Prasuti Sadan, a maternity hospital. Though the vicissitudes of memory, coupled with the different 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.

Bandyopadhyay first mentions Bijoygarh when he refers to the tendency among 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. Bandyopadhyay credits the residents of Bijoygarh with a high degree of organization 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’. Chakrabarti seconds this characterization of Bijoygarh as being in a class by itself. He too speaks of ‘evidence’ of verbal consent being given by the government. Neither Bandyopadhyay nor Chakrabarti provide any details about 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

33 Datta, Bijoygarh, 2001, p. 28. Also see the interviews with Shantiranjan Sen and Gouranga De Chowdhury in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, pp. 46–66; and the interview with Manindra Pal in Chakrabarti et al., Dhangsa-o-nirman, pp. 123–24.
34 Bandyopadhyay, Udbastu, p. 23
35 Bandyopadhyay, Udbastu, p. 35.
36 Chakrabarti, The marginal men, p. 36.
story that could be replicated. ‘When the colony which apparently sprang out of unauthorized occupation of land was allowed to exist, there were many among 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 other refugees. The refusal to describe Bijoygarh as a true *jabardakhal* colony is taken one step further by Ganguly. He claims that far from being a squatters’ colony, Bijoygarh actually approximated 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 that compelled 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 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 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 on quoting texts.\(^{40}\) He had clearly not witnessed the establishment of Bijoygarh and was not acquainted with its leaders, whose intentions he expounded on with such confidence. Nevertheless, his speculation on Santosh Datta’s secret pact with Dr Roy is significant in that it reflects the

\(^{37}\) Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 37.

\(^{38}\) Ganguly, *Colonysmriti*, p. 28.

\(^{39}\) Ganguly, *Colonysmriti*, p. 28.

\(^{40}\) Indubaran Ganguly quotes entire sections of Bandyopadhyay’s *Udbastu* and summarizes Chakrabarti’s *The marginal men* verbatim.
general belief among the residents of neighbouring refugee colonies in Bijoygarh’s special status. This belief was born of the respect Santosh Datta commanded within the Bengal Congress in particular and in the 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 most famous revolutionary terrorist organizations. On the one hand, his celebrated status as a national hero gave him access to the contemporary luminaries of West Bengal; on the other, he was a refugee and a squatter. This no doubt enabled him to champion Bijoygarh’s cause among bureaucrats and politicians. However, his methods were not those 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, under the leadership of Santosh Datta, lay at the core of Bijoygarh falling short of being a ‘true’ squatters’ colony.

The need for associative politics was urgently felt by the refugees in squatters’ colonies. The early leaders were largely 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 radicalization of refugee organizations was coupled by a shift in leadership to the communists and other left parties. As a result, particular attributes were associated with a typical squatters’ colony in Calcutta. They were 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 among 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 vividly described this rift in Colonysmriti.

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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, Sahitya Sansad, n.d. Also see David M. Laushley, *Bengal terrorism and the Marxist Left: Aspects of regional nationalism in India, 1905–42*, Calcutta, K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975.
In April 1950, a conference of refugee leaders from all the squatters’ colonies in the southern suburbs of Calcutta was organized with the express purpose of launching a new umbrella organization, the *Dakshin Kalikata Sahartali Bastuhara Samhati* (the South Suburban Calcutta Refugee Association). Though the representatives of Bijoygarh colony attended the conference, they refused to be a part of the organization. Santosh Datta supported the cause of formalizing the squatters’ colonies, but voiced his inability to participate in the methods of agitation that were likely to be adopted by the Association. Bijoygarh colony thus occupied a contradictory position within the history of the *jabardakhal* movement. On the one hand, by virtue of being the first colony born of illegal squatting, it provided a model for refugee colonies subsequently set up in the area. These colonies not only looked to Bijoygarh for inspiration, but also benefited from the institutional amenities developed by its residents, such as schools and markets. Nevertheless, Bijoygarh’s leaders held themselves aloof from contemporary refugee organizations and refused to participate in the growing movement to formalize squatters’ colonies. This soured its relations with other squatters’ colonies and fed rumours of a ‘secret pact’.

The relevance of Bijoygarh’s contradictory position can only be understood in the context of contemporary 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

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42 Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 66; and Ganguly, *Colonysmriti*, pp. 28–29.
43 Ganguly, *Colonysmriti*, pp. 28–29.
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 Bandyopadhyay’s unsubstantiated reference to evidence of government consent. See Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, p. 23. However, taking into account all the available interviews with Bijoygarh residents, it is clear that Dr B.C. Roy was far from pleased with the actions of the Bijoygarh refugees. The unofficial support might have come from lower down, that is, from the rehabilitation commissioner and secretary of rehabilitation in Dr Roy’s government, Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay himself. In their interviews, Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury (alias Kalabhai), and Shantiranjan Sen repeatedly allude to the sympathetic response of Bandyopadhyay. See Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman* and Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*. Kalabhai claims that Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, in response to a memorandum submitted by the refugees, promised to legally acquire the colony’s lands if he ever became the rehabilitation commissioner. He apparently kept his word, though—given the proliferation of colonies by 1950—Bijoygarh’s claim for special consideration had become impossible to implement. See Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 90. If this is true, then it could also explain Bandyopadhyay’s uncharacteristically vague allusion to ‘evidence’.
demands of the law with the needs of the refugees,’ was viewed by the refugees as an elaborate scheme to demolish the squatters’ colonies. It provided the catalyst for the heyday of belligerent refugee politics under the leadership of the United Central Refugee Council. 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 reconfigured as a settlement of militant underdogs. There is little doubt that the inhabitants of squatters’ colonies led a severely marginalized 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 the 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. However, far more significant than the actual details of these clashes was its representation in the public sphere of refugee politics.

As local leaders, inspired by the revolutionary ideology of the left, sought to organize the refugees and champion their cause, police brutality towards refugees became part of the standard rhetoric of anti-establishment speeches. Every single clash between the refugees and the police was portrayed as an organized campaign. In fiery speeches, pro-refugee editorials, pamphlets, and public meetings, repeated evocations of the unity and militancy of the refugees gradually produced a standardized mythic narrative of a battle between the refugees and the establishment. For example, at mass public meetings organized by the United Central Refugee Council, 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’.

45 Amrita Bazar Patrika, 21 March 1951.
46 For details, see Chakrabarti, The marginal men, pp. 80–81.
47 Extract of the report by the commissioner of police, Calcutta, for the week ending 7 April 1951, File no: 321/22 (KW), Sl 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 Party during the early 1960s and had ceased publication by 1965.
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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 remembered 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 at 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, organized by the Communist Party of India and the Forward Block on 28 January 1951, even named one of the main gates for the open-air event, Binapani toran (gate).\(^{50}\) 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 standardized narrative plays the role of a foundation myth, which both explains and legitimizes the origin of squatters’ colonies. Bijoygarh colony was dismissed from the ranks of squatters’ colonies on account of its leaders’ closeness 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 standard model of refugee resistance, which coalesced out of the multiple representations of refugees as militant underdogs, envisions the entire refugee colony as a mobilized machine of war against the establishment. In uncertain times, all residents of the colony had a responsibility to keep 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 idealized 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

\(^{49}\) 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), Sl No: 46/1922, GB IB.

\(^{51}\) Manas Ray, ‘Growing up refugee: On memory and locality’ in Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal*, p. 166.
of respectable refugees would be transformed into a militant army of resistance. At times, these accounts would be embellished with tales of the bravery of refugee women, who fought at the vanguard, or the strategic use of women and children as shields against the police. These battles, more often than not, ended in victory for the refugees, 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 this standardized origin myth of squatters’ colonies had on popular imagination in West Bengal has moulded not only the way in which refugees remember and represent their past, but also the production of refugee histories. Kaliprasad Mukhopadhyay’s *Shikorer 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?

Having immersed himself in refugee folklore, Mukhopadhyay aggressively sought confirmation of his preconceived notions from his respondents when he set out to interview the residents of Bijoygarh.

For Bijoygarh, this standardized folklore was combined with memories of an actual clash that took place between residents and hired thugs sent by Layalka, the landlord, to produce the foundation myth of the colony. However, Manindra Pal, Shantiranjan Sen, and Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury’s memories of this clash do not fit the pattern of the mythology of refugee warfare. The residents of Bijoygarh colony were largely taken by surprise by truckloads of hired

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52 The first attempt at establishing a squatters’ colony under *Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad* (All Bengal Refugee Working Council) 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 Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 65.

53 The suburban squatters’ colony at Mahesh evolved this strategy under the leadership of a local student activist. For details, see Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 81–82.

54 Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 54.

55 For the full text of Manindra Pal’s interviews, see Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, pp. 112–15 and Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman*, pp. 117–34.

56 For the full text of Shantiranjan Sen and Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury’s interviews, see Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, pp. 46–93.
men who 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 
for raising the alarm. Of the crowd that assembled in response, 
only 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, by 1950, when the residents renamed Jadavpur refugee 
camp ‘Bijoygarh’ (victory-fort) to commemorate this victory, few chose 
to acknowledge 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 for all the residents 
of the colony, portraying them as victorious underdogs. It fed into 
the squatters’ self-image of proud and independent East Bengalis, 
who relied on 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– 
1990s, these themes of physical courage, militant organization, 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 
éarlier, the community leaders of Bijoygarh colony had close 
ties to the Congress Party. Their reminiscences are littered with 
references to numerous incidents of non-confrontational interaction 
with the authorities, such as memorandums, deputations, appeals, and 
unofficial conversations which led to equally unofficial understandings 
being reached 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 just one of the many ways in which the refugees dealt with the 
state. The significance of the mythic battle waged by refugees lay in its 
ability to produce a homogenized refugee identity in opposition to the 
external ‘other’—that is, the state and the host society, as embodied

57 Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, p. 114.
58 Interview with Manindra Pal in Chakrabarti et al., Dhanga-o-nirman, p. 123.
in ruthless landlords. It papered over differences in caste, class, and cultural capital, which divided the refugees from East Bengal and moulded the kind of rehabilitation to which particular refugee families had access.

**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!’). Numerous scholars have seen their processions and slogans as a signal of the arrival of a new ‘power in the land’, which derived political clout from ‘their number, their completely expropriated condition and rootlessness, their poverty and hunger’. There is little doubt that the radicalization of refugees irretrievably altered the political balance in West Bengal. 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 the refugees. Through an examination of the micro-history of Bijoygarh colony it is possible to develop a more nuanced explanation for the refugees’ ability 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 more complex understanding of refugee power.

Constant attempts by the refugees to obtain government aid or legal recognition characterized the foundation of Jadavpur refugee camp and its eventual transformation into Bijoygarh colony. The residents’ reminiscences suggest that far from being marginal to the political and bureaucratic order of West Bengal, it was their familiarity with the ‘system’ that enabled Bijoygarh’s founders to

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59 See Nilanjana Chatterjee, ‘Interrogating victimhood: East Bengali refugee narratives of communal violence’, Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, n.d; [http://www.swadhinata.org.uk/document/chatterjeeEastBengal%20Refugee.pdf>, [Accessed 17 March 2013].

60 Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 48. He calls the first refugee rally in Calcutta, organized on 14 January 1949, 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 Chatterji, *Spoils of partition*, pp. 209–309.
transform an illegal settlement into a permanent one. 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 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 to the refugees. Ganguly suggests that since Kamalkrishna Ray came from Myemensingh in East Bengal, his actions were the result of his empathy for fellow East Bengalis. 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 of the recent, 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’. These 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 themselves of special provisions made for government servants and ‘opted’ for India. Though assured a future income, most were forced to abandon their ancestral homes and property in East Bengal. Most optees had to negotiate a sharp drop in their living standards, 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. 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 those refugees who hailed from roughly the

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62 Ganguly, **Colonysmriti**, 1997, pp. 25–26.

63 For a literary representation of this social distance, see Amitav Ghosh, *The shadow lines*, Delhi, Bloomsbury, 1988. Also see M.D. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel, “I am not a refugee”: Rethinking partition migration’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 37, 3, 2003, pp. 551–84. It is only of late that the popularization of the heroic trope of the self-settled Bengali refugee has made refugee identity a mantle worth wearing among the ‘bhadraloks’ of Calcutta.
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 Ray were two such individuals, and feature prominently in refugee narratives, though no special credit is reserved for them in the state’s archives. The more enterprising among the refugees specifically appealed for help from bureaucrats, administrators, and lawyers from East Bengal, hoping to exploit these affective ties. The middle-class refugees in 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 among the optees, who were also dealing with loss and dislocation, providing patronage to 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 Bijoygarh’s leaders. One such incident, which illustrates the role played by personal and social ties in Bijoygarh’s struggle to gain recognition, was the ‘battle’ with Layalka’s hired thugs. Though the residents of Bijoygarh came out on top in the skirmish, it was, in fact, only the beginning of their troubles. The police swiftly issued arrest warrants for all the refugees involved in the fight as well as all the committee members. Moreover, Layalka, unwilling to give up his land, took the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association to court. Desperate to avoid imprisonment and conviction for activities that were patently illegal, Santosh Datta and his cohort, Dhirenranath Ray Chowdhury (alias Kalabhai) sought a meeting with Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay who 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 because of his participation in revolutionary terrorism and his role as editor of a literary journal called Sarathi. Kalabhai had met Bandyopadhyay at a cultural function organized by the Brahmo Samaj in Barisal, where he had been extremely impressed by the latter’s lecture on Vedic

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64 Jashoda Kanta Ray was the deputy commissioner of relief and rehabilitation with the government of West Bengal.
65 Sarathi means ‘the charioteer’, but in this context clearly evokes the role played by Krishna in the epic battle of Mahabharata when he guided the mythical Pandava brothers to victory as the charioteer of Arjun.
philosophy. Subsequently, he had invited Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay to be the chief priest at a cultural festival, *Kalidas Janmajayanti*\(^{66}\) at Barisal’s town hall. Kalabhai did not hesitate to remind the district magistrate of their previous acquaintance, no doubt hoping to elicit sympathy for the squatters.\(^{67}\)

Bandyopadhyay directed the refugees to seek the help of yet another optingee: the officer-in-chief of Tollygunj police station, Amulya Bannerjee, who 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 to evict 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 predetermined spot and to immediately grant them bail. Thus, the refugee leaders were spared the ignominy of being locked up. In return for his cooperation, Bannerjee 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 persuaded Chinta Haran Ray, a famous criminal lawyer from Subidda in Dhaka, to argue on their behalf. The colony-dwellers could not afford the services of such a renowned lawyer, so it seems that ties to a lost homeland, coupled with a sense of obligation arising from a personal relationship

\(^{66}\) This translates as the birth anniversary of the Sanskrit composer Kalidasa; it is, in fact, more likely to have been the opening ceremony of a literary and cultural festival.

\(^{67}\) Interview with Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 77.

\(^{68}\) Interview with Manindra Pal in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 113.

\(^{69}\) Himanghsu Majumdar, a member of the central committee of Bijoygarh colony and a resident since December 1947, makes special mention of his aid. For details, see the interview with Himanghsu Majumdar in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 103.

\(^{70}\) Interview with Kalabhai in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, pp. 79–80.

\(^{71}\) Interview with Manindra Pal in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 115.
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 the colony. ‘I used to be his brother’s classmate at Jagannath Hall in Dhaka.’

Chinta Haran Ray’s legal intervention finally forced Layalka to drop charges. Thus, the battle with Layalka, which has been mythologized 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 and 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 Bijoygarh’s leaders and General Officer Commanding Eastern Command Satya Brata Sinha (or S.B.S.) Roy. Debabrata Datta provides a slightly different context for the meeting. According to him, the colony committee wanted to use the last extant military barracks, 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. However, both accounts place equal emphasis on the general’s East Bengali origins. Kalabhai issued him with an invitation to visit the colony in order to understand the motivation of the refugees. ‘You are after all from East Bengal,’ he implored, once more hoping to exploit the sentiments of East Bengali sub-nationalism. Datta’s narrative underlines this factor. ‘He too was from East Bengal. Therefore, realizing the difficulty of the refugees, he did not hold back in expressing a spirit of co-operation.’

The commander-in-chief visited Bijoygarh on 21 August 1950 and officially handed over the military barracks of Bijoygarh to the colony committee, to be used for ‘educational purposes’.

The refugees’ success in negotiating the bureaucratic and legal maze of partitioned Bengal cannot be attributed solely to successful appeals

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72 Interview with Manindra Pal in Chakrabarti et al., Dhansa-o-nirman, p. 120–21. Also see interview with Manindra Pal in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, p. 115.
73 Since the records of criminal cases that do not reach the higher courts are routinely destroyed every ten years, the records of this case have not survived.
74 Interview with Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, p. 81.
75 Datta, Bijoygarh, p. 59.
76 Interview with Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, p. 81.
77 Datta, Bijoygarh, p. 59.
78 The details of this visit are roughly the same in Datta, Bijoygarh, and are also found in Kalabhai’s interview in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, pp. 80–82.
to well-placed East Bengalis. Many refugees brought a measure of familiarity with associative politics to the colonies they inhabited. The founders of the Jadavpur refugee camp, Shombhu Guha Thakurta, Sushil Sengupta, and Ashish Debray, besides being East Bengalis and residents of the small residential complex around Jadavpur University, had in common their membership of the Jayprakash faction of the Congress Socialist Party.\textsuperscript{79} The refugees who took the lead in establishing squatters’ colonies usually proceeded only after forming an association or a committee.\textsuperscript{80} These committees and associations were formed spontaneously through mutual consent and 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 of the organizational skills typically found in a bourgeois public sphere. This know-how provides a far more convincing explanation for the ability of a certain section of the refugees to resist official policies of eviction and dispersal than that of mere willpower or enterprise.

A significant number of the squatters had worked as clerks or lower level officials in the various departments of the government of West Bengal.\textsuperscript{81} This made the colony committees privy to an ‘insider’s’ knowledge of bureaucracy. Often, this knowledge enabled them to succeed in obtaining government aid for a particular venture. A number of Bijoygarh’s constructive initiatives derived support and stability from such links. Shantiranjan Sen worked at the 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

\textsuperscript{79} Interview with Dr Subratesh Ghosh in Chakrabarti et al., \textit{Dhangsa-o-nirman}, pp. 97–98.

\textsuperscript{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 only after the abandoned military barracks had been occupied.

\textsuperscript{81} The East Bengali migrants’ ability to secure white-collar jobs has been highlighted by Chatterji, \textit{Spoils of partition}, pp. 141–50. Also see Nirmal Kumar Bose, \textit{Calcutta: 1964, A social survey}, Bombay, Lalvani Publishing House, 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, \textit{Rehabilitation of refugees—A statistical survey, 1955}, Alipore, 1956, pp. 5–9.
the first meeting between the refugees of the Jadavpur camp and the authorities at the 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.’ Familiar with the idiosyncrasies of bureaucracy, Shantiranjan came up with an ingenious plan to exploit the loopholes in administrative procedure in order to derive some official recognition for Bijoygarh.

There were several government employees among the refugees at Jadavpur camp who had ‘opted’ for government service in West Bengal. Shantiranjan 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, they forward the application for a plot of land for the applicant to the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association. 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.

At other times, Bijoygarh colony enjoyed more direct benefits from having government employees among 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. Dasgupta earned his living as an employee of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department of West Bengal and was therefore uniquely placed to obtain government recognition for the school, as well as the full

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82 Interview with Shantiranjan Senin in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, pp. 46–47.
83 Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, p. 52.
84 Datta, *Bijoygarh*, p. 28.
package of benefits to which refugee students were entitled. 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.

Despite high aspirations, most refugees in squatter’s colonies did not have the means to educate their children. Education and therefore social mobility among 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 overstated. Almost every colony boasted at least one secondary school and several primary schools. These schools were not only vital to refugees’ desire for economic rehabilitation through training the next generation for employment, they also embodied the educated and cultured bhadralok identity the middle-class squatters clung to. 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’. These schools also bound the refugee community together at a more practical level. Almost all the teachers at the schools were drawn from local refugees. Manas Ray, in his autobiographical account, noted large number of schoolteachers among the early migrants to West

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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 in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, p. 61.
86 Datta, Bijoygarh, p. 29.
87 For an analysis of the significance of education in the mindset of the residents of refugee colonies, see Dipankar Sinha, ‘Adjustment and transition in a Bengali refugee settlement: 1950–1999’ in Bose (ed.), Refugees in West Bengal, pp. 147–51.
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 increasingly came to represent a claim to social respectability, bolstered by superior educational qualifications, lineage, and cultural pursuits, which may or may not have been 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, New Delhi, Manohar, 2001, pp. 297–315.
89 Ray, ‘Growing up refugee’, p.173.
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 salaries, which were paid irregularly, if at all. Yet, given the high levels of unemployment in contemporary Calcutta, the colony’s schools seldom suffered from a dearth of teachers. Moreover, compared to formalizing 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 organize 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.

Not all the residents of the squatters’ colonies were middle class or educated. However, the self-image of the squatters was, without exception, that 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 the markers that set them apart from the urban poor of Calcutta. Kalabhai’s attempt to elicit support for formalizing Bijoygarh colony from the district magistrate of 24 Parganas, discussed above, provides a relevant example. In this meeting, he described the squatters of Bijoygarh as ‘members of that (East Bengali) erudite society’. Sailen 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, he had joined the ranks of squatters in West Bengal and had helped to found Deshbandhu colony. 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 roadblock. The governor was ushered into a squatter’s

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90 Manas Ray, ‘Kata deshe ghorer khonj’ (‘The quest for home in a divide land’) in Chakrabarti et al., Dhangsa-o-nirman, p. 254.
91 For a descriptive account of the foundation of numerous schools in Bijoygarh, see Datta, Bijoygarh, pp. 27–31.
92 See Datta, Bijoygarh, p 24.
93 Interview with Dhirendranath Ray Chowdhury in Mukhopadhyay, Shikorer sandhane, p.78.
94 Ganguly, Colonysmriti, pp. 36–39.
shack and draped with garlands, accompanied by songs and recitations by refugee children. Sailen Chowdhury wrapped up the session with an appeal for help.\textsuperscript{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 their poverty. He showed his appreciation by arranging for the resettlement of Deshbandhu colony on legally requisitioned land nearby. Naktala No. 1 colony, an island of legal settlement within the expanding mosaic of squatters’ colonies in south Calcutta, emerged as a result of Dr Katju’s determination to rescue these cultured families from a life of illegality.\textsuperscript{96}

Much of the enterprise and initiative shown by 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 professionals 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 for 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 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-wing parties in West Bengal, as well as the limits of the Communist Party’s commitment to the refugee cause has been discussed in vivid detail by Prafulla Chakrabarti.\textsuperscript{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 politics

\textsuperscript{95} Ganguly, \textit{Colonysmriti}, pp. 39–41.
\textsuperscript{96} Bandyopadhyay, \textit{Udbastu}, p. 39. Also described in Ganguly, \textit{Colonysmriti}, pp. 36–39.
\textsuperscript{97} Chakrabarti, \textit{The marginal men}. 
obsures the diverse strategies employed by refugees in trying to find a foothold in Calcutta. The vast majority of the refugee families who unleashed a veritable movement of land-grabbing on 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 have been the most visible of the many strategies used to wrestle rehabilitation from a reluctant state, but not the only—or even the most effective—one.

The *bhadralok* refugees 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 described 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. There is no doubt that existing refugee narratives lament the tragedy of the 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 *jabardakhali* 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 of the inmates of government camps. Their voices and

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98 Though the majority of the refugee colonies in Jadavpur and Tollygunj regions have been formalized and integrated into the urban sprawl of greater Calcutta, most have retained the colony committees and membership of the United Central Refugee Council. 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, a number of colonies, their schools or the local *Durga Puja* celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries. 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 Bastuhabra Samiti, Subarna Jayanti Utsab (Regent Colony Refugee Association, Golden Jubilee Celebrations), 1999–2000*, n.p., 2000.
lived experiences of rehabilitation are conspicuously absent. Two central assertions structure the reminiscences, amateur histories, and autobiographies written by squatters. First, the dehumanizing 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. Moreover, on closer scrutiny, the respectability of middle-class refugees can be seen to have had a divisive impact.

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 fits this profile. Even the names of these early settlers elude most respondents. Dr Subratesh Ghosh could barely recall the name of one such family. 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].’ While collective

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99 A handful of studies that 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, Oxford University Press, 2007; and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, ‘Permanent refugees: Female camp inhabitant in Bihar’ in 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 Uditi Sen, ‘Dissident memories: Exploring Bengali refugee narratives in the Andaman Islands’ in Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds), *Refugees and the end of empire: Imperial collapse and forced migration during the twentieth century*, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 219–44.

100 None of the 15 interviewees published in Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman* confesses to the experience of living in government camps or on railway platforms.

101 These include the 15 interviews published in Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman*; five respondents in Mukhopadhyay, *Shikorer sandhane*, and the various informants consulted by Datta, *Bijoygarh*.

102 Interview with Dr Subratesh Ghosh in Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman*, pp. 98–99.

103 Interview with Bharat Chandra Debnath in Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman*, p. 156.
memory in Bijoygarh has forgotten the first squatters who came from Sealdah station, the popular histories of other colonies seldom mention 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 homes for their uprooted families.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{105} This committee consisted of prominent refugee leaders living in neighbouring \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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 dehumanizing congestion of camp life and the ignominy of weeks spent on the platform, had actually had experience of either. The very real fear of being reduced to such destitution acted as a powerful motive for \textit{jabardakhal} among 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 know-how that characterized 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 \textit{Namasudras}. There is evidence to suggest that the \textit{bhadraloks} of the colony were not only desperate to avoid entering government camps, but were also eager to maintain a social distance from those refugees who did not live up to their standards of respectability.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Regent Colony Bastukhara samiti}.
\textsuperscript{105} Ganguly, \textit{Colonysmriti}, pp. 36–39.
\textsuperscript{106} Ray, ‘Growing up refugee’, pp. 149–79.
The *bhadralok* identity of squatters’ colonies was not limited to benign cultural terms. It was also used to justify replicating 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 colony. Jadavpur Association\(^{107}\) went one step further, announcing 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 the suitably cultured and substantially better-off *bhadraloks* of East Bengal.\(^{108}\) If there is truth to this allegation, it might explain the complete disappearance of those 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 in the squatters’ colonies, who have long been feted as the mainstay of left-wing politics in Calcutta, were—at best—inclined to favour friends, relatives, and acquaintances, and—at worst—practised active social segregation in order to maintain social respectability. Caste was the most visible marker of respect among the refugees. The refugees marginalized within the social geography

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\(^ {107}\) The Jadavpur Association mentioned in popular histories is none other than the Jadavpur Refugee Camp Association, which was instrumental in founding Bijoygarh colony.

\(^ {108}\) Ganguly, *Colonysmriti*, p. 35.

\(^ {109}\) Interview with Dr Subratesh Ghosh in Chakrabarti et al., *Dhangsa-o-nirman*, p. 99.

\(^ {110}\) Ray, ‘Growing up refugee’, pp. 149–79.
of Netaji Nagar, as well as the unfortunate people who stagnated in camps or were dispersed to distant, inhospitable lands, had 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 lists of occupations that lacked social status, but are also indicative of caste identities.

This caste-based segregation also divided the refugees as they agitated for rehabilitation in West Bengal. When the United Central Refugee Council 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 among the Namasudras of East Bengal. Ninety per cent of the deserters were Namasudras and were responsive only to the leadership of Apurbalal Mazumdar who had little sway within the various refugee organizations of Calcutta, but exerted tremendous influence among the Bettiah deserters because of his Namasudra identity. 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 organizations that emerged in West Bengal during the 1950s.

The movement demanding rehabilitation for Bettiah deserters failed, despite the support of all the leftist refugee organizations. The primary reason for its failure was the lack of active public support. Tellingly, the people of the squatters’ colonies could not be persuaded to participate in the movement. This was not for want of trying to involve them on the part of refugee organizations, which had grown organically out of these very colonies. This prompted Chakrabarti to move away from his celebratory narrative of the jabardakhal movement and speculate that ‘the petty bourgeoise squatters who had very little relationship with the lowly Namasudra peasant before migration felt no real concern for the fate of these agriculturists’.

111 Chakrabarti, The marginal men, p. 171.
112 Recent research has brought to light a sense of persecution among Namasudra refugees who clearly believe their low-caste identity to be the basis of their marginalization. For details, see Annu Jalais, ‘Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When tigers become “citizens: and refugees “tigerfood”’, Economic and Political Weekly, 23 April 2005, pp. 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, pp. 104–21.
113 For details of this agitation, see Chakrabarti, The marginal men, pp. 162–207.
114 Chakrabarti, The marginal men, p. 178–79.
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 naturalize the re-creation of caste and class hierarchies of rural East Bengal among the displaced Hindu population in West Bengal.

Refugee narratives about the genesis of squatters’ colonies emphasise 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.\textsuperscript{115}

Similar passages expressing this sentiment can be discerned in every single refugee narrative that emerged from the squatters’ colonies, whether textual or oral. The cultural arrogance of a middle-class identity is clearly discernible in these narratives. Squatters’ colonies not only provided their residents with shelter, but also enabled middle-class Bengalis to maintain a clear social distance from the camp refugees, who were perceived 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

\textsuperscript{115} Ganguly, \textit{Colonymrity}, p. 25.
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 forestall eviction, there were many residents who benefited 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 loan.117 Official records suggest that their experience was far from exceptional. In 1960, Morarji Desai, India’s finance minister, 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 benefited significantly from different kinds of government aid.

Renuka Ray sought to use her influence as an elected member of parliament to remedy what were, in her opinion, the ills that plagued the rehabilitation of Bengali refugees.119 Based on her experience as the minister of rehabilitation, she criticized the central government’s policy of prioritizing the resettlement of refugees living in various government camps over and above the work of formalizing 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 in fact.120 According to the minister of finance, by August 1960, 21 lakh121 refugees had received a total sum of Rs 66.5 crores122 as rehabilitation assistance. Not only were

116 Interview with Jatindranath Das in Chakrabarti et al., Dhanga-o-nirman, p. 206.
117 Interview with Jiten Datta in Chakrabarti et al., Dhanga-o-nirman, p. 145.
118 Morarji Desai, Finance Minister, Government of India to Renuka Ray, Member of Parliament, 15 August 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, Subject File No 5, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (henceforth NMML).
119 Renuka Ray, My reminiscences: Social development during the Gandhian era and after, Calcutta, Stree Samya Books, 2005, p. 189.
120 Morarji Desai to Renuka Ray, 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, NMML.
121 A lakh a unit of enumeration equal to one hundred thousand (100,000) that is widely used in official and other contexts in South Asia.
122 A crore is a unit of enumeration equal to ten million that is widely used in South Asia.
the majority of the recipients—an estimated 15 lakhs—from ‘outside camps’ but 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.123

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 comprised two separate categories of refugees in West Bengal, what distinguished them was not their inherent nature or psychology, but 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 the society and politics of West Bengal, the bhadraloks who shunned camps also monopolized 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.

123 Morarji Desai to Renuka Ray, 1960, Renuka Ray Papers, NMML.
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 a cohesive refugee identity out of a deeply divided history. The mytho-history West Bengal’s squatters’ colonies has been further reinforced by the recent proliferation of commemorative texts. Since 1997, every enterprising refugee colony has produced its own booklet on community history, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the colony, its school or the local *Durga Puja*. Through constant reiteration, a selective representation of refugee pasts—designed to foster political unity among refugees and to obfuscate the deep inequalities of class, caste, and cultural capital among 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 emergence of refugee women as breadwinners are the familiar themes of refugee anecdotes and reminiscences. The refugees resettled 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 characterizes 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

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124 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, Routledge, 1990, pp. 36–50.

125 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 among Bengali Hindus and a focal point of community life.
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 that characterizes histories of ‘self-settled’ refugees gives way to a nameless and faceless homogeneity. This distorts the lived experience of camp-dwellers and serves to further highlight the achievement of the refugee-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 among 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.

126 The few studies that 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 a-historicity of such representations. See Kaur, Since 1947, pp. 99–100; Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, ‘Permanent refugees: Female camp inhabitant in Bihar’ in Essed et al., Refugees and the transformation of societies, pp. 81–93; and Sen, ‘Dissident memories’.