
**ASHOKA GUPTA AND THE RIOT TORN NOAKHALI: A JOURNEY FOR PEACE,
STABILITY AND HUMANITY**

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ABSTRACT: *Ashoka Gupta was a renowned social worker who dedicated her life to social service. In 1946 a violent communal riot erupted in Noakhali in erstwhile East Bengal when Hindu life and property were targeted and conversion was undertaken under the threat of death. Assaults and molestation of women formed a significant feature of the riots. As soon as the news of the riots reached outside world, the members of the All India Women's Conference formed a Relief Committee with Ashoka as its convenor. Initially they distributed relief materials to the fleeing villagers. But when Gandhiji arrived in Noakhali he advised the workers to set up their camps in interior villages to restore confidence among the terrified Hindus. On Gandhiji's advice, Ashoka set up her base in an interior village, taking her little daughter with her. Ashoka's tasks included restoring normalcy and communal peace between the two communities, urging the Hindus to return back, ensuring that the victims received their quota of government relief. She was particularly concerned about the fate of the molested and abducted women. However, she admitted that she could not do much for those helpless women. Nevertheless, she won many hearts through her self-less service in Noakhali and it remained the most memorable chapter in her life.*

KEYWORDS: Riot, conversion, molestation, abduction, peace, normalcy.

Ashoka Gupta was one of those women who in the 1940s successfully made the transition from a house-wife in an educated middle class family to a life of serving the larger world outside. Never holding a paid post throughout her life, she used her skills of home management to serve the society at large. Her mother Jyotirmoyee Debi who became a famous writer in her later life, had a profound influence on Ashoka's life. Jyotirmoyee Debi never differentiated between her daughters and sons and took care that her daughters should be properly educated. She also encouraged Ashoka to read books and periodicals of different kinds. The Duff School in Calcutta where Asoka studied was involved in different kinds of welfare activities like organizing plays to raise funds or feasts for the children in the orphanages or raising funds for victims during natural calamities. Taking part in such activities played an important role in instilling in young Ashoka the value of social service. She also joined Girls' Guide where she learnt useful lessons on first-aid, home nursing, use of wheel-chair etc. About the influence of Girls' Guide on her life she wrote: 'The motto "help all the people at all times" became firmly fixed in my mind as a principle to be followed at all times.'¹ While she was in college she got married to Saibal kumar Gupta, an ICS officer. She used to accompany her husband in his postings in different districts of undivided Bengal. But not satisfied only with household duties she became a member of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC hereafter), Dacca branch in 1936. In 1938 when AIWC in collaboration with other organisations decided to raise funds Ashoka played an important role in organising a cultural show. Later when she was in Jessore she and other officers' wives formed the Child and Female Welfare Society to raise funds for a women's hospital as there was not a single clinic

for women. When the Japanese bombed Calcutta during the World War-II she was in Krishnanagar and became involved in tasks like finding alternative spaces for the evacuee institutions of Calcutta, rehabilitating the evacuees or supervising the production of *Khadi* in the villages. But the event which kick-started her career of social service in a real way was the devastating famine in 1943. She was then in Bankura district where she with her own eyes witnessed the horrors of famine. She now came out of her sheltered existence and started working for the famine-stricken people. She was also instrumental in starting the Bankura Sishu Sadan, on the initiative of the AIWC for children rendered orphan during the famine. Ashoka carried forward her career of social service through the riot-torn days in Noakhali in 1946. The Noakhali episode remained one of the most memorable periods of her life, where she worked under Gandhiji's guidance for bringing peace and communal harmony and giving courage and confidence to terrified Hindus who were a minority there. She stayed in Noakhali till partition became a reality.

Noakhali was a small coastal Muslim majority district of erstwhile East Bengal within the greater Chittagong Division. Like other parts of East Bengal, in Noakhali too, the Hindus, though minority, were economically dominant and the Muslims mostly worked under them. Before 1946 there was never any major communal violence in Noakhali. But in the 1940s the Muslim peasantry suffered badly due to a flood which considerably damaged their crops. On the other hand, a section of the Hindus profited at the expense of the Muslims. This fuelled their resentment against the Hindu economic supremacy.² It has also been argued that the Great Calcutta Killings of the 16th August, 1946 where both the communities had suffered badly, aggravated the communal tension in Noakhali. The violence first erupted in northern part of Noakhali on 10th of October and reached its extreme point on 14th of October. It was spearheaded by Ghulam Sarwar, a prominent member of the Muslim League and an ex-member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. What made matters worse was the fact that his actions received complete support from the Muslim League Ministry of the province. The main targets of attack were Hindu property and Hindu influential people, some of whom were brutally murdered. On the other hand, low caste Hindus were spared after conversion. Conversion of the Hindus was undertaken in an organized manner. Hindus were to perform acts which were forbidden in their religion and perform Islamic practices like reciting the *Kalma*, eating beef, wearing *lungi* and women had to wipe off the vermilion mark on their forehead and to break their conch bangles—all symbols of Hindu marriage. Converted Hindus were compelled to marry their daughters to the Muslims. Hindu temples were also desecrated and idols were also damaged by the mob. Assaults and molestation of women formed a significant feature of the riots. Women were abducted and forcibly married to Muslims. To the Muslim crowd, violation of the honour of Hindu women meant the exposure of the most protected aspect of Hindu identity and religion.³

When such terrible happenings were taking place in Noakhali the outside world was completely unaware of it as the rioters worked in an organised manner. This was done in the following way: The exit and entrance of the Hindus from and to the riot-stricken areas were cut off. This was possible in an area where one could move only either by boat or on foot. There were no motorable or vehicular roads. All the boatmen were Muslims. They refused to ferry the Hindus. The narrow paths (there were no roads) were dug up by the rioters. The few Hindus who tried to get into the interior had to turn back seriously wounded.⁴

Muslim employees in Post and Telegraph offices held up Hindu telegrams asking for urgent help.⁵ Ashoka was in Chittagong when the devastating communal riots erupted in Noakhali. But people like her had no inkling about the reality although Chittagong was the Divisional Headquarters for Noakhali

district. The news of the riots finally reached them through the Bengali Dailies on 18th October. Already in Chittagong stray incidents of stabbing the Hindus had started and a section of the administration acted in such a way that it instilled fear into the minds of the minority community. The District Magistrate, F.A. Karim started a fund raising campaign to aid the Muslim riot victims in Calcutta. But Ashoka noted that the leaflet, through which appeals for aid had been circulated, was so worded that it tantamount to a threat for the Hindus who were forced to make large contributions for fear of possible retaliation.⁶ When the news of Noakhali carnage reached, she proposed that fund raising should now be conducted both for the affected Muslims in Calcutta as well as for the affected Hindus in Noakhali. Such a gesture, she hoped, would help to promote communal harmony and restore confidence in both the communities. But her suggestion was not accepted by the women's wing as also the Main Committee. In fact, no fund raising was done for the Noakhali victims at any time during the period up to August, 1947.⁷

As soon as the news of riots reached, the AIWC members of the Chittagong branch met at Nellie Sengupta's house and a Relief Committee was set up which would engage in relief activities. Ashoka was made the convenor of the committee. Initially, they resolved to distribute food, medicines and clothes to the people who had fled from their villages empty-handed. At this point Ashoka was particularly anxious about the fate of abducted and molested girls because Hindu society was quite conservative in its attitude towards its women and she feared that a molested girl might not be taken back by her family. On 20th October, 1946 she met the District Commissioner, Mr. Carter with this issue in mind. But Mr. Carter showed reluctance and was even sarcastic. Ashoka was also disheartened by the fact that despite so many atrocities committed on the women, the civil society did not come forward to register its strong protest on the issue. In a letter dated 25.10.46 to the Editor of The Statesman she wrote:

Fifteen days have passed since the trouble started at Noakhali and from the very beginning press reports showed that offences against women were committed on a large scale. Yet the Anglo Indian Press was inexplicably silent and very few British men and women whom I met expressed even a lukewarm interest in the affair. I feel that when crimes against women are committed, the question should not arise whether this is a civil war or a rising of one community against one another, but that women as a community should come forward and say that this state of affairs should not be tolerated . . . Is it too much to expect that ladies of the highest rank in British and Indian societies should lead a band of women volunteers and visit every house in the affected area to rescue abducted women and girls in order to save them from the dishonour and the agony to which they are being daily subjected at the present moment?⁸

From 30th October to 4th November, 1946 she undertook a tour of a portion of Tippera and Noakhali districts to get first-hand information about the situation. On 1st November, early in the morning she and her group visited the Faridgunge Police Station and the relief camp. There were about five to six thousand refugees who complained to her that they were provided poor quality rice and as a result they had bowel problems. The women complained that the attackers had broken their conch bangles and wiped off their vermilion mark on their parting. However, she got no definite response on the issue of abduction of women. Her next halt was at Raipura where the big market was almost deserted as most of the shops and the stalls belonged to the Hindus. Two big *Akhras* (Vaishnava place of worship) with their deities and belongings were completely dismantled and looted. Humanity, though fragmented, was still alive when she saw that a Hindu family, whose house had been burnt down, was sheltered by a Muslim neighbour for three days at the risk of his own safety.⁹ Here also she did not get a clue of

abduction. But there was talk of forcible marriage. Next at Karoa or Karpa village(No.5 Union) she saw that the houses were unharmed because of mass conversions. The villagers met them, women cried before them and they insisted on military posting or patrolling for their safety. At Chandpur a Hindu majority village was completely devastated. On 3rd November they reached Lamchar and saw that baring three permanent houses, all other houses had been burnt down. But here the villagers had fought with the attackers with courage and a few young men even dared to lodge a complaint in Ramgunj Police Station.¹⁰

However, the most devastating scenario, she witnessed was at Karpara where the Zaminder, Rajendralal Roy was brutally murdered by his Muslim peasants. The Roy house was completely ruined and the big rafters were reduced to charcoal. Here for the first time she got a little bit of information about abduction of women. She learnt from reliable sources that four women who were more or less distantly related to the Roy family had been taken away and till that time they could not be traced.¹¹ One of the women was seven months' pregnant and another was a little eight year old girl. Another young girl of a neighbour was also missing. After her tour she suggested that following measures were to be taken urgently:

- 1) Search parties for abducted women,
- 2) Forming volunteer corps, patrol areas with armed guards,
- 3) Posting of more military,
- 4) Reassuring people that they were still Hindus,
- 5) Re-establishing them in their own homesteads by putting up some sort of huts as soon as possible,
- 6) Making arrangements for reaping the *aman*(winter) crop immediately and giving it to the rightful owners.¹²

On 7th November Mahatma Gandhi on his way to Choumuhani arrived at Chandpur to restore communal peace. Ashoka on a sudden impulse decided to meet him. She first attended a prayer meeting and then along with others decided to board the same train that was to take Gandhi to Choumuhani. After reaching there, Gandhiji first attended a prayer meeting and then met the women workers of the AIWC. He gave them a plan of action by which they would have to go and live with the people in order to work for them. It was decided that each worker would be assigned one particular police station. Her duty would be to cover all the villages under its jurisdiction in order to acquaint herself with the actual situation in the area and be able to find out about the abducted women.¹³ Ashoka decided to go to Lakshmipur Police Station area. Both her husband and her mother-in-law supported her decision.

Ashoka along with Dr.Phulrenu Guha and Phullarani Das of the AIWC toured Noakhali from 7th to 13th November with their headquarters at Lakshmipur. They visited about twenty villages. Most of these villages were inhabited by backward Hindu communities of *Namasudras* and *Jugis* origins. Ashoka observed that there was a common pattern in the attacks. In most villages a large number of houses including the handlooms were burnt to ashes and houses that escaped destruction by fire were plundered.¹⁴ Many villagers had fled and some of them who stayed back were forced to live under improvised sheds. Hindus were terrorised in a number of ways. In some cases Hindus were falsely implicated of burning down the houses of the Muslims. In some cases Hindus were forced to give donations to the League. Such hostile environment forced the Hindus to leave their villages. Sometimes Ashoka and her teammates tried to assure them that they should stay back as they had lovely crops in the fields. Such assurances gave them some confidence and some of them even

returned. After touring these villages Ashoka and her teammates felt that the Hindus were living in a terrible terrified state as thirty-forty Hindus were arrested in different cases.¹⁵

Secondly, Ashoka and her teammates observed that conversion under threat of death was universal, but at the same time they acknowledged that though conversion saved life, it did not protect the house from loot and arson.¹⁶ After conversion women had to break their conch bangles and rub off the vermilion mark on their parting. The places of worship were defiled and Hindus were forced to eat beef. Thirdly, the team noted that in most cases, culprits were known persons belonging either to the same village or neighbouring villages. Not only were the victims pressurised not to mention any names but were also threatened not to lodge any statements with the police. After talking to the victims Ashoka found that copies of written statement submitted in the police-stations reached the majority community within twenty-four hours.¹⁷ So the Hindus did not dare to depose before the police and Ashoka doubted whether they would ever be able to make any statements, if they decided to stay on. So her suggestion was:

Unless protection is guaranteed truth cannot be told by those who are staying on, it can only be told by those who have left the villages for good and do not propose to come back.¹⁸

The group observed that government relief had not reached these villages until the 12th of November and food shortage was acute. The price of rice was at Rs.20/- per maund. But the people having lost everything in the riots virtually had no buying capacity at all. Their only possessions were a few cattle, betel nuts and coconuts but these commodities had no selling price. Moreover, in riot torn villages most people were suffering from lack of clothes, possessing not more than a piece of cloth and almost no utensils.¹⁹ Ashoka also noted that a considerable number of people were suffering from diseases like Malaria or Cholera and felt that unless a special effort was given people would die without any medical aid.²⁰ Hindus, they observed, were too scared to go near their fields and they also came across cases of forcible stealing of betel nuts and coconuts. Hindus were too scared to protest and even if they protested, it meant little.

Ashoka and her team also started collecting statistics of crimes against women. They came across cases of physical assault on women when the rioters attempted to forcibly take away money and jewellery.²¹ They also came across cases of forcible marriage, molestation and even rape. Even young girls who had not yet reached their marriageable age, were not spared. But it was not easy to extract information from them. 'Sometimes we had to talk to them alone for a long time before they dared to come forward with their pitiful story.'²² She noted that luckily many parents of the forcibly married girls did not consider such marriages valid and brought back their girls after the disturbance was over. In some cases, however, forcible marriages were averted after persuasion by the girl's family or by the timely intervention of the neighbouring family. In some cases refusal to forcible marriage resulted in the house being put on fire.²³ She also noted that a section of the Muslim women too, did not prevent their men from committing atrocities on women.²⁴ A victim confided in Ashoka that when she was hiding to escape from the perpetrators one Muslim woman told her: "Why do you flee? Be of our religion, eat beef and get your daughters married to our family."²⁵ Ashoka's experience also pointed out that even a section of educated Muslims were not against such forcible marriages.²⁶ She noted that in Charruhita Sashi Majumder's daughter Sudebi Sundari, aged ten was married to Sayed Ahmed, who belonged to a doctor's family in Tumchar.²⁷

Another serious point that she and her teammates raised was the misuse of the Red Cross badges by the majority community. They noted that a number of local volunteers wearing Red Cross badges

belonging to the majority community were regarded a terror to the affected people. They stationed themselves at cross roads or ferry *ghats*(a landing stage as on the bank of a river, pond etc.) to get information of the newcomers. Ashoka noted that even those who were accused of hooliganism were freely wearing Red Cross badges. These volunteers allegedly arrested innocent Hindus on false charges of arson.²⁸ More alarming was the fact that except at Lakshmipur the team did not notice a single Red Cross milk centre or evidence of any activity in the area that they toured.²⁹ But in the days of darkness, not all human values were lost. They found out that some Muslims, even at the cost of risking their lives, had tried to save their neighbours. Generally they found that the older generation was more or less united in condemning the violence. But she noted that the younger generation of Muslims did not think like their seniors.

In this way for a month they toured the villages to have first-hand information about the situation. They also distributed relief materials. But when they asked the villagers to return to their villages, they refused. Also their efforts to rescue the abducted girls came to a nought. So, at this stage Ashoka was quite frustrated and disheartened. She now decided to seek Gandhiji's advice for her future course of action. In her meeting with Gandhiji, Ashoka proposed that she would work in the villages for fifteen days without a break and then she would return and thereafter, Phullarani would take charge. This way, she thought, they would be able to take care of their household and their children to a certain extent. But Gandhiji argued that “. . . working for a few days, then returning home, would bring no results. Any sort of work that one undertook, must be done with complete concentration and involvement.”³⁰ He told them that if they took their small child with them, then in the prevailing situation there, their children might be in danger. He further told them: “Unless you prove to the villagers that before harming your own children, no one can cause any harm to the villagers, you cannot request the uprooted villagers to return to their own villages.”³¹ Ashoka now informed Gandhiji that she was now ready to take up the challenge. As her daughter was very small then, Gandhiji asked Ashoka to take her daughter with her. He also advised Ashoka not to take any decision in haste. Addressing workers like her, he said that they should go to such villages, where everybody had fled out of panic. Looking at them the villagers would find the courage to return. They could also visit those villages where all the inhabitants were *Harijans* who had not left their villages but their backbone was broken. They had to be protected from terror and despair. Ashoka was also reminded that once she took up the task, she would not be able to return without completing her work. Her husband could come and meet her at his convenience. But Ashoka was now determined and she informed Gandhiji that she was fully prepared to take on the challenge.

Ashoka and Phullarani started working in Parbatinagar first. After breakfast they used to go out with relief materials and select a house in a locality as their base for the day. From here, they toured the village and met the villagers. In the evening after returning to their camp, they used to hold prayer meetings. In this way she and Phullarani worked more than a month in Parbatinagar and Majupur. Most of the inhabitants were weavers Their houses were burnt down. Not only that, Ashoka noted that even *ghanis*(a large block of wood used in grinding oilseeds to express oil from them) and *dhekis*(a kind of husking pedal operated in a seesaw manner) were either destroyed or made unworkable, if they had escaped fire.³² She realized that it was indeed difficult to rehabilitate these people. After working a while Ashoka decided to set up a base for herself. She selected Tumchar, a *Harijan* village for this purpose. Meanwhile, Phullarani had to go back due to personal reasons and Sneharani Kanjilal took her place. They set up their base in the house of the Talukdars- the most prominent family in Tumchar. Her Girl-Guide training came in handy when she dug three trench-latrines for the camp inmates and visitors. She noted that their arrival in Tumchar certainly gave the local Hindus some sort

encouragement. But their condition was deplorable. She wrote: 'There was no stock of food-everything had been looted. There was no place to work and earn something.'³³ They first started distributing relief materials received through the Union Board, AIWC, Congress and other organisations. Relief materials were distributed among riot-torn Hindus as well as poor Muslims. They also took the initiative to rebuild the destroyed houses. But in spite of their best efforts, Ashoka found that they were unable to win the confidence of both the communities. Though the Hindus did repair their houses, they still lacked the confidence to stay on. On the other hand, the Muslims were in general antagonistic to workers like her, as the Muslims felt that all the work of the relief workers were meant only for the Hindus. The attendance of the Muslims in the prayer meetings was also very low. During this time she and Sneharani Kanjilal started reading the *Quran* under the guidance of a Maulabi who was a follower of Gandhiji and used to attend his prayer meetings. He suggested that in order to understand Islam better they should read the *Quran*. After walking a mile or so, from 7-30 every morning they began to study the *Quran*. One day while they were reading the Quran the Maulabi's mother –an ordinary village woman came to meet them and lifted the veil on their head and told them that one should always cover his/her head while reading the Quran. Ashoka felt embarrassed and later wrote: '. . . how easily an illiterate village woman made us understand that whatever we do, we should do it with respect.'³⁴ Ashoka's husband, however, became anxious when he learnt that a section of the orthodox Muslims had written to Gandhiji that no one other than the Muslims had the right to read the Quran. So, he feared that her wife might become a target of the Muslims fanatics. However, luckily no unpleasant event took place.

For three months she was fully immersed in relief work which included organising medical teams, rebuilding houses, undertaking repairing of roads, sinking tube-wells, talking to the local people and visiting villages and camps. On behalf of the AIWC they were running three camps in Majupur, Parbatinagar and Tumchar. One thousand fifty-five persons were taken care of at camp no.1, one thousand one hundred and five persons in camp no.2 and eight hundred persons at camp no.3.³⁵ She on 11.1.47 wrote to Mr. Zaman, Additional Magistrate, Relief, Noakhali to supply dried potatoes, dried cabbages and dried onions at their Parbatinagar, Majupur and Bejoynagar camps because the village people were unaware of cooking these dried items. So she wanted the cooking to be done under their supervision and they were also willing to take responsibility of the distribution of the cooked stuff which would be done keeping in mind the taste and the needs of the people.³⁶ From the last week of December to the second week of January, 1947 she along with other workers visited a number of houses in no.4, 5 and 12 Unions to assess the situation. While about 200 refugees from different places had gathered in the Majupur camp and the surrounding areas, about 100 people were staying in a place near Majupur. That a section of people were still willing to come back to their villages was demonstrated by the fact that in Parbatinagar camp in no.5 Union, about 300 people had returned to their villages during the last six or seven days.³⁷ She also felt that as people had lost almost everything in the riots adequate foodstuffs in the form of rice and *atta*(wheat flour) should be provided to them by the government until the people were in a position to resume their work which was weaving.³⁸ Almost every house was looted and she noticed that few handlooms had escaped damage. So, resuming their traditional work was indeed difficult. Barring the families which possessed some amount of paddy lands, the rest had turned into paupers.³⁹

She further noted that government policy instead of making the lives of the victims easier was actually making it difficult. First there was an unnecessary delay in sanctioning gratuitous relief in the shape of grains. The refugees were being asked by the R.O to produce U.F.C Ration card or relief cards. But most of the refugees could not produce the card after the loot or arson; and relief cards could not be

produced by people coming from distant places as they were issued at Lakshmipur. Therefore she suggested that either identification by their neighbours or a responsible person at the time of grain distribution should be considered sufficient by the R.O.⁴⁰ Secondly, grains were used to be distributed according to a list prepared by the Presidents of the Union Board. But many had come afterwards and so if the list was strictly adhered to, then she feared that not even 1000 of the refugees would be covered by the stock. Not only that for the last three months free grains were not distributed among the affected people in no.13 Sakchar Union of Lakshmipur.⁴¹ When a list was indeed made, it was done by persons who never visited the villages after the riot. That the authorities were indifferent towards the plight of the homeless people was borne by the fact that on 8.1.47 a number of refugees including 44 women, 56 men and 20 children including a new born baby were driven out of the high school refugee camp at Lakshmipur by the President of No.4 Union without providing them any alternative arrangements.⁴² Citing such pathetic incidents Ashoka requested the administration to consider the interests of the homeless people as a priority.

She also felt that more money should be spent by the authorities to provide poor relief in addition to the special relief given to the affected people. She felt that gratuitous relief should be given to all persons. The quantity of rice and *atta* distributed in Lakshmipur area should be increased because the need of the people after the riots was so great that even the refugees from far off areas could not be given any rice.⁴³ So she felt that an increase was absolutely necessary so that ordinary general relief normally given in December and January could be continued. She argued that if only special relief was given to the affected people and normal relief was altogether stopped then it would be unjust for the poor people and would also put the relief workers in an uneasy situation because workers like her were there not only for relief and rehabilitation but also to bridge the gap between the two communities.⁴⁴ So she felt that both general relief as well as special relief was to operate side by side. It also dawned upon her that the villagers who were slowly getting back to their villages lacked even the basic necessities due to inadequate government relief. Therefore if generous contributions in the form of blankets or clothes were not given then the incoming refugees in every possibility would succumb to cold and other diseases. She also found that the government allotment of two *seers* of grains (rice or *atta*) per head per week was not sufficient. Not only that, it was only the Red Cross which was supplying milk in one or two places and there was also a dearth of doctors and medicines in many villages.⁴⁵

Meanwhile a government order had arrived in February, stating that a relief officer would be entrusted to disburse compensation in cash to the riot victims in March. But Ashoka and other workers found that the terms of the order were rather vague. According to the order Rs 250 was to be disbursed to each household while Rs.200 would have to be given to every weaver, fishermen or peasant for procuring tools or implements subject to the production of proofs. But Ashoka felt that Rs. 250 was inadequate for large joint families. The disbursement took place in Charmandal for two days. Ashoka with her workers were present with their own list and saw to it that nobody was left out. When a widow was wrongfully deprived of her compensation by the President of the Union Board, on the ground that the surviving family members would take care of her, Ashoka took up her case. She argued that the widow had a room and a cow which was slaughtered, cooked and fed to the family. Ultimately the Relief Officer was forced to give the woman compensation. Ashoka later recalled that the aforesaid event had created quite uproar in those days.⁴⁶

On 28th February, 1947 Gandhiji, then staying in Haimchar, convened a meeting of all the workers working in *Harijan* villages. In that meeting Gandhiji announced that he was leaving Noakhali for

Bihar where a terrible communal riots had erupted in retaliation of the Noakhali carnage. Ashoka and workers like her were visibly upset at this as Gandhiji's presence was a major source of inspiration. Observing their distress Gandhiji promised them that he would return to Noakhali soon. Before parting his last advice to the women workers was:

You women must be like Mirabai. If like her, you truly believe that the path you have chosen is the rightful path, then you will also take everyone around you on that path. You will never look back.⁴⁷ He also advised the workers to live and behave like the villagers, only then would the latter have complete faith on them.

During the next few months she along with other workers started visiting villages and localities according to their list. She went to both Muslim and Hindu houses to converse with the family members. However, in most Hindu families the women were either sent to the Lakshmipur camp or to other safe places. In Muslim families the women sometimes complained to them that the workers like Ashoka were here only to serve the Hindus, while the poverty of the Muslims were overlooked by the workers. Ashoka and other workers tried to convince them that as the Hindus were the victims the preference would have to be given to the Hindus and that clothes, medicines and other necessary items would also be distributed among the needy Muslims. Asoka recalled that they even proposed to send the camp doctor. While a section of the Muslim women gladly accepted their offer Muslim men generally were indifferent to their efforts.⁴⁸ Ashoka also found out that earlier the Hindus were healthy and strong and were capable of physical labour as well. But the riots had devastated them both mentally and physically. Without a source of livelihood, she noted that, they managed to survive somehow.⁴⁹ But communal harmony could not be restored between the two communities despite the workers' best efforts. They gradually realised that they were not going to succeed in this regard. Harassment by the majority community continued unabated. On one such cases of harassment Gourango Sarker became the victim when a road was ordered to be constructed right through the middle of his arable lands. After all his pleas had gone in vain, the man came to Ashoka for help. After a lot of efforts Ashoka was able to halt the work for four-five days. Later, the Additional District Magistrate Mr. Zaman surveyed the land and assured Ashoka that the land would be saved. Gouranga Sarkar, however, died shortly due to cholera epidemic, though Ashoka suspected that there might have been a possibility of a foul play in his death.⁵⁰ Moreover, as the Hindus had sold their cattle and paddy at a low price for fear of loot it caused a problem for future cultivation as the prices of commodities continued to be exorbitantly high.⁵¹

Despite her group's efforts to recover the abducted girls Ashoka found out that they were not successful in this regard. The main hindrance in such a task was that very few women were ready to admit that they were molested or raped. She found that only about 25% of the returned girls admitted that they had been raped or molested.⁵² Such refusal to admission was born out of a fear of social ostracisms which was alarmingly high among the people. Ashoka noted that in few cases abducted girls were taken back by their families, but in innumerable cases the families disowned such girls or in some cases the abducted girls were unable to overcome the trauma. Ashoka admitted: 'Very rarely were we able to succeed in such situations.'⁵³ She remembered one incident in Bejoynagar where even after two months of her return to her home a married woman was forced to come to the Union Board Office late at night and then molested every night.⁵⁴ The victim and her husband admitted to Ashoka that they were afraid of lodging a complaint in the local police station. Ashoka was able to persuade them to come to Lashmipur Police Station but the couple was too terrified to mention any name. With no other option in sight, they fled to safer places. Ashoka was disheartened and wrote: 'I did not have the strength either to punish the culprits or to protect the tortured. We were mere helpless spectators.'⁵⁵

An important part of their rehabilitation programme was to make arrangements for children and women who were guardian less. Ashoka at first used to make a temporary arrangement either in Lakshmipur camp or in some family. Later they were transferred to Kasturba Trust in Comilla or the Prabartak Sangha in Chittagong. In Majupur they came across two orphan children- a boy and a girl who were growing up in their maternal uncle's house. But during the riots the uncle and his wife were burnt to death. The District Magistrate, Mr. Macinarni sent the two helpless children to Ashoka. Due to her effort they were rehabilitated in Prabartak Sangha and the girl in Comilla.⁵⁶ In another case a woman expressed her desire to rehabilitate two of her sons somewhere and they, too, were rehabilitated in Prabartak Sangha.

During the summer, in mid-April there was outbreak of cholera. At first Ashoka sent Dr. Palit who used to live in Ramanandi village, with injections. But unfortunately Dr. Palit himself became a victim of Cholera and eventually died. As they did not have enough stock of medicines in the camp, she went to Dattapara to collect medicine and arrange for the visit of a medical team. The team arrived on the next day.

When she was thus busy with her relief work she had no inkling of the possibility that the Partition of India was increasingly becoming a reality day by day. They did not have radio or newspaper. So they were completely in the dark about the decisions that were being taken in the corridors of power. Ashoka wrote: 'Perhaps I was like the one-eyed deer- I was so busy dealing with the problem in front of me that I had no time for reality.'⁵⁷ It was Sucheta Kripalini who after learning about the outbreak of cholera asked Saibal Kumar Gupta to take back her wife and daughter. In the month of May her husband was transferred to Calcutta to work for the Partition Committee. Now Ashoka had to leave to take care of her two children. Gandhiji still wanted Ashoka to stay for a few more months. But Sucheta convinced Gandhiji that it was really an emergency for Ashoka. Before her departure she distributed all the relief materials, left with her. Sinking of tube-wells was still going on. She also completed the task of inoculation in her area. She did not forget to make financial arrangements for the children she had rescued and sent them to Prabartak Sangha, so that they would not have to face any financial problems after her departure. Ashoka considered her days in Noakhali as the most rewarding and memorable period in her working life. She wrote:

The work was fulfilling because we were trying on the one hand to bring about an attitudinal change among the strong and on the other helping the weak become strong and courageous.⁵⁸

The fact that she found acceptance among the people can be gauged from the number of letters she received during the riots, found in her private papers. The subject-matter varied from plea for financial help by the students or complaint against harassment of the victims by relief officials or women writing their own experiences. Also the workers working in different areas used to maintain regular correspondence with her to seek advice from time to time. As regards her personal life the Noakhali episode was the most difficult phase in her life. Her husband supported her endeavour throughout and took care of their two children in her absence. But no doubt he was worried about Ashoka's safety and the primitive conditions in the camp in which their little daughter was living. But gradually a sense of unhappiness arose in him about this forced separation and how long it would continue. 'Once he wrote that he felt like just leaving everything and coming away to join me!'⁵⁹ Ashoka was no doubt worried about her family, as she wrote '...but my immensely busy life and my deep commitment to Gandhiji's words made me determined to complete my work and not thinking of my returning home as yet.'⁶⁰ She also recalled later that during her Noakhali days, how her daughter Sakuntala's teachers in their small

ways extended their support to her family. When the principal and another teacher found out how Ashoka's husband was struggling to plait his daughter's hair, they made an arrangement whereby Sakuntala could change her dress in school, her hair would be tied neatly before going home. Such gestures really moved Ashoka and made her feel that she 'had a solid support system behind her.'⁶¹ In fact her domestic world never came in the way of her service outside. Both her mother and mother-in-law were always supportive. Her husband, too, was accommodating and never raised any objection about her long absence from home. But this sort of attitude at that time was not at all common as was manifested by a letter written by Mrs. Rebecca Ghosh from Dacca who was engaged in relief work in Chandpur in 1946-47. On 21.3.47 she wrote to Ashoka that she was forced to leave her camp because her husband was increasingly becoming adamant about her working away from Dacca because he believed that she was wasting her time in the villages.⁶² Perhaps this was the predominant attitude prevalent in the society and Ashoka's case was an exception. The work of social service which she started in Noakhali, did not stay restricted in that particular time and place, but became her life-long passion.

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