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## Discussion on Relief and Rehabilitation of Refugees: A Study of Selected Correspondence of Jawaharlal Nehru 1946-1948

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to advance the study on relief and rehabilitation by drawing upon the correspondence of Jawaharlal Nehru. It provides a promising approach for analysing the situation of the colossal humanitarian crisis which emerged due to the partition and resulting mass displacement. Through these letters this paper attempts to draw the picture of nation building in its most essential and raw form: as an immense collective effort of care, coordination and compassion, where the stability of the state depended on its ability to mend the lives of its most vulnerable citizens. The letters reveal the intersection of ethical concern, administrative experimentation, and political consolidation. Refugee rehabilitation emerged as a process through which state authority was asserted, institutional capacity strengthened, and national integration pursued. This article undertakes a close reading of selected letters written between 1946 and 1948 to examine how refugee rehabilitation was conceptualised within the broader vision of democratic governance and secular nation building. It argues that Nehru's correspondence reveals both the humanitarian concerns and the political calculations that shaped early refugee policy in



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independent India. Finally, the article tends to outline how the principles and administrative priorities in his correspondence directly shaped the early Indian state's response and legacy.

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## Introduction

Fifteenth August 1947 was more than the occasion for the transfer of power in India from the British to the representatives of the Indian people. It marked the successful culmination of a long and heroic struggle full of trial and suffering. If the opportunities for the newly independent nation were great so were the responsibilities of its government headed by Jawaharlal Nehru.

Beyond the ceremonial hoisting of the flag on the historic August day in 1947 lay a landscape of trauma and upheaval. The preceding year had seen a bloody communal carnage, a foreshadowing of the violence to come, setting the stage for partition that would uproot countless souls. In this critical scenario of joy and despair, Jawaharlal Nehru assumed the helm of the world's largest democracy. This article attempts to understand the immediate aftermath of independence through his eyes, as revealed in his personal and official letters. It focuses on the formidable task of relief and rehabilitation- a task that demanded not just political will but immense compassion and dedication. Nehru's correspondence serves as an intimate window into Nehru's dual role: he was both the architect of the democratic dream and a first responder to a humanitarian catastrophe.

We see not just the prime minister issuing decrees. However, a deeply empathetic individual grappling with the scale of suffering- corresponding with chief ministers about refugee camps' conditions, pleading with communal harmony and pouring out personal anguish at the stories of violence that reached his desk. The focus on relief and rehabilitation here is framed not merely as a bureaucratic challenge, but as the fundamental moral undertaking of the new independent India. Nehru's writings reveal how the project of resettling millions- providing shelter, food, work, and a sense of belonging became the urgent, practical expression of the nation's founding ideals of secularism and social justice. This correspondence becomes a map of conscience at work, highlighting the tension between soaring visions of the future and the grim, daily demands of healing a fractured present.

## Discussions

According to Nehru, regarding the question of rehabilitation, two points must be clearly borne in mind: firstly, that it is a colossal problem and requires the fullest cooperation of the entire nation in



solving it. Thus, it necessitates cooperation and coordination under central direction. Secondly, when facing any major problem, it is essential to have priorities established. Rehabilitation, on a large scale, offers an excellent opportunity for economic planning (Nehru, 1985).

The correspondence makes clear that refugee relief was intimately linked to political stability. Communal violence had not subsided with independence; rather, displacement and insecurity often intensified retaliatory sentiments. Nehru repeatedly cautioned against allowing refugee grievances to translate into communal hostility. In a circular to chief ministers in October 1947, he wrote: “We must not allow our anger and grief to cloud our judgement. The protection of minorities is a test of our civilisation”. The statement reveals that relief policy embedded within a broader ideological project. The treatment of refugees predominantly Hindu and Sikh arrivals from West Punjab and Sindh risked reinforcing communal polarisation.

The question of continuing the education of students who have been forced to migrate from schools and colleges in Pakistan to India has captured the attention of both the central and provincial governments—the Government of India, in the Ministry of Education, letter No. F. 73-97/47-E.I. dated 8 October 1947, has already expressed the view that, in the special circumstances, it is desirable to permit such students to join educational institutions without insisting on the production of migration or other certificates which the students are expected to produce in regular times. The government of India also addressed the issue of the employment of teachers from the Pakistan area who have been thrown out of their jobs and are obliged to migrate to India.

A marked conceptual shift occurs in the letters from late 1947 onwards. While initial communications emphasised emergency relief like food, shelter, security subsequent letters increasingly focused on rehabilitation and integration. Nehru wrote in early 1948 that “we must aim not merely at relief but at the re-establishment of these displaced persons as self supporting members of society”. This statement signals an evolution in policy thinking. Refugees were no longer viewed solely as victims in transit but as future citizens requiring economic integration.

Property claims posed particularly complex challenges. The exchange of evacuee properties between India and Pakistan required legal innovation and bureaucratic oversight. Nehru acknowledged the sensitivity of these matters, cautioning against “hasty or inequitable distribution”. Fairness in property settlement was linked to public trust. Administrative arbitrariness could erode legitimacy.

The Cabinet has appointed a sub-committee with the following terms of reference:-



- (a) To survey the problem of rehabilitation of refugees coming from Western Pakistan, more specifically, those coming from urban areas;
- (b) To lay down the general lines of policy and to make recommendations for an overall planned system of rehabilitation;
- (c) To suggest the machinery necessary to put into effect this general plan; and
- (d) To examine the financial implications of such a plan both in the Centre and in the provinces and states concerned.

It is proposed to have a high-powered Development and Rehabilitation Board with a Rehabilitation Commissioner with broad powers for planning and execution.

The problem of the rehabilitation of the vast number of refugees from Pakistan must be considered as one of the highest priorities. The Government of India communique on 1 January 1948 stated that by December 1947, 43,62,000 non-Muslim refugees had migrated to India. Of these, approximately 20 lakhs had settled in East Punjab and the Indian states, while 12.5 lakhs had been accommodated in 160 refugee camps throughout the country. While accommodating the masses, he highlighted their constructive productivity in serving the state if given the chance in various fields of activity.

Nehru's vision for rehabilitation took cognisance of profound psychological trauma inflicted by the violence, partition and the mass migration that took place. We are faced, particularly in East Punjab and Delhi, with the psychological problem created by the events of the last few months. These have created in the minds of people, not merely among the refugees but also among others, a bitterness, a sense of desperation and a desire for retaliation—in short, a profound spiritual malaise.

Among the many problems, the one of utmost importance was the recovery of the abducted women. The pioneering efforts of women like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Rameshwari Nehru are also mentioned. The point was made that the girls were not forced to go to Pakistan against their wishes. There was a great majority of the women who recovered refused to leave their new homes and were so frightened of being taken away forcibly that they committed suicide (Nehru, n.d.). In this work, the International Red Cross and the Friend Service Unit made a remarkable contribution.

Stress was laid on the marked necessity of a central planning for the adequate rehabilitation of the refugees from Pakistan (Nehru, 1948). For this task, a planning and development board should be



formed, which must include a high-powered development commissioner and two or four other members. This board was tasked with developing schemes for the settlement of refugees in provinces or areas with potential for new settlements. The Central Provinces were the most appropriate provinces, rich in forest and mineral resources.

There were talks over linking the previous development programmes with the rehabilitation works (Nehru, 1948). The increasing intensity of the crisis heightened the urgency of appointing a high-powered board and a Development and Rehabilitation Commissioner. Due to the paucity of funds, there was a need for a central relief fund that could be accessed in any situation of distress, but not specifically for the relief and rehabilitation of refugees in India. Hence, the “Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund” was initiated and was to be managed by a committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, a representative of the Tata Trustee, and a representative of industry and commerce to be chosen by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce (Nehru, 1948).

The long term impact of rehabilitation policies is implicit in the correspondence. Refugee resettlement reshaped urban landscapes, particularly in Delhi and northern India. Entire neighbourhoods emerged from rehabilitation schemes. Commercial networks were reconfigured as displaced entrepreneurs re established businesses. Nehru recognised this transformative potential, he wrote that “these displaced persons bring with them energy and resilience which, if properly directed, will enrich the nation.” This observation reframes refugees not as burdens but as contributors to national reconstruction. The state’s task was to channel this resilience productively. In this sense, refugee management intersected with developmental planning. The integration of displaced populations accelerated industrial and agricultural initiatives. Rehabilitation was thus not only restorative but generative.

## Conclusion

Nehru’s correspondence reveals that the challenge of rehabilitation in the wake of Partition was not merely administrative but civilisational in scale. He consistently stressed that only national cooperation, centralised coordination, and clear priorities could address a crisis of such magnitude. Education, employment, and psychological recovery—particularly for displaced students, teachers, and abducted women—were treated as essential components of rebuilding a fractured society. The establishment of specialised committees, a high-powered Development and Rehabilitation Board, and eventually the Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund reflected an emerging state attempting to pair



humane concern with structured economic planning. Taken together, these measures underscore Nehru's conviction that the stability of the new nation depended on its ability to restore dignity, livelihood, and hope to millions whom Partition had uprooted.

Thus, the study of selected correspondence of Jawaharlal Nehru between 1946 and 1948 reveals that the relief and rehabilitation were foundational to the making of the postcolonial Indian state. The unprecedented displacement following the Partition of India and Pakistan was not merely a humanitarian crisis but a defining administrative and political challenge. It demonstrates a constant balancing act between act between moral responsibility and administrative constraint. The correspondence underscores that the refugee rehabilitation was not a peripheral issue but central to the consolidation of democratic governance in early independent India. The refugee crisis shaped both policy structures and the moral vocabulary of the nation state.

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