

Public Arguments – 1



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

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therefore, elsewhere":
*Mapping the Many Displacements of Bengali
Hindu Refugees from East Pakistan,
1947 to 1960s*

Anwasha Sengupta

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Village: Chandmari, Danapur Cantonment

Patna – 801502 (Bihar) INDIA

Website: www.tiss.edu

e-mail: patnacentre@tiss.edu

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"They must have to go therefore, elsewhere": Mapping the Many Displacements of Bengali Hindu Refugees from East Pakistan, 1947 to 1960s

Anwesha Sengupta¹

British India's partition (1947) generated massive refugee movement across the newly-formed international border. West Bengal witnessed huge refugee influx from East Pakistan, while the Muslims had to make a reverse trek in large numbers. This paper focuses on the Bengali Hindu refugees who entered West Bengal. It explores a particular "rehabilitation" policy of the West Bengal Government, known as the dispersal scheme. It was a peculiar form of refugee movement that was initiated and regulated by the government to prevent, on one hand, congestion of the refugees in particular areas like Calcutta and, on the other, to provide a labour force for underdeveloped and thinly populated areas like the Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya. In this paper, I will discuss some of the key issues regarding this plan of the government. They are:

- a) The rationale of the scheme stemmed from the belief that the refugees, displaced once, could be displaced again and that they did not/ should not have an opinion about the destination;
- b) To look at "dispersal" as a peculiar form of forced migration – though the element of "force" varied from time to time; and
- c) To complicate the received wisdom regarding migration during the partition of the subcontinent. Studies have focused mostly on the migration of the Muslims from India and Hindus from Pakistan. But it was a more complicated process which included various forms of population movements including internal displacements of various kinds like dispersal, ghettoization and mass desertion from camps, plus the right and scope of return migration. For many, border crossing was just the beginning of their migrant life – once they reached their supposed destinations, they were dispersed by the government; the new destinations often offered no respite to many and they again moved to newer places in search of a better life or returned to their homeland as being minority seemed better than being refugee.

1. Assistant Professor, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata

Section 1: Dispersal

Ganesh Haloi, a noted artist of contemporary Bengal, left East Pakistan at the wake of the February Riots in 1950². This was a year of intense cross border migration between East Pakistan and West Bengal. More than 1.17 millions of Bengali Hindus had left East Pakistan that year³ and Haloi's family was one of them. They reached Ranaghat, a railway station near the border on the Indian side and were taken to the transit camp (known as Coopers' Camp) for the time being. From there they boarded the "special refugee train" to reach Bihar. The whole arrangement was put in place hurriedly: refugees coming by train like Haloi's family would be stopped at border stations like Ranaghat or Bongaon, they would be put in the nearby transit camps and then they would be taken to the neighbouring states like Orissa and Bihar as soon as possible by special trains. It was decided that they would not be allowed to reach Calcutta at any cost, unless they had some immediate relatives with whom they could stay. The refugees who headed towards Calcutta by steamer had similar fate. They were de-boarded at Shalimar near Howrah and were packed off to Bihar/Orissa immediately by special trains. Again, exceptions were made only for those having close relations in Calcutta.

Why were there such desperate attempts to keep Calcutta out of bound for the refugees? The government would say that Calcutta already had too many of them. They could substantiate their reply with statistics: by the end of April, 1949, 1.9 million people had migrated from East Pakistan. Of this displaced population, .97 million people came to Calcutta and its neighbourhood⁴. An estimate suggested that at least 10,000 refugees were squatting at the Sealdah station complex itself in March/April of 1950⁵. The West Bengal government insisted that refugees were 'not a provincial problem but an all-Indian one.'⁶ Kailash Nath Katju, the Governor of West Bengal, suggested that refugees should 'spread themselves out.'⁷ He asked the migrants,

To realise that it would be impossible for all these refugees to try to seek accommodation in West Bengal. There was the natural desire everywhere amongst these people to live in Bengal, among people who were familiar to them by language, by diet and because of familiar climatic conditions. Somehow Calcutta exerted a magnificent influence on almost everybody in Bengal and everyone of them wanted to live somewhere in Calcutta ... [but] they all knew that the conditions of Calcutta were already horrible... [the refugees] must have to go therefore, elsewhere.⁸

Related to this was the growing fear that unregulated refugee influx to the city would destroy the urban infrastructure. 'To be a good city, as well as a well run city, both its size and its density of population must not exceed a certain limit,' observed one of the retired chief executive officers of Calcutta Corporation.⁹ 'To make the situation worse, many of these refugees had never lived in cities before, they did not know the mode and discipline of city life', observed the officer.¹⁰ Steadily, a consensus was emerging among certain sections of the city residents and in the government circles that the refugees should be sent elsewhere, particularly to the scarcely populated areas within and outside West Bengal. Already in 1949, the process had been initiated when few hundreds of Bengali Hindu refugees staying in camps in and around Calcutta were sent to the Andaman Islands in small batches. It came to be known as dispersal policy. This process of dispersal intensified (and also took a different shape) in 1950 as a consequence of increased refugee influx to West Bengal. But let us begin with the story of Andaman.

Sending the Refugees to the Andaman

Since India's independence, the central government was keen to take advantage of the fertile land, mineral resources, timber and other natural wealth that the Andaman Islands had to offer. As early as November 1948, a group, designated as the Andaman Exploratory Delegation, was sent to these Islands to examine 'the prospect of colonization and settlement'¹¹ there and they found the islands favourable for "colonization".¹² It was observed that 'there are large possibilities for settlement by those who take to cultivation or fishery as their principal occupation.'¹³ But to exploit the resources of Andaman, there was an 'urgent need for labourers of all types as well as skilled labourers of artisan class'.¹⁴ Initially the government attempted to identify individuals from the settled population who would be "willing" to relocate in these Islands. But the unwillingness of the settled population to go to these far off islands made the government shift its attention to the refugees. Seemingly, the rationale was that the refugees, who had already migrated once, would pose fewer problems if asked to move again. Thus, the policy of dispersal presupposed that the refugees had no sense of *belonging* and no choice for destination. Or, rather they should not have a sense of belonging and a choice of destination. The fallacy of this logic was evident though. That places like Calcutta attracted

more refugees than other parts of the region proved the refugees had clear sense and their own reasons about where to go and where not go.¹⁶

Most of the refugees were deeply suspicious of the Andaman plan. Since colonial times, the islands had carried alarming associations: Andaman meant “fearsome savages”, penal settlement and the Cellular Jail. They feared that the government, by sending the refugees to these far flung remote areas, was simply trying to get rid of them. They found a sympathetic audience among the Communist Party members and sympathizers as well as among many ordinary residents of West Bengal who believed that the government could accommodate the refugees within the state if the government wanted so. Many feared that the government, by sending the refugees to these far flung remote areas, was simply trying to get rid of them. A letter published in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on February 2, 1949, reflected this. “How these islands, so long considered to be veritable inferno, could suddenly change into a paradise is, indeed a puzzle to the common man,” sarcastically commented the letter writer. He doubted the credibility of the government “that is yet to give proof of its ability to make jungle infested villages within its province fit for habitation is indeed capable of turning the far off islands into happy homes for refugees from East Bengal!” The *Statesman* reporter, writing on the same day, was equally unenthusiastic: “Communications and marketing facilities are poor. Mangrove swamps discourage enterprise. Moreover...our information is that they [i.e., the islands] can be malarious.”¹⁷ The reluctance of the refugees became evident when around the middle of February 1949, the Relief and Rehabilitation Department of West Bengal could come up with an initial list of only 112 families who were ready to go to the islands. This was an “unpleasant surprise” for the central government. As B.G. Rao of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation wrote to the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission of the Government of West Bengal,

Our scheme, as you know, is to send 200 families this year; and, to make a success of the job, we are sinking quite a lot of money in the scheme. It will be most unfortunate if your Government is unable to get even this small number; if that is the last word on the situation, then perhaps we may have to revise our ideas altogether.

The terms which have been given are very liberal and if they fail to attract the necessary minimum number of immigrant refugee families then what it will mean is that the entire burden of settlement of rural refugees from East Bengal will have to be given up. I have no doubt that you will make

every effort to collect the necessary number of refugee families as per our original instructions and ensure that they are the *type and quality* which will lead to a successful beginning of the scheme.¹⁸

What was this particular *type and quality* of people that Rao was talking about? The priority was the development of these islands and for this the refugees were perceived as the potential labour. Their rehabilitation would be a by-product of the entire scheme. Hence, hardworking, experienced agrarian labourers were required who could till the land and expand cultivation. The Andaman and Nicobar administration was determined not to take refugees unused to manual labour. Therefore, it was decided that in the first phase 200 refugee families would be sent to the islands, of whom 150 families would earn their livelihood from agriculture and the rest would be artisan families. When the first batch of refugees reached Andaman, the administration spent considerable time and energy to judge the authenticity of their claims to be peasants or artisans. One administrator reported, 'some of the settlers who have come here as agriculturalists have never ploughed lands before as professional agriculturalists though they may have honest intension to take the agriculture here as a means to rehabilitation.'¹⁹ The Deputy Commissioner of the Islands also suspected that 'at least fourteen of these families are not professional agriculturalists, although they might have lived on land.'²⁰ In early 1953, three men were actually sent back to Calcutta as they were 'so obviously not agriculturalists.'²¹

Caste identity became a crucial marker in selecting suitable refugees for Andaman. From the memoir of Bikash Chakrabarty, who was in charge of selecting refugees for the Andaman voyage, it appears that caste identity had a role to play in the selection process. He writes,

With my colleague Priten Roy, I would visit the Kashipur refugee camp to select refugees for Andaman. There were unambiguous directions... about the criteria of selections... We would not take the upper caste, so called *bhadraloks*, the scheduled castes and other laboring population were most welcome.²²

In colonial East Bengal, fields were ploughed mostly by the Muslims and the Namasudras and other low caste people. Refugee agriculturalists were, therefore, primarily from the lower castes. The independent state had promised to eradicate caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Through affirmative action like reservation, it had promised to break the

caste-occupation continuum. But in practice, at least in this case, the caste-occupation continuum was being reproduced. However, selecting the refugees on the basis of their caste was a hidden and not a declared official policy.²³ On government paper, occupation was the key word for selection.

Despite a widespread reluctance among the refugees and the general suspicion about the whole scheme, there were always a few “willing” applicants eager to go to Andaman. Their eagerness came from the terrible living conditions of the government camps. Living in the camps and opting for Andaman were indeed “choices” between the fire and the frying pan. But as the rehabilitation of the refugees was secondary and the development of the islands was the primary concerns of the authority, the flow of refugees was meticulously regulated. How many would be sent, when they would be sent, where they would be resettled and what kind of skills they had to have – all of these were determined by the Andaman administration according to their requirements. The refugees did not go to these islands as refugees; they were hand-picked agriculturalists, artisans, school teachers or shop keepers first and refugees later. Even during the turbulent days of February Riots (1950), when the government desperately attempted to disperse the refugees from Calcutta and West Bengal to other provinces, there were no sudden increase in the number of refugees going to the Andamans. While in 1950 Orissa and Bihar received roughly about 22,000 and 37,000 displaced persons respectively, only 65 refugee families were sent to Andaman.²⁴ A certain kind of labour was needed for expansion of agriculture, exploitation of forest resources and for infrastructural development. Only a certain category of Bengali Hindu refugees fitted the bill.²⁵

Sending the Refugees to Bihar and Orissa in 1950

As hinted in the beginning, dispersal of refugees to Bihar and Orissa in 1950 was of a different kind. It was immediate, hurried, ad hoc and the number of people shifted from West Bengal to these states was significantly higher. Incidentally, the decision to send refugees to Bihar and Orissa from overpopulated areas of West Bengal was taken long before 1950. It was decided as early as on October 30, 1948, that the Government of Orissa would take the responsibility of rehabilitating 25,000 refugees within its territory.²⁶ However, we come to know from the Legislative Assembly proceedings, even in early March, 1950 the state had no sponsored refugee, i.e., a refugee receiving government aid.²⁷ By the end of March, refugees began to reach Orissa and Bihar in thousands. Orissa accommodated the first batch of refugees in a hastily-opened transit camp at the wartime aerodrome on Amarda Road in

Mayurbhanj district. Similarly, temporary refugee camps were opened in various parts of Bihar, including Ranchi, Gaya, Bihta, Purnea, Mokamah, and Hathidahi to accommodate 19,000 refugees who reached the state by the end of April 1950²⁸. Thus, unlike the Andamans, where the plan for rehabilitating the refugees was combined with a well thought-out scheme to develop the islands, in these provinces arrangements were made in a hurried way, the immediate concern being the easing of congestion in West Bengal, particularly in the railway stations like Sealdah. While settlers were carefully chosen from a larger number of applicants for the Andaman, no such arrangements were made for Orissa or Bihar. Refugees went there as refugees, not as agriculturalists, artisans or school teachers. Rather, the subsequent challenge was to turn them into “productive citizens”.

Camps, which involved huge expenditure, were supposed to be temporary. Only the hapless poor, mainly from the lower-castes, who had few or no connection or relatives in West Bengal, took shelter in these government camps. In early March, 1950, the Central Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, in a meeting with the state governments of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Assam and Tripura, expressed hope that a section of the new refugees would return to East Bengal once things settled down there, and that providing immediate relief in the form of dole and temporary shelter would be enough to tide them over. However, it soon became clear that most of these migrants had come to stay. While the Nehru-Liaquat Pact had kept the provision of return open to refugees, many required permanent rehabilitation and, to prevent their becoming dependents of government, it had to provide them with opportunities to earn an independent living. To this end, initiatives were taken in these transit camps to classify them according to their occupation. At Amarda camp, for instance, it was noted that 50 per cent of the residents were agriculturalists, some 25 per cent belonged to various occupational groups like weavers, carpenters, fishermen, etc. and the rest were mostly small traders. Only a very low percentage of the camp dwellers were educated middle class.²⁹ Such information was collected to provide the refugees with suitable occupation. But, in most cases the camp officials could only provide them with temporary ad hoc jobs like thatching the roofs of the camp huts, repairing doors and windows, ‘bidi’ making etc. Some with a little money would open small pan-bidi and cigarette shops. Some others have opened tea stalls at the camps.³⁰ Thus, the idea was to provide the refugees with whatever immediate jobs that was available. The contrast with the situation in Andaman could not have been clearer. The aim of dovetailing rehabilitation and nation-building was present in Orissa and Bihar as much as it was present in the context of Andaman, but they shared different causal

relations. If development was the cause and refugee rehabilitation was its effect in the context of Andaman, the reverse was the case for Bihar and Orissa. And as we shall see shortly, the outcomes of these two variants of the dispersal scheme were very different as well. Andaman was a 'success' story. But the rehabilitation through dispersal failed in Orissa, Bihar and many other parts of India, as the refugees began to leave the camps and rehabilitation sites of these areas in large number to return to Calcutta or to go elsewhere.

Sending the Refugees to Dandakaranya

The element of "force" became increasingly pronounced in dispersing the refugees over the years. While in the case of Andaman, refugees were selected from a larger pool of applicants "willing" to settle in these islands, for the migrants of 1950, going to Bihar or Orissa was prearranged and their consent was irrelevant. Coercion became the order of the day when in the late 1950s and 1960s, began the initiative of sending the refugees living in various camps in West Bengal to Dandakaranya.

In 1957, the ambitious project of Dandakaranya Development was initiated with an estimated budget of Rs. 1 billion. By then the total number of registered refugees from East Pakistan were 39.84 lakhs and the government attempted to put a closure to the ongoing migration by sealing India-East Pakistan border. It argued that West Bengal had reached a "saturation point" and could rehabilitate no more refugees. Therefore, those who were still in various camps awaiting rehabilitation were to be sent to Dandakaranya, i.e., two underdeveloped districts of Orissa – Koraput and Kalahandi, and in the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh. Following the logic of Andaman, the refugees, here, were to act as 'developing agents', and spread agriculture and develop industries. Thus, development and rehabilitation were to go hand in hand.

Unlike Andaman, however, the government was now far more coercive in their attempt to send off the refugees. Camps were proving to be a huge burden on government exchequer and therefore they had to be closed down. In a high profile ministerial meeting in the middle of 1958, the following points were noted: a) there are 45,000 refugee families currently residing in various camps of West Bengal. Of these 45,000 families, only 10,000 families can be rehabilitated within this state. Rests have to go outside Bengal; b) the families unwilling to go outside West Bengal will be given financial assistance equivalent of 6 months dole. They will not be entitled to any further governmental assistance;

c) by July 31, 1959, the government relief camps will be closed down.³¹ Thus, the camp refugees had two “choices” – either they could go to Dandakaranya or they could *choose* to face hunger and abject poverty, look for odd jobs and could try to be on their own with no governmental assistance. Thus, though it was decided that no one would be forcefully taken to Dandakaranya, the reality was otherwise.

Despite these odds, most refugees refused to go to Dandakaranya. The governor explained this refusal in the house of the Legislative Assembly on February 3, 1959 in following words:

It is...with pain and regret that I noticed that an agitation was started in March last over the question of settling refugees outside the State. Again since last month another movement has started opposing the proposal for rehabilitation of refugees in the Dandakaranya Project. My Chief Minister has declared categorically that no refugee would be sent outside West Bengal against his will for resettlement. There seems, therefore, no reason for continuing such agitation. I personally believe that if the refugees are left to their own counsel, the majority of them will opt for settlement in Dandakaranya Project or in other States rather than eke out a precarious existence here...”³²

The hint was clear. It was not the refugees who on their own were resisting the government initiative to move them from one place to another. Rather, they were instigated by some “outsiders”. By this the governor indicated the Communist Party leaders who from the beginning had opposed the dispersal scheme saying that the first priority of the West Bengal government should be to try accommodate as many refugees as possible within its own state. As Jyoti Basu, the leader of the Party in the Legislative Assembly announced:

I am not essentially against sending Bengalis outside West Bengal...but from our experience I am saying that we need to discuss about whether they should go or not. But instead of that you have simply sent them to Orissa, Bihar, Sourashtra and Hyderabad. We opposed that because you had made no arrangements in these places. Therefore they are deserting, they are compelled to leave....you are not considering the problems of human beings. I mean what will be their language, what language will their children learn, to which state will they belong...many Bengalis are staying in Assam. The language question is important there. In which

language they will study in school and college? There are constant problem of Bengalis and Assamese....you may say that I am being parochial. But these are facts. When a Bengali is applying for a job in Bihar he is asked of his domicile. When you are sending the refugees are you taking these factors into account?...when you are sending the Bengalis outside Bengal you are not giving any consideration to the social environment, their jobs, homes etc³³.

Basu's point was simple. Refugees from East Pakistan *belonged* to Bengal as they spoke the same language. Incidentally, while Basu spoke in the Assembly, the city was witnessing protest rallies and satyagrahas of refugees who were originally sent to Bettiah in Bihar but were forced to return to West Bengal because of inadequate rehabilitation arrangement, local hostility, and cultural differences etc. They were squatting in Howrah station and demands were being raised to rehabilitate them within West Bengal.³⁴ Amidst this, fresh decision regarding Dandakaranya was bound to draw severe criticism.

Belonging becomes the core idea of this debate – did the refugees belong to West Bengal or not? Nehru at the centre and the Congress government in West Bengal had throughout argued that though they were sympathetic to the despairs of the East Pakistani refugees, they did not *belong* to West Bengal. Hence Nehru constantly insisted in the 1950s that the refugees should return to East Pakistan and the state government argued that if they did not return at least they should disperse. Belonging, here had a *material* sense, “whereby individuals have possessions, homes, farms, jobs, all of which connect them to formal economic and political systems...”³⁵ They did not consider the “immaterial sense” of the term *belonging* which may include “a range of informal systems, social, cultural, familial, affective, etc.”³⁶ Those who argued for the refugees’ rights to stay put in West Bengal emphasized on these aspects – shared language, familiar climate, similar customs like religious festivals, food habit etc. Since the policy of dispersal ruptured the belonging of a person or a group of persons to a particular “place, space, community, culture, tradition, etc,” it was portrayed and perceived as a forced displacement or forcefully sending the refugees to exile, as a camp resident later described in his autobiography.³⁷

Section 2: Life after Dispersal

Except for the Andamans, the attempts to rehabilitate the refugees outside West Bengal mostly ended in a failure. Large numbers of refugees left the camp sites and the rehabilitation sites of Orissa and Bihar to return to West Bengal. One may mention here that certain camps within West Bengal also witnessed massive “desertion”. The figures below will indicate the extent to which refugees “deserted” the camps and rehabilitation sites of Orissa and Bihar:

Statement showing the number of East Pakistan displaced persons resettled outside West Bengal:

S. No	Name of the States	Population	Persons Deserted before Rehabilitation	Persons who received Rehabilitation Assistance	Desertion from Rehabilitation Centres	Total Desertion from the State
1.	Bihar	62,500	9,569	21,600 (old) 17,105 (new)	3,198	12,167
2.	Orissa	34,745 (*32,823)	15,145	12,437	5,834	20,979
3.	Assam	333,414	++	155,300	++	++
4.	Tripura	280,075	++	158,574	++	++
5.	Manipur	1,783	++	1,783	++	++
6.	U.P.	4,090	Nil	4,090	590	590
7.	Andaman	3,315	Nil	3,315	520	520

Source: *The Report of the Committee of Ministers for the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal, 1954, p. 46.*

* Figures indicate number of sponsored displaced persons

++ Figures not available or maintained

Old refugees are those who were displaced prior to the 1950 riots.

There were certain clear reasons for “desertion”. Contrary to the government’s claims and the propaganda of a section of the media, the conditions of these temporary camps were dreadful, to say the least. For instance, even according to the official estimate, between end March and end November, 1950, seven hundred and seventy six refugees had died in various camps of Orissa.³⁸ There

was perhaps not much difference between a railway station and a camp like this. Rather, staying in Sealdah or Howrah Station would give the refugees an easier access to Calcutta, where they would have more scope to try their luck.

Life in the camp was stagnant. Despite much talks on the need to make the refugees “productive” and rehabilitation a part of “development”, often there were no initiatives towards that end. Ganesh Haloi remembered the camp life as empty, boring and monotonous, where people had nothing much to do but live on a paltry dole of Rs. 2 per adult (per week) and Rs.1.50 per minor. “Desertion” was the only way to break away from this monotony in search of a worthier way of living.³⁹ Indeed, in a situation like this, “desertion” seemed to be a “positive choice” by the refugees who were eager to rehabilitate themselves without depending on state initiatives.⁴⁰

The “desertion” rate was even higher from the rehabilitation sites. Inadequacy of water and bad quality soil in the rehabilitation site, remoteness of the site, bureaucratic red tape-ism of the relief and rehabilitation departments and insensitive officials were cited as causes for “desertion”. The refugees of the Charbatia camp in Orissa, for instance, complained that the rehabilitation scheme was flawed as non-agriculturalist families were being taken to agricultural colonies and vice versa.⁴¹

Moreover, there was a palpable tension between the refugees and the locals everywhere as the refugees seemed to “benefit” from the government schemes at the expense of the locals. This tension was even more acute in areas outside West Bengal, where the Hindu Bengalis from East Pakistan seemed as impositions from the government. To cite an example, the refugee residents of Palasy Colony (P.S. Narpatganj) of Purnea District (Bihar) complained about the local population to the District Magistrate:

We are all cultivators and we have no other source of income except cultivation. But the lands which are allotted to us in Chakardaha Mouza, are beyond our control to protect the crops as it is far away from our home stead. We are to go there by crossing two rivers. It is impossible for us to watch the lands always and taking this advantage the villagers residing close to our above lands are grazing their cows and buffaloes and destroying our crops in our absence. [sic.]⁴²

In the same letter, they informed the District Magistrate that they had attempted to negotiate with the local villagers and also tried to teach them “a lesson” by detaining their cattle, but all these attempts had failed. The other trouble maker

was 'the previous owner of the land from whom the Government acquired land for us', wrote the refugees.⁴³ Because 'at the time of harvesting Bhadaï crops...[he] began to reap the crops...'⁴⁴ The local rehabilitation officers, however, intervened and the refugee-cultivators managed to reap their paddy. The previous owner might have been coerced by the government to give up his land for the refugees. Dissatisfied by the deal, he tried to compensate for his losses by forcibly reaping the paddy in the lands that had once belonged to him. It is also possible that despite enough compensation, the previous owner was simply trying to make some more money by bullying the new residents. Either way, it is evident that there was widespread tension between the refugees and the locals. Because of such tension, Harekrushna Mahtab, minister of Orissa emphasized that the Bengali refugees should learn the local language of the province where they were being sent and accept the fact that in new surroundings their economic and other conditions would be different.⁴⁵ The tension between the refugees and the local population was perhaps most acute in Assam because of a more general and long drawn conflict between the Bengali and the Assamese people. In 1950 when the government decided to requisition the surplus waste lands in the tea gardens, the Revenue Minister of the state declared that these lands would be redistributed 'firstly, to indigenous landless cultivators, etc., secondly, to tea garden labourers,...and after this the refugees should be considered.'⁴⁶ Thus, even during the peak of refugee crisis, the government was eager to safeguard local interests vis-à-vis refugee interests. As Gopinath Bardoloi, the Chief Minister of Assam, confessed, '[if there is] an announcement of a policy declaring the claims of the refugees as superior to those of the local people, or even on par with them, we should decide not to contest the next election...'⁴⁷

Those who chose (or rather were compelled) to leave the camps and colonies were no longer termed as "refugees" on papers, as through their acts of "desertion", they had "rejected" the rehabilitation policies of the government. They became "deserters" in the official discourse, a term generally used to denote military personnel leaving their duty without informing the authority and with no intention of returning.⁴⁸ As "deserters", they could expect no government aid and received very little public sympathy. Once more, many of them had to settle down in the stations. The trains from Orissa and Bihar mostly came to Howrah station unlike the trains from East Bengal. So in addition to Sealdah, the "deserters" squatted in Howrah station as well. *Amritabazar* reported: 'their stay at the Howrah Station Platform is unwelcome to the passengers at large and embarrassing to both the State and Central Governments.'⁴⁹ The reporter could not quite decide whom to blame – the refugees or the Orissa

Government. He complained, 'the fact stands out that they [refugees] could not adjust themselves to the new conditions they were placed in.'⁵⁰ But he also mentioned, 'for about ten months these refugees gave their camp lives a trial.... It is therefore not fair to ascribe their failure to their unwillingness to live there or to the class to which they socially belong.'⁵¹

A section of the public blamed the refugees for not being cooperative and enterprising. A letter, written by 'a Punjabi' and published in *Amritabazar*, asked Bengali refugees to learn from their Sindhi and Punjabi counterparts who were 'doing their utmost to earn their daily bread.' The letter praised the Punjabi and Sindhi refugees for settling down in various parts of the country and for their attempts to become independent. Unlike them, those from East Pakistan, 'would starve and die' in Calcutta but would not go to other states for rehabilitation, they would live on dole but would not do menial jobs.⁵² This was becoming the dominant stereotype: the East Pakistani refugees were "lazy" and "parochial". The same sentiment is echoed in the narrative of U. Bhaskar Rao, which can be considered as the official narrative of the rehabilitation initiatives. He wrote:

In the western region they [the refugees] were tougher, more resilient of spirit and much more adaptable. It was easier for them to turn their hands to any job that came along. With them, therefore, the process of assimilation into their new surroundings was less difficult than it might otherwise have been.⁵³

By implication, the refugees from East Bengal were weaker, lacked resolve, and were inflexible about where they would settle and hence difficult to rehabilitate.

The Report of the Committee of Ministers for the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal, 1954, too noted the 'strong disinclination [of the refugees] to be settled in areas outside West Bengal.'⁵⁴ This attitude was explained by depicting the East Bengali refugees as people who were used to 'plenty of water and fertile soil' and were unable to 'adjust themselves to a different condition.' 'Further, having been habituated to comparatively easy conditions of living many of them are not disposed to put in the amount of effort needed for making the best use of conditions different from original environment.'⁵⁵

To add to the range of stereotypes, refugees were projected as pawns in the hands of the Communists. In a conference of rehabilitation secretaries of eastern Indian states, held in November, 1954, Ajit Prasad Jain, the Union Rehabilitation Minister, argued that

Apart from difficulties of climate, environments, language, etc., there were other reasons, including political reasons, for these desertions. Certain political parties and groups of refugees, both in these states and West Bengal, were making constant efforts to keep the minds of the refugees agitated, and they had succeeded in drawing out a number of refugees from these States, thus creating an acute problem for West Bengal.⁵⁶

Though Jain did not specifically mention the Communists, the hints were clear enough. We learn from Ratish Mallick, a refugee activist and a long term resident of Coopers' Camp, how the government officials and the ministers warned them against mingling with the Communists and the members of other Left Parties:

I was in the Coopers' Camp between 1951 and 1960. During my entire stay three ministers visited us. But they never talked to us, only they had conversations with the camp officials. Only thing they used to say to us – “go for rehabilitation”; “don't listen to the conspirers”; “Charbatia is a good place to settle down;” “you are being fed by the government, so you should listen to us. Your leaders do not feed you.” They used to tell the refugee leaders “you have nothing to say! You only create trouble.” Renuka Roy and Saradwip Banerjee used to say these things. There was another woman minister – I do not remember her name – she also used to say these things.⁵⁷

Indeed, the Communist Party and other Left organizations, when in opposition, had consistently protested against the government initiatives to rehabilitate the Bengali refugees outside West Bengal. This was in stark contrast to their stance when they later became the ruling party in West Bengal in 1977. But “desertion” cannot be explained solely in terms of Communist instigations. “Desertion” was almost always a survival strategy and not a result of political manipulation. However, as Nilanjana Chatterjee writes, and as my findings corroborate: ‘the state’s marked lack of success in rehabilitating East Bengali refugees was blamed on the refugees themselves.’⁵⁸ The refugees, consequently, were stereotyped as lazy, picky, unwilling to do manual labour and rebellious.

What happened to the “deserters”? We know very little about the life of the refugees after “desertion” as they became generally invisible to the government. The fragmentary evidences that we have show that they negotiated variously with the situation. They had a few “options”. They could go back to the sites

again and could try to build their lives there; they could return to East Pakistan as the Nehru-Liaquat Pact had recognized their right to return; or they could try to find some odd jobs themselves, without any government aid. All these “options” were explored. Some of the refugees “deserted” after receiving a business loan or a house building loan from the government.⁵⁹ This possibly sustained them for a while and by then they found something to do. As we read in *Amritabazar*:

Goaded by the instinct of self preservation they [the deserters squatting in Howrah station] are putting in the last amount of their energy and resources to rehabilitate themselves and the evidence of the same is available when one finds that every fifth unit is found hawking or collecting odd things to sell.⁶⁰

Representatives of the West Bengal government and of governments from other states from where refugees were “deserting” tried to coax and force them to return to the rehabilitation sites. The Orissa government tried to convince the refugees from the Charbatia camp of Orissa, who were the earliest “deserters”, to return. It was declared that ‘those willing to go back to Orissa would be welcomed and afforded all old and new amenities. Free transport facilities would immediately be made for their journey.’⁶¹ The railway authorities threatened to throw them out of the station premises. The responses from the refugees to such offers and threats were mixed: around 380 refugees out of almost 700 agreed to return. Among the rest, 150 people decided to travel back to East Bengal and the others were yet to take any decision when the reporter was penning the article.⁶² Their decision depended on a number of factors, such as reasons for their “desertion”, income opportunities in and around the station, offers from the government, political condition of their current location and possible destinations, income opportunities at their possible destinations and so on. Therefore, while some of the “deserters” from Charbatia had decided to return to Orissa, for the “deserters” from Bettiah of Bihar, going back was not an option:

The Bettiah returned refugees now stranded at Howrah and Sealdah Stations and also at Howrah Maidan are averse to the idea of going back to Bettiah in Bihar due mainly to language difficulties, extreme climate prevalent there, alleged unsympathetic treatment of the Bihar government officers, and hostile attitude of local people and shortage of agricultural lands, fishing areas etc. They do not believe that the government of West

Bengal can effect a change of heart of the local people of Bettiah – much less the Bihari officers of the place. So they are determined to stick to the soil of West Bengal despite their miserable plight and untold sufferings.

Complex calculations along with multiple compulsions shaped the decisions of migration of the Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan. But, as it is evident, for many, becoming refugee was only the first chapter of their long lives as migrants.⁶³

Conclusion

The response of the government towards the plight of the refugees is generally seen as one of apathy and insincere attempts at rehabilitation. The story of dispersal adds further incriminating evidence to this view. However, in this paper I have tried to disaggregate the neat picture and show that there were various layers to the whole process. There were crucial issues regarding notions of belonging, language and culture, development, responsibility of states, coercion, and caste profiling. All these played important role for and against the idea of dispersal. In all these, however, we tend to lose sight of the fact that for a section of the refugees sedentary life became an anomaly. Crossing the nascent international border was the first of the many travels (and travails) of their lives. Coerced by the government, rejected by hostile residents, or lured by a promise of a better future—this hapless bunch moved from one place to another. In governmental parlance, each movement had a specific import—they categorized the sequence of the movement. Thus the bunch coming from East Pakistan was denoted as ‘displaced people’ or the ‘refugees’, then the group of ‘dispersed people’, and finally the ‘deserters’. These tags clearly indicated the terms of the dealing, the location in government registers. But more crucially, they indicate the transient nature of this group of people.

[The paper is a part of a chapter of my PhD dissertation. I have presented various parts this chapter on various occasions and I would like to gratefully acknowledge the comments and the feedbacks that I had received on these events. The arguments of this paper emerged primarily from two presentations: a) ‘South South Migration, Refugees and Diasporic Communities’ Workshop organized by National University, Singapore and b) at the Department of History, Patna University as a part of the lecture series on Migration organized by Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna and the Department of History, Patna University.]

Notes

¹Regarding the dispersal scheme, see also Joya Chatterji, 'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41 (5), 2007, pp995-1032 and Uditi Sen, *Refugees and the Politics of Nation-building in India: 1947 – 1971*, Unpublished Dissertation submitted to Clare College, Cambridge, 2009 [particularly her chapter on Andaman].

² Ganesh Haloi, "Swadhinata Noy, Desh Bibhager Ponchash Bachhor" [Not Independence, but 50 Years of Partition] in Tridib Chakrabarty et al edited, *Dhwangsho O Nirman: Bangiyo Udbastu Samajer swakathito Biboron*, Seriban, Jadavpur University, 2007, pp246-249.

³ See 'Appendix A', Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men*, Naya Udyog edition, Kolkata, 1999, p. 464.

⁴ Amritabazar, August 27, 1949.

⁵ Amritabazar, April 21, 1950.

⁶ Kailash Nath Katju, the Governor of West Bengal between June 21 1948 and October 31 1951, said this in the annual meeting of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, 1949. See Amritabazar Patrika, March 30, 1950.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Amritabazar, November 1, 1950.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Amritabazar Patrika, September 4, 1949.

¹² 'The Andamans of Today' in *The Modern Review* for March, 1949pp214-216, p.214.

¹³ Ibid, p.216.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.214.

¹⁵ Uditi Sen, *Refugees and Politics of Nation-Building in India*, pp 90-94. Sen

has written extensively on the process and politics of sending the refugees to Andaman, their rehabilitation processes as well as how they have remembered their experiences of this journey and resettlement. For this see her unpublished dissertation, particularly chapter 2. Also see 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 in the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York, 2011, pp. 219-244.

¹⁶This is a point that has been emphasized repeatedly by Joya Chatterji. See for instance Chatterji, 'Dispersal' and the Failure of Rehabilitation', p. 1003.

¹⁷Newspaper clipping kept in F.No 14/21/49 – AN, Home Department, Branch –Andaman and Nicobar, 1949, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter N.A.I.).

¹⁸Letter from B G Rao to B K Guha, Commissioner, Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, 14/9/49- AN, Home Department, Branch – Andaman, 1949, N.A.I. emphasis mine.

¹⁹Letter dated 31 May, 1949, F.No 14/9/49 – AN, 1949, N.A.I.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Extract for Administration Report for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the period ending June 30, 1953, F.No 8/3/52- AN, Department: Home, Branch: Andaman and Nicobar, 1952, N.A.I.

²²Bikash Chakraborty, *Andaman –e Punorbashon: Ak Bangal Officer-er Diary*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2012, pp 29-30, translation mine.

²³Though Bikash Chakraborty has mentioned that among the refugees, almost everyone was low caste, in the archives we come across one or two names with (most probably) upper caste surnames like Chakrabarty, Raichoudhury, Mazumdar and Roy. See F.No – 14/15/49 –AN, Department: Home, Branch: Andaman and Nicobar, 1949, N.A.I.; However, in the fiction of Prafulla Roy on the rehabilitation activities in Andaman we do not see any character who is high caste. See Prafulla Roy, *Nona Jol, Mither Mati, Dey's*, Kolkata, 1959.

²⁴F. No – 14/15/49-AN, Home, Andaman and Nicobar Branch, N.A.I.

²⁵The system at times was disrupted when after being selected for the Andamans,

some refugees developed cold feet and finally did not turn up on the scheduled day. From an interview of Naresh Ganguly, an employee in charge of recruiting the refugees, we come to know that to 'fill up the seats', refugees were selected randomly from the squatting population in Sealdah station and from the footpaths of Calcutta on an emergency basis. He says, 'we used to go and ask random poor man, begging at the station, "are you from East Bengal? If so, will you come with us to Andaman?"' Thus, though the needs of the islands were kept in mind and attempts were made to select refugees meticulously, there were exceptions. The interview was conducted by Prafulla Chakrabarty at Port Blair on September 1, 1985. The full recorded interview is available in The International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam. Record No: GC 5/921, Call No IISG BG GC5/907-928, Interviews by Prafulla Chakrabarti of refugees and political activists in West Bengal.

²⁶Letter from Saxena to Nehru, August 5, 1950. Reprinted in Mohanlal Saxena, *Some Reflections on the Problems of Rehabilitation*, Progressive Publishers, New Delhi, not dated [but from the text it appears that it was written sometime not long after Nehru Liaquat Pact and it was donated to Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in August, 1966], p.90.

²⁷ Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Orissa, March 13, 1950, p.315.

²⁸ Amritabazar, May 1, 1950.

²⁹ Amritabazar, April 10, 1950.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Babul K. Pal, *Barishal theke Dandakaranya*, Granthamitra, Kolkata, 2010, P85.

³² West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol. 22, No.1.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ J. Peter Burgess, *What is Critical Migration Studies?* MCRG Distinguished Lecture Series – 4, Kolkata, January 2013, pp 7-8.

³⁶ Ibid, p.8.

³⁷ Punornirbashon is the word used by Manoranjan Byapari in his autobiography Itibritte Chandaljiban I, Priyo Shilpo Prakashan, Kolkata, 2012.

³⁸ Amritabazar, December 14, 1950.

³⁹ Ganesh Haloi, 'Mrityur Michhil, Jiboner Jagaran' in Madhumoy Pal (Ed.), Deshbhag: Binash O Binirman, Gangchil, 2011, pp 112 -117.

⁴⁰ Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudasiya, Aftermath of Partition in South Asia, Routledge, London, 2000, p.162.

⁴¹ Amritabazar, Sept 23, 1950.

⁴² Letter dated 20 October, 1952, Syama Prasad Mookherjee (SPM) Papers, II-IV Installment, Subject File No. 187 (Part 1), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Amritabazar Patrika, Independence Supplement, August 15, 1950.

⁴⁶ Letter from Sardar Patel to Gopinath Bardoloi, 11 June, 1950, Durga Das (Ed.), Sardar Patel's Correspondence, Volume 9, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 1974, p.205.

⁴⁷ Letter from Bardoloi to Patel, June 22, 1950, *ibid*, p. 207.

⁴⁸ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/deserter>, last accessed on May 31, 2015. This online dictionary also gives the following meanings – a) to leave...in violation of duty, promise b) to fail(someone) at time of need c) to forsake one's duty, obligation. Thus, it is, by implication, an act of cowardice, irresponsibility and disloyalty.

⁴⁹ Amritabazar, June 16, 1951.

⁵⁰ Amritabazar, June 16, 1951.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Amritabazar , November 21, 1950.

⁵³ U. Bhaskar Rao, *The Story of Rehabilitation*, New Delhi, 1967, pp 147-148.

⁵⁴ The Report of the Committee of Ministers for the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal, 1954, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, P16.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *The Statesman*, November 16, 1954; Serial No. 2, 'Press clippings' Meghnad Saha Papers, Installment VII, NMML.

⁵⁷ Interview with Ratish Mallick by Prafulla Chakrabarty between 22 June and 25 June, 1981, Prafulla Chakrabarty Papers, IISH.

⁵⁸ Nilanjana Chatterjee, *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*, Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the Brown University, 1992, pp 153-154

⁵⁹ B.S. Guha, *Studies in Social Tensions among the Refugees from Eastern Pakistan*, Memoir No 1, 1954, Department of Anthropology, Government of India, Calcutta, 1959, p.11.

⁶⁰ *Amritabazar Patrika*, June 16, 1951.

⁶¹ *Amritabazar Patrika*, October 11, 1950.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ UCRC Record, accessed in Prafulla Chakrabarty papers, IISH.



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