

Mobilising the Migrants: The Role of the UCRC in the Indian State of West Bengal - A Critical Assessment¹

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International migrants are generally seen either as victims and/or as potentially threatening. The present paper humbly contests these traditional perceptions and tries to probe the issue based on the experiences of the 'heroic' role of the East Bengali migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) in 1950s and 1960s in the body polity of the Indian state of West Bengal, and especially the role of an indigenous refugee organisation, namely, the left-dominated United Central Refugee Council or UCRC. Then it seeks to interrogate critically the 'social bases' of the UCRC and tries to capture the dialectics of its relationship with the 'other' subaltern refugee organisations and leaders in the light of recent developments. In this connection it revisits the unsuccessful attempts of Jogen Mandal to launch an effective organisation of the scheduled caste refugees; the process of resettlement of (mostly) dalit refugees at the far away Dandakaranya camp; and lastly reconnects this with the Marichjhapi massacre in the late 1970s and the rise of the subaltern Matuas as one of the catalysts of change or 'parivartan' in the long rule of the LF in West Bengal.

Broadly speaking, refugees/asylum seekers are seen from two perspectives by the people/ authority of host countries: a) from the perspective of *obligations* (based on 1951 Convention); and b) as *threats*. By 'obligations', a host country generally understands i) providing asylum and ii) burden-sharing. By 'threats', it usually assumes threats to private property, resources and opportunities, and in recent times it strongly assumes threat to national and individual security.

Thus international migrants are seen either as *victims* and/or as potentially *threatening*.¹ A great bulk of literature and scholarship also dwindle between these two poles. Either they, at least theoretically, deny any autonomy and subjectivity of the migrant. Or, when they acknowledge the autonomous actions of the migrants, they view them as potentially threatening people. Thus, very rarely they see migrants as persons capable of taking *positive political* action in a host country.

However, some scholars belonging to the tradition of 'critical' thinking do not subscribe to the above view. They also highlight the migrants/refugees as 'subjects'/agents. Ranabir Samaddar is a prominent thinker of this tradition, who puts his position in the following words: "Nobody can possibly fail to recognise the importance of the refugees as subjects in an analysis of policies of refugee protection and care."²

The proposed paper inspired by the above position humbly contests the traditional perceptions of migrants as 'victims' or 'threatening'. It tries to probe the issue based on the experiences of the 'heroic' role of the East Bengali migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) in

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1950s and 1960s in the body polity of the Indian state of West Bengal, and especially the role of an indigenous refugee organisation, namely, the United Central Refugee Council or UCRC. Then it seeks to interrogate critically the ‘social bases’ of the UCRC and tries to capture the dialectics of its relationship with the ‘other’ subaltern refugee organisations and leaders in the light of recent developments.

The Beginning

In 1947 India won freedom and was partitioned. Pakistan, the new state, emerged on the western and the eastern parts of erstwhile British India, resulting in a mass exodus – the largest in the history, according to United Nation High Commission for Refugees, especially with the division of erstwhile British Indian provinces of Punjab and Bengal. Although the Indian state of Punjab could somehow tackle the ‘burden of refugees’ through a so-called ‘land-man exchange’, the new – territorially truncated after partition – Indian state of West Bengal had to provide shelter to millions of partition-refugees.

In Joya Chatterjee’s assessment, “The exodus of Hindu refugees from East to West Bengal was massive. By contrast, the number of Muslims who left West Bengal for eastern Pakistan after partition were relatively small. Most of them stayed on.”⁷³ The 1951 census in India (4 years after the Partition of India) also recorded 2.523 million refugees coming from East Bengal. Among them 2.061 million settled in West Bengal. The rest went to Assam, Tripura and other states. Estimates of the number of refugees up to 1970 are over 5 million to West Bengal alone. Thus, the infant state of West Bengal began its journey as a crippled toddler crowned with problems.

In the early days of 1950, the city of Calcutta/Kolkata itself seemed like a huge relief camp with front-page pictures of destitute families living on footpaths or city parks. But as the migrations continued, the government was forced to realize that those who came to West Bengal were unlikely to return. Consequently, the debates in the Legislative Assembly shifted from the question of extending relief to the larger problem of rehabilitation.

The refugees who were present in the city in the years immediately after 1947 can be divided into three categories. The first group had no place to stay but was otherwise fairly well-off whose problem was finding suitable accommodation. The second group was completely dependent on government aid for livelihood as well as for accommodation. The third section was the largest in number whose rehabilitation could not be taken up at all and who resorted to establishing squatter’s colony in and around the city. These third category refugees settled in the illegally occupied colonies, which grew around the suburbs of Calcutta and in adjacent districts. The 1951 census recorded that 27% of Kolkata’s population was East Bengali refugees.

New Life, New Identity

For these migrants, the new life, was extremely hard with scarcely provided primary resources, it was also unknown to them, since most of them came from rural background set in cast and communal relations. Most of these refugees were from upper caste with some degree of formal education. But they lost their property and had to embrace an immensely hard life with or without government help in refugee colonies in a new environment.

The colonies were largely homogeneous by caste and district origins bound by the feelings

and experiences of struggle and common loss. As Parth Chatterjee, observes, “The discriminatory caste practices soon began to fade away and receded into a distant memory.” In early 1950s, many lower caste people even put affidavit notices in dailies declaring the change of their last names usually chosen from caste-neutral or higher caste names.⁴

A new kind of homogenising identity as ‘refugee’ was of course slowly relegating the memories of the birth place to margins, not only in the squatter colonies of cities but in the camps away from Kolkata. An old respondent at Nadia District’s Cooper’s camp revealed his feelings to a researcher in these words⁵:

Yes, I am a refugee. When I left my *desh* [homeland], I was only twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old. That was in 1948. And I came to this Cooper’s Camp on 10th March, 1950. From the very next day, the camp was officially opened to provide shelter to the East Bengali displaced people. I am from Barisal district of East Bengal. I can remember distinctly my village, even after so many years. It was Duttapara, name of our house was Duttapara Bado-bari. After leaving my *desh*, I was in Calcutta for two years and, frankly speaking, I came here at Ranaghat to get a job. Satish Sen, a Congress leader, inspired me a lot at that time. With two of my friends I reached here. When we arrived at Ranaghat, the railway station was so crowded that, we apprehended, at any moment an accident would happen. A large portion of the land, where the camp is located at present, belonged to Cooper saheb. He also started a missionary hospital near the railway station. There were many quarters adjacent to the hospital, which were initially used as the make-shift camps by the shelterseekers. After reaching here, we saw a huge preparation was going on – to build up huts, arranging tents for providing shelter to the displaced, to install tube-wells for the supply of drinking water to the hapless refugees. It was then decided that, initially the asylumseekers would be provided with *chira* [rice-flex] and *gur* [jaggery]. When the camp was started functioning it was not meant for rehabilitation of these displaced persons. So many people, from so many different places of East Bengal! But, we are all refugees! It was such a terrible situation that, it seemed, we all lost our own individual identity by losing our home, our *desh*, our *para* [locality]. While we crossed the border, we got the new identity - refugee...

In Kolkata and its suburbs, the process of collective takeover is immortalised by the term *jabardakhal* – forcible seizure. At night individual plots were marked and shacks erected, and *hogla* leaves were used to thatch makeshift roofs. The colony committee fixed the size of the plots. These areas were usually low lying, marshy jungle and forest lands, prone to monsoon flooding. The squatter colonies mushroomed in and around Calcutta primarily between 1949 and 1950.

A new urban culture also developed in and around the city during this time. Here it must be reminded that contrary to the developed West, urbanisation in postcolonial countries had happened without industrialisation. The result has been the rapid growth of shanty-towns on the edges of big cities and towns. With refugee camps and colonies sprang haphazardly, the city-space of Calcutta/Kolkata changed dramatically. From its earlier reputation of being the ‘Second City’ in the erstwhile British Empire – the ‘City of Palaces’, it soon became an extremely overcrowded city almost devoid of the basic amenities to its new inhabitants. The slummy conditions of life steadily eroded old values and moral standards. The refugee youth created a new urban proletariat and resorted to

Area	Number of Settlement ⁶
Jadavpur	58
Behala	04
Dum Dum	40
Belghoria	03
Baranagar	07
Noapara	04
Khardah	15
Naihati	03
Bijpur	04
Titagarh	01
Jagaddal	04
Habra	02
Srirampur	03
Bally	01

various ways to earn the bread. Covert prostitution and crime became a common feature. At the same time, for many of the early settlers, education became the only means for material emancipation. On the other hand, the refugee women created a new space for urban ‘working women’ in and around the cities and towns. Earlier, the most of the mainstream middle class families were not prepared to ‘allow’ their women folk to go for outside jobs for earning bread. The educated/semi-educated refugee women broke this taboo and their growing presence in the job market influenced other sections of women in the society. Thus emerged a new urban working women, composed of both refugee and non-refugee women. Many contemporary films portray the social tension within the families and outside regarding this new ‘independent’ role of the urban working women. Among such films, Satyajit Ray’s *Mahanagar* (The Big City), Ritwik Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud Capped Star), *Komol Gandhar* (A Short Note on A Sharp Scale, or the E Flat) or *Subarnarekha* are worth mentioning.

The UCRC

In such background we notice the refugee movements of 1950s and 1960s voicing a set of demands under the leadership of United Central Refugee Council (founded in 1950), popular as the UCRC, in and around Calcutta. The undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) and other left parties saw it as an opportunity to expand their support base and organise movements against the Congress ministry in the state. On the other hand, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), a centrist party, also started actively organising the refugees and came to dominate the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti (SBBS) [All Bengal Refugee Association]. It is noteworthy, while the UCRC had strongholds over the refugees in and around Kolkata – the SBBS was powerful in the outskirts. However, in course of time, the control of the SBBS faded to make room for the UCRC, owing to better organising skills of the leftists and also some other factors.

The UCRC with the help of the left leadership brought thousands of refugees in Calcutta/

Kolkata on 28 March 1950 to protest against the introduction of the Eviction Bill, which sought to empower the state government to evict squatter colonies. Another refugee organisation also held a massive rally in the city. Owing to embarrassment, the state government quickly withdrew it and redrafted a new bill namely, *The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and the Eviction of persons in Unauthorized Occupation of Land Act*, which included a pledge to accommodate displaced persons who had engaged in unauthorized occupation of land.⁷

The UCRC led mainly by the CPI and then after the party-split in 1964, by the CPIM, mobilised the refugees, had taken them to streets to make demands on the state. Since the state and the central governments at that time were held by the Congress Party and since in West Bengal the left parties were the principal opposition – the refugees under the UCRC soon also became the part and parcel of various other mobilisations and movements like anti-Tramways Fare Rise Movement of 1953, or Food Movements of 1959 & 1966. Paula Banerjee, a well-known researcher on refugee and border studies and Sucharita Sengupta have also described the importance of UCRC as the centre of refugee movements in late-1950s. “The UCRC was more active throughout the late 50s. The refugee movement around this time was centred mainly on refugees who lived in colonies.”⁸

The UCRC realised that by remaining a closed movement of the migrants, they would fail to draw sympathy of the local people. They were aware of the rumbles among the local population that ‘foreigners’ were threatening the property of the locals. The UCRC’s demand for recognition of the illegally occupied colonies by the government was a part of the larger demand of abolition of landlordism and land speculation in and around Calcutta.

By joining in the left led movements the refugees in and around Calcutta learnt fast the new political rhetoric of the class struggle of the urban middle class, industrial workers and the rural peasants against industrialists and landlords. The left parties also gained heavily by the steady support of numerous urban refugees. Their support is acknowledged as one of the key factors behind the victory of the left-led United Front that ended the long 20 years rule of the Congress Party in the state in 1967.

Prafulla Chakrabarti also demonstrates in his classic, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*⁹, there was a symbiotic relationship between the refugee movement and Left Politics in West Bengal in the early years of Independence. In fact, the political ascendancy of the left in West Bengal owes a great deal to the refugees and their struggles for rehabilitation in the 1950s. Chakrabarti argues that the Communists provided the refugees with leadership in their struggle for rehabilitation, and in return, the refugees became the striking arm of the Communists, providing them with the mass support which enabled them to entrench themselves in the city of Calcutta, and later, catapulted them to power. But in 1979, in a most ironic and tragic turn of events, the Left Front Government in West Bengal was turning against the very cause which it had championed for over two decades and which had been key in bringing it to power.

The Refugee ‘Other’

But how could a large number of East Bengali refugees, under the UCRC, transcend their *identity-as-refugees* and mainstream themselves in the discourse/practice of ‘opposition politics’ in the state? Critical questions were being raised about it since early 1950s by many refugee

leaders outside UCRC, and later by academic scholars and researchers.

Critics generally highlight the educated upper-caste Hindu Bhadrakok/gentry character of the early settlers, who became the backbone of the CPI-led UCRC. Contrary to the experiences of early *bhadrolok*, upper caste settlers, the Dalit refugees had a markedly different experience of resettlement. When the first wave of mainly high caste Hindu bhadrakok refugees had arrived in West Bengal, they had their own resources and kin-group support. Many of them resettled themselves in squatter colonies in and around Calcutta, and the government after initial hesitation endorsed that mode of rehabilitation. But when the Dalit peasant refugees without any resources arrived by train in thousands at the Sealdah station after 1950, they were first despatched to various refugee camps in different districts like 24-Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, Midnapur or Cooch Behar. In allocating space in the camps, caste and identity did play a part, despite persistent official denial. At Sealdah Station they were asked about their identity, given a registration card and sent by train to a refugee camp.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury have undertaken a very extensive research on the caste identity of camp refugees.¹⁰ It was at these registration desks at Sealdah Station that their identity as Namasudra cultivator was permanently inscribed on their cards – no matter what their real occupation or qualifications were.¹¹ Refugees would prefer to go to the camp where they knew they would find their relatives, village acquaintances or community members who had migrated earlier.¹² As a result, the refugee camps developed their own specific community demographics: in certain camps like Cooper's Camp, Dhubulia Camp in Nadia or Bagjola Camp in the 24-Parganas, the Namasudras constituted more than 70 per cent of the residents. In the camps they lived a shared commune life – sleeping in large living spaces with no privacy, sharing common toilets (80 for 70,000 refugees in Cooper's Camp), and standing in long ques for dole and ration. Caste officially and apparently had no place in this camp life, which sought to democratize poverty and suffering in strange ways; yet it was there all the time. Caste was certainly taken into consideration in allocating space within the camps, in the sense that the few caste Hindu refugees who came to these camps preferred to stay in separate rooms, as far as practicable.

This is not to suggest that some form of caste segregation was maintained in the camps; this is to indicate however that caste mattered in governance and in everyday social relations even in extreme situations of privation, despite the currency of a levelling discourse of victimhood, appropriating all those displaced and destitute people into a new collective category called the 'refugees.' But, within the camps, these refugees had little opportunity to agitate about caste, as the compulsions of the struggle for rehabilitation imposed on them a language of unity and protest that could bring all the residents of the camps to the same barricade lines. They were all given a cash dole and some weekly ration. They were not allowed to get out of the camps, seek jobs or interact with the local population, who remained often deeply suspicious of the refugees. In this way, within the fenced compounds of the Cooper's Camp, for example, about seventy thousand refugees spent months and sometimes years in imposed idleness or just 'endlessly playing cards,' earning in the process the reputation of being indolent and lacking in entrepreneurship.

The level of frustration was bound to increase in such a situation. Coordinated often by the

emerging Bastuhara Samitis (refugee associations), their initial protests were against camp maladministration, unacceptable quality of ration or high handedness of the Camp Administrators. For example, in July 1949, about two hundred Namasudras refugees of the Dudkundi Camp in Jhargram in Midnapore district, frustrated by lack of job opportunities and late payment of cash doles, vented their anger on the Nepali camp guards, who prevented them from removing doors and windows of unoccupied huts.¹³ Sometimes their anger spilled over into the outside communities. In Rupasri Camp in Ranaghat in Nadia, in February, 1950, when they were not getting adequate ration, they went out to the adjoining villages and demanded rice and paddy from the local Muslims threatening them to loot their stocks otherwise.¹⁴

When, after 1950, the Namasudra peasant refugees began to arrive in large numbers, there were targeted attempts to mobilize them. For example, Manohar Roy, who claimed himself to be a right hand man of Jogen Mandal, started a Purba Banga Bastuhara Samiti in Chandmari Camp and started mobilizing the Namasudra refugees. Similarly, one Ramendra Kishor Mullick, who claimed to be close to P. R. Thakur, began to mobilise Namasudra refugees in Bagula and Dhubulia, asking them not to join any political party. In largely attended meetings, he discussed ways and means of rehabilitating peasant refugees who had just migrated from East Bengal. But sometimes they also mobilised under non-Dalit local refugee leaders. For example, when a storm destroyed 300 huts in Cooper's Camp in April 1952, more than 200 residents of the camp, under the leadership of Jyotish Mukerjee and Bimal Biswas (a Brahmin and a Namasudra consecutively), travelled by train without ticket to Calcutta to communicate their grievances to Chief Minister and Relief Commissioner. They were arrested at Sealdah Station and sent back to Cooper's, while their leaders were prosecuted and convicted. A few days later, about 800 refugees of the Dhubulia Camp squatted on the railway tracks for the whole day to ventilate their complaints against the Camp Administration.

Role of Jogen Mandal

Let us first focus on the dissenting voices in the then refugee politics. Jogendra Nath Mandal (popular as Jogen Mandal), for example, was known throughout Bengal as a champion of Dalit (Oppressed Hindu outcaste) and Muslim unity during the Indian freedom struggle. He sided with Pakistan and became its first Law Minister. However, on 8 October 1950, Mandal migrated to West Bengal after resigning from his ministerial position in the Pakistani central cabinet as a mark of protest against the continuing repression of Hindu minorities in East Pakistan. But Mandal's defection could not immediately rejuvenate the Scheduled Caste movement in West Bengal, where he found himself in more hostile grounds, as his past made him unacceptable to the political establishment.

In the first election in 1952, Mandal contested in the Beniapukur Ballygunge reserved Assembly seat in Calcutta as an independent candidate, after the Returning Officer dismissed an objection about his citizenship status. But, in the election campaign, he did not project himself as a Scheduled Caste leader, and tried to represent a much broader social front incorporating both the Scheduled Castes and the refugees. The local Dalit groups organised processions in support of Mandal's candidature, while he was also supported by the local refugee lawyers' association and the refugee women's groups, led by caste Hindu leaders. He was indeed supported by a wide cross-section of

non-Congress voters in the constituency and this did not allow him to use the rhetoric of caste in this election campaign. But, in the end, he lost the election to an unknown Congress candidate, as the SC vote was divided among numerous independent candidates, indicating the unorganised nature of Dalit voice in post-Partition West Bengal. The Congress did not win all the reserved seats in West Bengal Assembly in this election but the Scheduled Castes Federation got none. Given the lack of organisation, the Scheduled Caste leadership in West Bengal could only operate in alliance with other mainstream political parties – not alone. If this was a despondent situation for Scheduled Caste politics in West Bengal, the major problem that a sizeable group of them were facing in this province was that of rehabilitation.

Mandal soon found among the refugees a new support base that helped him reinvent his political leadership as a refugee leader. He initially became a member of the SBBS and worked in collaboration with the UCRC, but his relationship with the latter began to deteriorate from late 1957. He warned the camp refugees that the leftist leaders of the UCRC did not work in the true interest of the dalits/outcastes. He sought to introduce the caste question into the discourse of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal. As one police report notes: “Shri Jogen Mandal has been spreading class and caste ... [hatred] openly in camps.”

On his part, Mandal accused the Govt of turning West Bengal into a caste Hindu state. The counter attack from the other refugee leaders was also sharp and virulent. The SBBS leaders at a meeting in Bagjola camp on 29 June 1958 condemned him for creating a rift among the refugees by raising the caste question. The UCRC/CPI also attacked Mandal virulently and accused him of creating a division between caste Hindu and Scheduled Caste refugees and thus weakening the refugee movement. In Bolpur and Uttartilpara camp meetings on 23rd and 24th February [1958], he openly accused caste Hindu employees and caste Hindu people for sending refugee families to Madhya Pradesh outside West Bengal. He accused Govt to make West Bengal a caste Hindu state.

The counter attack from the other refugee leaders was also sharp and virulent. The SBBS leaders at a meeting in Bagjola camp on 29 June 1958 condemned him for creating a rift among the refugees by raising the caste question.⁸⁴ Even his one-time comrade Hemanta Biswas with his followers came to disrupt his meeting at Bagjola Camp on 25 July 1958 and accused him for the partition of Bengal.⁸⁵ At a meeting at Asrafabad Transit Camp in Habra in the district of 24-Parganas in July 1958, Anil Singh of CPI condemned Mandal for establishing a separate organisation only with the Scheduled Caste refugees and appealed to him to fight a united battle for all refugees along with the UCRC. Nani Kar, also of CPI, was even more merciless. He accused Mandal of creating a division between caste Hindu and Scheduled Caste refugees and thus weakening the refugee movement. He could, therefore, be nothing but a ‘dalal’ (agent) of the Congress government.¹⁵

But despite these attacks, Mandal continued to ask difficult questions. In December 1959 a few bus conductors were recruited from among the refugees in Cooper’s Camp. ‘[H]ow many of them are from the Scheduled Castes?’ Mandal asked the Camp Administrator. He did not get an answer, but for asking that question he again got the flak of the leftist leaders and was branded as

‘communal’. Thus, in the name of unity, the caste question seems to have been very deliberately purged from the discourse of refugee movement, although it remained as relevant as ever. The refugees too were often in serious dilemma over the caste question, as, in the interest of their struggle, unity among all refugees seemed essential. A Police intelligence report in March 1958 showed that while ‘a rift’ was clearly visible among the camp refugees in Burdwan district, a delegation from Ramchandrapur, Kashipur and Nawabnagar camps went to Calcutta to meet the leaders of both the UCRC and the Jogen Mandal group ‘with a view to bring amity between the two to strengthen the refugee movement.’ But the leaders refused to listen, and their followers failed to reconcile their differences.

A refugee activist in Cooper’s Camp in his recollection of those days of struggle sought to privilege a generalised refugee identity over caste: ‘the namasudra or the other lower caste people participated in this movement to fulfil their demands not as lower caste community members but as refugees’. At a group meeting with the former residents of the Bagjola Camp, the participants vehemently asserted that caste did not matter in their movement – they were fighting as a united front for all refugees. A frequently used slogan in the refugee demonstrations of this period, ‘Amra kara? Bastuhara’ (Who are we? Refugees) was a powerful statement that privileged their refugee identity over their caste.

At Dandakaranya Camp

At this time, the caste question within the Bengali partition-refugees came to surface, as the central government tried to relocate the camp refugees from West Bengal to Dandakaranya, a hilly and forest infested area in the central India, inhabited originally by Gonds and other tribes. Most of these refugees were dalits or Namasudras, who had no means – economic or educational – like the upper-caste refugees. Despite strong protests from SBBS and UCRC, the government forcibly despatched many of them to uncultivable area surrounded by alien culture.

The Dandakaranya rehabilitation plan was conceived in early 1956 to resettle the East Pakistani refugees as West Bengal was groaning under the huge burden of rehabilitation. At the National Development Council meeting in June 1957, it was formally decided to develop Dandakaranya as a place for permanent resettlement (not rehabilitation) of Displaced Persons. Right from the onset, it was clear that by ‘rehabilitation’ the government meant resettlement ‘in the narrower economic sense’ while refugees were termed ‘displaced persons’ who were categorized into three classes.

In the Lok Sabha, acrimonious debates about the proposal were common as ‘the land in Koraput and Malkangiri area is of very poor quality’ and ‘the fallow, waste and waterlogged lands available in West Bengal could be profitably developed and distributed.’ Left parties saw little merit in the scheme and often deemed the plans as ‘reckless’ and warned the government against wasting much needed funds on it. In July, 1958, at the Rehabilitation Ministers’ Conference, it was decided that displaced families would start going to Dandakaranya from January next year. However, as opposition to resettlement of refugees outside West Bengal by various Left parties continued, the Government decided to give the refugees the options of either going to Dandakaranya or leaving the Government aided camps after taking a lump sum of three months’ dole. In any case, all DP camps were to close by 31 July, 1959, and the strident note on which Dandakaranya was

promoted by the media as well as in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha debates are noteworthy.¹⁶ The Rehabilitation Minister urged officials to make the scheme a success because it was the 'greatest national cause to which one and all owe their duty' (Amrit Bazar Patrika, 2 November 1958). Rehabilitation was now being correlated with the general development of the country and often the Government accused the Left parties of undermining this by taking up the refugees' cause. Refugees were sent from camps in West Bengal by train to Raipur. From Raipur, they came to transit camps in Mana and to worksite camps where they worked on land reclamation, road-building etc. From these camps they were finally taken to villages for permanent settlement.

By 1965, 7,500 refugee families were settled there. Mandal's efforts to stall this process through his India Refugee Council (EIRC) also failed miserably. Personally, he also failed to win a single elected office and died on 5 October 1968 while conducting an election campaign. A host of contemporary scholars have argued that as a result of this particular dynamics of the refugee movement in West Bengal, a large section of the Dalit lost their distinctive autonomous political voice. And then, because of their dispersal, the Namasudras lost that spatial capacity to organise a powerful protest movement.

The Marichjhapi Tragedy and the New Resurgences

After a decade, however, the dalit/low caste refugees of Dandakaranya wrote a new tragic chapter in the history of refugee movements in West Bengal. By this time, the Left Front Government led by the CPIM had come to power. The Left Front Minister Ram Chattejee visited the refugee camps at Dandak and was widely reported to have encouraged the refugees to settle in the Sunderbans which had been a long held Left demand. So through the months of March and April 1978, families sold their belongings and left Dandakaranya.

By April, 1978, about 10,000 refugees, remembering the previous protest role of the UCRC/ CPI, and inspired by the promise of Ram Chatterjee had moved from Dandakaranya into Marichjhapi (near Kumirmari) in the Sunderban area (famous for world's largest mangrove forests and Royal Bengal Tigers) of 24-Parganas.

But for the LF government, which thrived on the huge support from the refugees for more than three decades, now these dalit refugees were no longer welcome. On January 26 1979, India's Republic Day, the Left Front Chief Minister Jyoti Basu announced an economic blockade of the island to force the settlers to go back. Thirty police launches surrounded the island; the refugees were tear-gassed, their huts, fisheries and tube-wells destroyed. Those who tried to cross the river in makeshift boats were shot at. The refugees, armed with carpentry tools and makeshift bows and arrows were no match for the government forces. A conservative estimate gave the dead as several hundred men, women and children who died either through starvation or who were shot at and their bodies thrown into the river. Marichjhapi became out of bounds to visiting journalists, opposition politicians and even a Parliamentary Committee who came to investigate police atrocities faced harassment at the hands of the Forest Department officials. About 4128 families perished in this massacre; the rest were sent back to Dandakaranya.¹⁷ The incident of the Marichjhapi brutality forms an important space in Amitav Ghosh's famous novel, *The Hungry Tide*.

Then, nearly three decades after the *Marichjhapi* massacre, the caste identity of Bengali

refugees came to the fore again with a caste-based religious organisation called, Matua Mahasangha, particularly when in 2003, the Government of India, under the BJP-led NDA, introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act which denied Indian citizenship to those who migrated after 1971. The new law posed a serious threat to the identity of the Namasudra refugees, as a large section of them had crossed the border after the Bangladesh war in 1971. The Matua Mahasangha, which by now had emerged as the frontal organization of the Namasudras, opposed the new law and their leaders organized a hunger strike in 2004 at its headquarters at Thakurnagar.

The Matua Mahasangha, particularly since 2004, has gradually emerged as the mouthpiece organization of the Namasudras with a membership of about 100,000 to 120,000 families, not only in Bengal but also outside. Being an autonomous community organization, the Mahasangha gradually drew up with its own constitution, issued identity cards to its members, held periodic gatherings, published books, journals and pamphlets and thereby encouraged a dalit literary movement, and organized other mass-mobilizing activities to resist the bhadraklok hegemonic politics. This group has also proved to be a support base for the 'Change' or *Paribartan* of the LF rule of three and a half decades in West Bengal.

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9. Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Lumière Books, Kalyani, West Bengal, India, 1990
10. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste

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11. *Jugantar* (a Bengali daily) reported the following on 26 and 27 March 1950. According to reports, the registration desks issued three coloured cards – white coloured cards for those, who wanted to take shelter in the camps; red coloured cards for those, who were able to take care of themselves and were not willing to go to the camps; and blue coloured cards for those, who only needed initial assistance for their travel before their own rehabilitation on the other side of the border,. Under the circumstances it was quite expected that a person with a Namasudra name would invariably be classified as ‘cultivator’ and was sent to the camp as he/she did not have means for his/her survival.
12. Extract from W.C.R. of the Supdt. of Police, Murshidabad for the week ending 30th July 1949, GB, IB Records, F.No 1809/48 (Midnapore), WBSA, as cited in Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Op. Cit.*
13. *Ibid*
14. *Ibid*
15. *Ibid*
16. S.K. Gupta, ‘Dandakaranya: A Survey of Rehabilitation, I: The State of Agriculture,’ *The Economic Weekly*, Jan 2, 1965, p. 15. See also S.K. Gupta, ‘Proshongo Dandakaranya’ in *Kichu Smriti Kichu Katha*, Calcutta, 1994, pp. 121-140. Gupta’s three essays are later collected in book form in 1999 and published in Calcutta.
17. There seems to be some dispute about the exact number of people who managed to settle in Marichjhapi but it can be anywhere between 4000 to 10,000 families. See Kalyan Chaudhuri, ‘Victims of Their Leaders’ Making’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 July, 1978, pp.1098-1099, as well as Ross Mallick, ‘Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and Marichjhapi Massacre’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58: I, 1999, pp. 104-125. Pannalal Dasgupta, who had covered the Marichjhapi massacre extensively for *Anandabazar Patrika* stated in his report that 2713 families were relocated to Dudhkundi camp after the massacre. If each family had three members that made 8139 people alone, apart from those killed in police firing or who died on the island.

