CHAPTER 4
FROM DANDAKARANYA TO MORICHJHAPI:
REHABILITATION, REPRESENTATION AND
THE PARTITION OF BENGAL (1947)

Oh queen, oh my queen,
In your kingdom
The ill-fated children
Of menial mothers
Arrive in throng....

Subhash Mukhopadyay, Thakumar Jhuli

When Partition came in 1947, East Bengal had a sizeable Hindu population. About 344,000 refugees came into West Bengal, many of them middleclass people who had jobs in West Bengal or some family connections. While in Punjab there was virtually an exchange of population, there was no such equal exchange across the Bengal borders. There was, therefore, a massive population pressure on the state with every successive migration. To prevent further influx of refugees in the months after the country was divided, a number of initiatives were undertaken to see that the minorities in East Bengal remained where they were. In April 1948, an Inter-Dominion conference was held in Calcutta where the Rehabilitation Ministers of West Bengal and Pakistan declared their intention to take possible steps to prevent an exodus. It was decided to establish Minority Boards at the provincial and local levels in both countries to redress grievances and as a confidence building measure. Another

---

1 Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes, fragmented identities,' in Tai Yong Tan and G. Kudaisya, eds, The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia, London, 2001, p., 144. Also reprinted in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, eds, Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Reader, vol., II, London, 2008. No one knows for certain how many refugees came to India from East Bengal from 1946 to 1964; the official estimate is just under 5 million. See also Joya Chatterji, The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-67, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 105-106. The largest number, mostly Hindu Bengalis, settled in West Bengal with districts of 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Howrah and Bardwan taking the largest influx; around 13% went to Assam, while the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, mainly the Chakmas, settled in Arunachal Pradesh. A relatively small number of Hindus from Sylhet went to Assam and Tripura. The Rajbongshis from the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur came to Coochbihar and Jalpaiguri.
Inter-Dominion conference took place in December 1948 to follow up on these actions.²

These measures, however, largely failed to stem the influx of refugees into West Bengal. Although the decision to leave was based on a set of complex calculations, a number of reasons, economic and political, made the Hindus apprehensive about living on in East Pakistan. A spokesman of the East Bengal Minority Committee claimed that nearly 2.5 lakh members of minority communities had already left for the Indian Union (Hindustan Standard, 28 March 1948) amidst growing allegations of atrocities on Hindu villagers in various districts like Sylhet (Amritbazar Patrika, 20 November 1949). By August 1949, acute food shortage in large areas of Tippera and some other districts in East Pakistan added to the exodus. Coupled with this was the passage of the East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Property) Act (1949) that enabled the Pakistan government to confiscate properties of evacuees. This fuelled Hindu apprehension about their security in Pakistan. However, despite the risk that their assets would be seized, many left while others tried to exchange their properties with Muslims arriving from India. In the early months of 1950, when serious riots engulfed certain areas of Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna and parts of Rajshahi and Barisal, the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, made a statement in Parliament about the ‘grim East Bengal tragedy.’³ Throughout February and March, newspapers in Calcutta reported widespread looting and arson in Chittagong and Barisal. Steamers and trains carrying fleeing people were raided and looted by Ansars, a semi official para-military Pakistani force that was formed to protect the borders. In March, Dr P.C.Ghosh, member of the Congress Working Committee, visited Dacca and made a statement: ‘There is no sense of security in the

---

² Inter-dominion conferences on the ministerial level (that discussed security of minorities) as well as Boundary Commissions (that discussed disputed boundary lines between India and Pakistan) were some of the unfinished business of Partition. The former discussed threadbare the ways in which security could be provided to minorities in both countries but on the ground these promises did not mean much. See Willem van Schendel, The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia, London, 2005, pp. 98-99: ‘The new states of India and Pakistan meant the disarmament of minority communities and their active expulsion. In spite of the lofty promises and intentions expressed by the leaders of India and Pakistan, those who were labeled ‘minorities’ in either country were often perceived and treated as internal enemies. Thus Muslims on the Indian side and non-Muslims on the Pakistan side were widely assumed to be disloyal to the new state.’

³ Amrit Bazar Patrika, 24, February 1950.
minds of the Hindus. The greatest scare has been caused by attacks resulting in deaths in the railway trains.\(^4\) Photographs began to appear on the front pages of national dailies of worn out men, women and children walking along railway lines, detained at Darshana (the last outpost before reaching West Bengal) or huddling on the platforms at the Bongaon and Sealdah stations with their meager belongings piled next to their weary bodies. By March end of 1950, over 2,50,000 refugees had entered West Bengal by air, river and land routes since the disturbances started in December while special steamers were requisitioned by Dr B.C. Ray, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, to bring stranded East Bengal refugees from Khulna, Narayangunj, Chandpur and Barisal (Hindustan Standard, 14 April 1950).

The Amrit Bazar Patrika reported on 23, March 1950 that ‘people from villages in districts like Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Bogra and Rangpur say that large scale movement of Hindus have started. Cattle, stacked paddy and corn, plough and the land offer no more lure to them to keep to their village homes...village smiths, kavirajs, day-labourers, carpenters, namasudras, santhals – in fact every Hindu in Eastern Pakistan is trying to move out.’ In April that year, a pact was signed between the prime ministers of the two countries to create a sense of security among the minorities but the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was unable to stop the attacks on minorities and throughout the early 1950’s the exodus continued. On 30, March 1951, A. Mitra, Superintendent of Census Operations, West Bengal, stated that the total number of persons who declared themselves as Displaced in the state was 2,117,896. The number was soon to swell with near famine conditions in parts of East Bengal like Khulna and the introduction of the proposed passport system in October 1952. By November, Renuka Ray, State Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, reported that 27 lakh refugees were living in West Bengal (Amrit Bazar Patrika, 18, November 1954).

The Government’s inability to tackle such heavy exodus was openly admitted in official circles especially since 1952 the refugees were the lower caste Namasudras and Poundra-Kshatriyas who were agriculturists and would require some form of land to be resettled. Refugees who came immediately after the Partition could rehabilitate themselves with very little government help. But after 1952, it was mainly the small farmers, traders and artisans who began to migrate. This considerably changed the way the state and union governments looked at rehabilitation. Earlier the effort was to provide relief and rehabilitation to refugees fleeing communal disturbances (especially after the Calcutta and Noakhali riots). Immediately after the country was divided, the middleclass and white collared population who came to the state did not require large-scale rehabilitation, as they were sufficiently solvent to relocate by their own efforts. After 1952, the demographic and occupational character of the refugees changed and relief now provided by government agencies was more in the context of displacement and not in the context of riots as was the case earlier. This led to a major alteration in the state’s relief policies of the 1950s. Classification of refugees was now done more in terms of their occupations: agriculturist refugees with strong ties to land would need land to make a living.

Roughly, the refugees who came into West Bengal immediately after Partition were classified according to the nature of government relief given between 1948 and 1952. These were people living in transit camps, permanent liability camps, worksite camps or squatters’ colonies or government-aided colonies. But after 1952, the

---


6 *Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported that ‘an alarming feature of the present exodus is that a large number of Hindu population who are deeply rooted to the soil and never moved out despite grave threat to their way of life are now coming over to West Bengal,’ 11, October 1952.

7 Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, London, 2007, p., 164: ‘In West Bengal the phraseology of ‘camps’ does not do justice to the enormity of social dislocation and the scale of change instigated by the arrival of Bengalis from the east.’ Roughly the East Bengali refugees were either camp refugees or non-camp refugees, apart from those who had arrived before 1950. Amongst the camp refugees were the non-permanent liabilities (divided further into transit camps, worksite camps and government sponsored colonies) while permanent liability refugees were divided into P.L. camps or Homes for destitute and widowed women and children.
refugees were mainly people who needed serious rehabilitation efforts as they had limited means of rebuilding their lives. Earlier, relief was in the context of riots for the large number of people affected by communal conflagration in Noakhali, Dhaka and Calcutta. Relief camps had been temporary, as the people had returned to their homes when things quietened down. But by 1952, as the number of refugees swelled (the causes were not communal disturbances but more economic and political) the official discourse of relief changed slowly into the discourse of rehabilitation as there was no sign that the influx was going to be stemmed for some time to come. In an article titled ‘Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons’ that Renuka Ray, minister in West Bengal Cabinet wrote in 1958, this idea was stressed: ‘...With the increasing influx, by 1954, it was found that it was no longer possible to fit in the new comers’ for West Bengal was a state ‘which since Partition is 1/3 in its original size with a density of 806 per sq mile, which is one of the highest in India and the world. It must also be remembered that the new comers have come to a state whose economy has suffered even before partition as a consequence of a major famine in 1943 and the impact of the war and turmoil that took place on the eve of Independence.’

Muslim evacuee property in West Bengal was negligible as most Muslim migrants were labourers and artisans and numbered much less than in Punjab. Calcutta, the capital city, was stretched to its limits with the sheer numerical strength of the refugees who changed

---

8 Joya Chatterji, ‘Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal 1947-50’ in Suvir Kaul, ed., The Partitions Of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India, Delhi, 2001, p., 79, points out that West Bengal government decided 31, October 1949 as a cut off date to phase out relief camps. She sees this period as also a time of harsher government policies towards refugees when rehabilitation would only be given to those the state defined as ‘refugees.’ It is around the first five years of 1950s that relief policies undergo a major shift: it is now that relief in the context of displacement becomes the key discourse over relief in the context of communal riots, as more and more refugees arrive in West Bengal. See Saroj Chakraborty, With Dr. B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers, Calcutta, 1974, pp. 169-178. See also Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, Udvastu, Calcutta, 1970, p., 32, where he states: ‘Dr. Roy decided to undertake the work of rehabilitation under a new government department soon to be opened. As of now the old Relief department was looking after the work relating to the refugees...but if importance has to be given to refugee rehabilitation, then it has to be conducted under a separate department.....later when rehabilitation became an even more pressing problem, this measure was immensely beneficial.’

9 Renuka Ray, Speeches and Writings by Her (1957-67), Serial No. 34, p., 2, NMML. See also reports about sending refugees outside West Bengal taken in the Rehabilitation Ministers Conference in Calcutta reported in Jugantar, 30 January 1956 and Ananda Bazar Patrika, 30 January 1956.

many semi-urban areas into towns. Partition had also disrupted the regional economy, particularly the jute sector, and the West Bengal government claimed that it was unable to take in the burden of the continued influx. The state’s food situation was precarious throughout 1957 and 1958. Acute unemployment, rising prices of essential commodities and food shortage were also adding to the perception that the state had taken more than its fair share of burdens. So by 1954, the West Bengal government increasingly took the view that the ‘refugee problem’ was not its sole responsibility and must be shared by the Central government as well as by the neighbouring states. The East Bengal Relief Committee, chaired by Dr Meghnad Saha, participating in a conference held at the West Bengal Government Secretariat on December 3, 1953 (presided over by Shri Ajit Prasad Jain) pointed out caustically in a memorandum that ‘the Government of India should proclaim with respect to East Bengal refugees the same policy as the case of West Punjab refugees.’ The memorandum stated that up to the end of 1953 the expenditure on refugees in West Punjab was 142 crores while for East Bengal refugees it was 60 crores. In November the next year, Meghnad Saha urged Nehru to take up the State’s Rehabilitation portfolio as ‘refugee rehabilitation has completely failed in Eastern regions.’

The new Union Relief and Rehabilitation minister Sri Meher Chand Khanna was soon to announce that the resettlement problem of Displaced Persons in West Bengal was ‘far more complex than that of Punjab.’ By June 1955, in a meeting of the National Development Council, plans were set out for resettling refugees outside West Bengal with six Eastern states accommodating 3 million refugees. But

---

12 Amrita Bazaar Patrika, November 26, 1954. See also Draft of a Press Statement (22.11.54) issued by Dr. Meghnad Saha and Shri Tridib Chowdhury after a tour of Cachar refugee camps, Papers and Correspondences received by M.N Saha during his tenure as MP regarding East Bengal Refugee Rehabilitation, 1952-55, Instalment VII, Sub. File 6, p.,122, NMML where Dr. Saha stated that ‘dichotomy between power and responsibility has been as much responsible in Assam as in West Bengal for the unsatisfactory state of affairs with regard to rehabilitation for displaced persons…..The passage of years has taken away much of the urgency and priority accorded to the problem by those in authority.’ He blamed this on the major disagreement of policies between the Union Rehabilitation Ministry and the State Ministry concerned and urged that the ‘Prime Minister of India…should take upon himself the Portfolio of Refugee Rehabilitation of the Eastern Zone.’
13 Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 9, May 1955.
rehabilitation schemes were often ill conceived and efforts to send refugees outside the state mismanaged. On 13 August 1957, *Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported ‘trenchant’ criticisms in the Lok Sabha ‘about slow progress of rehabilitation of East Bengal displaced persons…….. delays in execution of schemes, [and the] lack of proper planning’ by the Rehabilitation Ministry. By 1957, the Union Minister was to announce that there was no more room for Refugee Rehabilitation in West Bengal. ‘Over 40 lakhs of Hindus had already come from East Pakistan and of them a little over 30 lakhs were in West Bengal alone. During the last two years, 1955 and 1956, the exodus had been the heaviest, the figures being 5,60,000.’ In spite of opposition by various Left parties to send refugees outside the state, efforts were made to dispatch batches of refugees in Bihar, Orissa and Assam. These, however, were largely unsuccessful and there were a large number of deserters from camps in Orissa and Bihar. In 1956, families were sent to be resettled in the Andaman Islands and the government promised that soon ‘20,000 acres of forest land are to be cleared and made available for 4000 agriculturist families from the mainland.

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

---

14 *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 11, May 1957 reports on the press conference in Calcutta held by the Minister.

15 The Rehabilitation Minister M.C Khanna’s tirade reported in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 August 1958. See also Phulrenu Guha, ‘Rehabilitation: East and West’ in Ritu Menon ed., *No Woman’s Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh write on the Partition of India*, Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004, p., 196: ‘The Communist Party of India never realized the irreparable damage they caused by objecting to the transfer of refugees to these islands – the Andamans could really have emerged as a second East Bengal…As someone who originally hails from East Bengal, I still nurse this grievance against the Communists.’ See also Saroj Chakraborty, *With Dr B.C. Roy*, p., 111.

16 Most of the refugees sent to Orissa, for example, were agriculturists who went to Bushandipur, Rannagar, Romuna and Chandbali. They complained that ‘the lands offered for rehabilitation were unyielding to cultivation and lack in even essential facilities for resettlement. The lands were mostly marshy or waterlogged which were found to be extremely difficult for cultivation.’ *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 15, July 1956. See also *Amrit Bazar*, 12 January 1951 for news on desertion from Rairakhel in Sambalpur district. In Bihar, the Bettiah camp had a large number of deserters. See *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 15 May 1958 for news of firing on the refugees in this camp.

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. On 18 June, a front page news item in a leading Calcutta newspaper described the Union Government’s intention: ‘Dandakaranya: Legendary Lore’s Forest Fringed Soil – Vast 80,000 Sq Mile Land Mass to be New Haven for 1.9 m DPs’. Dandakaranya, thrice as large as West Bengal, watered by numerous rivers and channels, had a density of population of only 100 persons per square mile as compared to 900 of West Bengal. The newspaper reported that the members of the Planning Commission ‘have come to the conclusion that the area offered attractive possibilities for resettlement of refugees.’ The authorities were well aware of the magnitude of the task. In a note circulated among members of Parliament on the proposed Dandakaranya scheme, it was stated that an autonomous central authority be set up to oversee the project as the area, in large part, was covered by thick primeval forests. An overall development scheme would be necessary before refugees could be rehabilitated. State Minister Renuka Ray was also of the same opinion. In 1958 she wrote in The Statesman: ‘As large jungles have to be cleared and swamps reclaimed, it must take time before it [the Dandakaranya scheme] can be implemented in any satisfactory manner.’ In the Lok Sabha, acrimonious debates about the proposal

---

18 Amrit Bazar Patrika on 4 June 1957 carried a report on this meeting: ‘After hearing the report of Mr. H.M. Patel, Chairman of the Committee asked to go into the development of the Dandakaranya scheme covering the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, the National Development Council decided that an autonomous authority, on the lines of the D.V.C. should be set up to clear the jungle and develop this area and resettle East Pakistan displaced persons there.’ The report was followed by front-page news on 16 June quoting the statement of Shri P.C. Sen, West Bengal Rehabilitation Minister who stated in the assembly that the Dandakaranya project had the ‘potentiality of rehabilitating a crore of East Bengal refugees.’

19 The ‘displaced persons’ were those who were homeless but not registered as refugees, registered refugees who did not live in camps nor received doles, and registered refugees receiving both. In connection with the Dandakaranya project, the DDA was mainly concerned with the third category consisting mainly of lower caste people such as the Namasudras, Kshatriyas and the Pundra-Kshatriyas. See Alok Kumar Ghosh, ‘Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy of Rehabilitation,’ in Pradip K. Bose, ed., Refugees in West Bengal, pp. 107-8.

20 Amrit Bazar Patrika, 18, June 1957.

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.’22 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.23

An aerial survey was quickly undertaken to assess the potentialities of the region that stretched between Koraput and Kalahandi districts in Orissa, Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh and parts of Andhra Pradesh. Although the isolated Dandakaranya, with its self sufficient tribal population, inaccessible hilly tracts and uneven rainfall was not conducive to resettling large numbers of agriculturists who were used to a riverine land and a wet climate, the area’s low population density was a crucial factor in its choice as a site for refugee rehabilitation.24 The two large refugee organizations, the United Central Refugee Council and Shara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti had a number of reservations about the Dandakaranya project, especially at the Government decision to wind up all camps in the state by July 1959 and thereby forcing many refugees to go to there, sometimes against their will.25 By August end 1957, the Government of India had decided to entrust the development of the entire Dandakarnya scheme to the Union Rehabilitation Ministry instead of leaving it to an autonomous body. It was decided to appoint an executive officer who

22 Communist MP Renu Chakravarthy’s remark in the Parliament reported in Amrit Bazar Patrika, 13 August 1957.
24 Statesman, 15 August 1957. The DDA reclaimed land for rehabilitation of which 25% were returned to the state governments to be distributed to landless tribal people of the state. The rest were to be used for refugee rehabilitation. See Pannalal Dasgupta, ‘Dandakaranya Ghurey Duti Protibedon’, Jugantar, 25 July 1978.
25 See H. Bhattacharyya, ‘Post Partition Refugees and the Communists: A Comparative Study Of West Bengal and Tripura,’ in Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, eds, Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Sub-Continent,’ Delhi, 1999, p., 325, who sees the Communist mobilization of refugees as dictated by two objectives: electoral support and political recruitment. So genuine refugee interests were subordinated to political needs and prospects of real rehabilitation was hampered. This was certainly the case in Dandak and later Marichjhapi. See also The Statesman, 23 December 1959 about refugee agitation against Dandakaranya.
would make a detailed survey of selected areas with a team of experts with a special emphasis on developing communications and eradicating malaria.  

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. 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.

Shri S. K. Gupta was the Chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority for ten months in 1963-64. After he quit the post, he wrote a series of articles in The Economic Weekly, assessing the rehabilitation programmes that were undertaken from 1959 onwards when the first batch of refugees arrived there. These

---

27 See Amrit Bazar Patrika, 8, December 1958 as well as The Statesman, 11 April 1958. Also see Lok Sabha Debates, vol., XV, 1958, Lok Sabha Secretariat, p., 10781.
28 The situation in Mana was hardly conducive to the welfare of the refugees. Ashoka Gupta, who had traveled frequently to Mana when her husband S.K. Gupta was the Chairman of DDA, testifies to the abysmal condition of the camps. In a report on the ‘Present position at Mana and the gravity of the situation’ that she prepared for the Central Social Welfare Board (of which she was a member) Ashoka Gupta wrote: ‘Mana, once an Army camp and abandoned after the last war, is a large treeless stretch of morrum land, unfit for agricultural purposes. Mana is extremely hot in summer. There is a great dearth of water. The possibilities of subterranean water resources were yet to be explored when the new migrants began to arrive in an endless stream.’ Ashoka Gupta, Papers and Correspondences regarding Rehabilitation Work in Refugee Camps in Dandakaranya, Sub File 3, 1964, NMML. This report is also reproduced as an appendix in Saibal Kumar Gupta, Dandakaranya: A Survey in Rehabilitation, Calcutta, 1999, pp.108-116.
articles are worth quoting extensively because they are in many respects an important
assessment of things that happened in Dandakaranya in the name of rehabilitation.
Written with facts gleaned from government reports and his own assessment of what
he saw, S.K. Gupta’s articles also have importance because they blew the lid off from
one of the most prominent rehabilitation projects undertaken in the post Partition
years. The series of three articles begins on a somber note:

The development of Dandakaranya was undertaken to solve an almost
intractable human problem – the rehabilitation of a large number of refugees who
were uprooted from their homeland in East Pakistan, victims of a political decision to
divide the country in which they were not consulted…

Dandakaranya was expected to provide a home for the residuary refugee population in
camps or elsewhere for whom there was supposed to be no more room in West Bengal.
More then twenty-two crores of rupees have already been spent and further
expenditures are in the offing but barely 7000 families have been given rehabilitation
of a sort in the course of five or six years. What is the end result of all this expenditure
of time and money? What are the prospects? It is time that a proper assessment was
made and people saw Dandakaranya without any blinkers.

What I saw myself and learnt on further enquiry caused me profound disquiet. I have
decided to share my disquiet with the public, not to cast reflections or start a polemic,
but so that if things are what I believe they are, immediate actions may be taken to set
things right. Human distress on a large scale is much too serious a matter to be passed
over in silence either to feed official complacency or to save reputations. 29

In Dandakaranya, the scheme was simple: a plot of 6.5 hectares was given to
each family and loans were disbursed for building houses and purchase of bullocks
and agricultural implements. But it was clear from the start that the refugees had to
‘make do with the worst lands, hitherto regarded as uncultivable’ and S.K. Gupta
noted that in Pharasgaon zone, ‘6% of the plots were basically unfit for agriculture,
32% were poor and sub-marginal, 53% could be of medium quality if their moisture
retention capacity could be improved, and only 9% were of good quality.’30 Lack of
sustainable irrigation, cost of manure and shortage of adults working on fields from

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.
each family were other reasons why agricultural rehabilitation got off to a poor start. Gupta was also clear that the absence of tenancy rights over the plots failed to create a sense of responsibility among the refugees. 'The displaced persons have not yet had tenancy rights secured by the grant of pattas because the Ministry is as yet unable to decide whether the cost of reclamation and development of agricultural land should be charged to the settler. It would be a cruel joke if people uprooted from East Bengal who have lost all their assets are made to pay for the development of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.' The small traders and businessmen among the refugees also faced 'an uphill task.' They were offered a business loan of a thousand rupees and a house-building loan of 2000 and a maximum of three months dole. Within that time they had to earn enough, not only to pay off the loans but also to maintain their families. 'The scheme was, therefore, not very realistic and the rigidity with which it was applied made its harshness all too plain. One glaring example was the case of 23 displaced families, who had never before lived in a government relief camp and who arrived towards the later part of 1963. They were not offered any homestead plots and did not on that account take the business loan because there was no place where they could ply their trade. Their dole was stopped after three months, reducing them to starvation.' The infrastructure, promised vociferously by the Indian Government, also failed to materialize. Electricity was not available over large areas and there was often an acute shortage of drinking water. The lack of medical services and the rough terrain led to frequent epidemics with a high rate of child mortality that unsettled the refugees. Dandakaranya, the mythological place of the ‘dark forests’ where Ram was

32 See S.K. Gupta, ‘Dandakaranya: A Survey of Rehabilitation II: Industries,’ *The Economic Weekly*, January 9, 1965, and ‘A Survey of Rehabilitation III: Other Urban and Semi-Urban Employment,’ *The Economic Weekly*, January 16, 1965, p., 89. Rehabilitation Minister Shri M.C Khanna in the Rajya Sabha stated: ‘I am going to see that elaborate arrangements are made for the welfare of the people whom I take there (Dandakaranya). I will have hospitals, I will have schools. I will have Bengali doctors, I will have Bengali teachers and I will have Bengali social workers.’ *Rajya Sabha Official Report*, Vol XX, Feb 26- Mar 14 1958, Rajya Sabha Secretariat, p., 3148. See also, Renuka Ray’s copy of her speech in the Parliament (no date) that is available among her personal papers: ‘...this picture of promises made and not kept, of excuses made and an extraordinary tendency to shelve blame on others and to find scapegoat for one’s own deficiencies seem to be the story of the Ministry of Rehabilitation of recent years.’ Renuka Ray, *Papers and Correspondences relating to the activities of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, 1954-56*, Serial number 3, p., 4, NMML.
exiled, appeared to the new settlers less as a land of hope than a place of banishment. It was not surprising that within 1964, cases of desertion began to appear in local dailies and were also reported in the national press. From Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi was just a step away.33

II

The Partition of India is commonly understood as a violent territorial and political separation of groups as well as forced evictions and migration of populations after communal upheavals. It is also the personal price paid by people undergoing all these traumas. But Partition refers to much more than the processes of forced separations of communities and the creation of distinct political identities. It creates a different experiential reality for whole groups of people as it also forms 'the basis for long term practices such as identity, work, memory and inspiration.'34 Each member of the displaced families has their own Partition, and in their stories we see both resistance and accommodation. The 'affective dimension' of their pain, trauma, guilt and nostalgia that has been exorcised from Partition history must be taken into account to give us a fuller picture of the division that takes place in the subcontinent.35

In Punjab, if the originary moment of Partition is marked by physical violence, in East Bengal it is displacement and migration, other forms of violence. This displacement of a whole people cutting across class and caste, followed by rehabilitation or resettlement in a new place, forms one of the important social and cultural processes

---

33 Manikuntala Sen, 'Partition: Streams of Refugees' in Ritu Menon, ed, No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India, Delhi, 2004, pp.71-2 states: 'A number of peasant families were sent to Dandakaranya...where they were given plots of land to cultivate so that they could resume their lives as farmers. Much of this land was barren and rocky but they poured their life blood into it, made it fertile and succeeded in growing crops.....The skirmish at Marichjhapi is proof enough of the fact that all refugees have not been able to reach such a state of resettlement even now.'


35 Priya Kumar, ‘Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation’ in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, eds, Partition and Postcolonial South Asia: A Reader, vol., II. London, 2008, p., 326: 'Conventional historiography has been conspicuous for its inability to enunciate collective traumas of the scale and magnitude of Partition. Since such painful experiences can only be comprehended by taking their affective dimensions into account - dimensions of pain, shame, guilt, revenge, nostalgia that history has traditionally chosen to excise and exorcise from its telling.'
that we see in the post Partition years in West Bengal. This course of movement also forms the basis of refugee memories of Partition and the master narrative of Partition uprooting and resettlement that discursively dissolve the socially divisive categories of caste, class and gender and seriously challenge the official notion of a refugee as a ‘victim’ of forces beyond control. 36 Rehabilitation and resettlement, a form of internal displacement that repeats the processes of Partition, therefore is the narrativizing principles of a number of novels that are written in Bengal that are woven around these themes. I suggest that these kinds of representations, deliberately looking at fall-outs of the Partition other than communal tensions and migrations, are not an accident but a deliberate way in which literature is foregrounding questions of citizenship and the exigencies of the modern nation state. They are laying claim to notions of agency and livelihood on behalf of specific groups of peoples whose inarticulate and unspoken experiences is not the stuff of ‘national’, ‘rational’ and ‘progressive’ history of the nation state. 37 These narratives that use rehabilitation as a motif do not simply approximate the ‘reality’ of their social and historical contexts in mimetic ways; rather they employ a different exploratory perspective that radically rethinks the lived realities of the refugees’ circumstances. Rehabilitation becomes a narrative core of these texts because resettlement creates a different experiential reality for a large body of people. Issues of home, settlement, livelihood, and work create a new body of literature that re-look at Partition and its consequence, the free nation state, in very important critical ways. Moreover, in these novels the refugees come across as agents that successfully contest the stereotype embedded in official discourse that attributes the failure of refugee rehabilitation to the inherent parochialism of the refugees, their unwillingness to settle outside Bengal and their lack of mobility and enterprise. These narratives then undercut in interesting ways the ‘representations of the Purbo Bangiyo refugee (that) has remained trapped within predictable categories of shoronarthi

36 See Joya Chatterji, ‘Who is a Refugee? The Case of East Bengalis in India’ in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, eds, Partition and Post Colonial South Asia, vol., II. ibid., p., 209: ‘A second maxim of the “official mind” is that refugees by definition are victims.... The notion that refugees were not active agents but persons “displaced” by political forces outside their control has been central to the elaboration of refugee policy.’ This was a common stereotype in the official circles as is evident from Patel’s speech at the 55th Congress Session at Gandhinagar. Hindustan Standard, 18, December 1948 reported that while speaking about East Bengali Hindus, Patel stated that ‘Bengalis were not strong, they only knew how to weep.’

37 I use these terms after Gyanendra Pandey where he makes a distinction between ‘national’ and ‘local’ forms of history. See G. Pandey, Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India, Cambridge, 2001, p., 119.
(seeking refuge), vastuhara (homeless) and udbastu (uprooted): official terms with which refugees were classified. Terms such as these, classifying people into categories, hide the other complex aspects of being a refugee: the feelings of exile, dislocation and the lived experience of resettlement. The narrative discourse of displacement that we see in some of the literary texts of the period is different from the discourse of ‘rights’ that these governmental terms seem to imply. This dichotomy, between the legal machinery and the actual practices in the resettlement of the refugees can be seen in the critical modes of subjectivity that some of these texts employ: Amiyabhushan Majumdar’s Nirbaash (The Exile, 1959), Narayan Sanyal’s Aranya Dandak (The Forest Dandak, 1961) and Bokultala P.L. Camp (The P.L. Camp at Bokultala, 1960), Shaktipada Rajguru’s Dandak Theke Marichjhapi (From Dandak to Marichjhapi, written 1980-81), and Dulalendu Chattopadhyay’s Ora Ajo Udvasu (They are Still Refugees, 1983) are texts that look at issues of rehabilitation through the optics of fiction and subvert the notion of refugees as ‘victims’ of a history they fail to understand. Since the novels are all written in different times, a different context is written into the time differences. For example, the earlier novels are mainly preoccupied with middle or lower middle class refugees but Rajguru’s novel, written later, is about the Namasudra peasants and artisans who trickle in throughout the years of 1950s and 1960s. The state’s response to this later influx is also very different to its earlier handling of the refugees immediately after the Partition.

Amiyabhushan Majumdar (1918-2000) has a number of novels that reflect his sense of history and society. Garh Srikhando (1957) is a novel that is set far from the urban milieu and can belong to a group of novels in Bangla that consciously evoked the locale and ethnography of a rural underdeveloped marginal people and place. The novel is set in an area in North Bengal and describes the struggles of the

---


40 This can be termed as a distinct genre in Bangla fiction: Manoj Basu’s Bon Ketey Boshot (1961), Satinath Bhaduri’s Dhorai Chorit Manosh (1950) and Advaita Mallaburman’s Titash Ekti Nadir Naam (1956) turn attention to the marginal communities of fisher-folk and peasants whose lives and struggles create new fictional tropes of labour and culture that question the given notions of nationalist literatures. In Bangladesh, similar impetus can be seen in the works of Syed Waliullah and Akhtaruzumman Elias.
Sandar tribesmen, the peasants of the area as well as the feudal Sanyal family, on whose lives the wounds of war, famine, peasant struggles against the jotedars and Partition throw long shadows. The canvas of the novel is big, so is the writer’s social consciousness of a large epic span of events and happenings that is implicit in the questions of livelihood and labour of the characters. For example, the effects of the 1943 famine make women like Fatema and Surotan paupers who turn to illegal rice smuggling to earn a livelihood. The elder Communist son of the Sanyal family, Nripunarayan goes to jail as he is charged with sedition while his wife Sumiti is a symbol of rebellion against the age-old feudal practices of his family. The novel’s wide canvas describes a changing Bengal through the years of the World War II and is reflective of Amiyabhushan’s critical yet humanistic aesthetic at work. His later novel Nirbaash is smaller in scale where the theme of refugee-hood has a different aesthetic implication and reflects the earlier literary conventions of Garh Srikhando. In Nirbaash,\(^{41}\) the referents of rehabilitation in Dandakaranya are not so direct but still visible. The novel, set in 1959 around a camp called Holudmohun, revolves around Bimala who is an inmate there. ‘They have used all sorts of materials to build permanent homes for themselves. Hay, tree leaves, terracotta tiles, serrated tin pieces, even the brownish barks of trees. There was a plywood factory nearby. One can buy the rejected bits of ply there, nothing better than barks of trees. The camp inmates have used those too’\(^{(6)}\). The novel opens with the imminent departure of the camp inmates for Dandakaranya and the resistance that some people have to this idea of leaving and going further away from the land they once called their own. ‘At the Holudmohun camp, people were living in an atmosphere of decay that destroyed them slowly and inevitably. If one looked at them it would seem that the only solution was to resettle them in another place. But where? Where was that country?....In Holudmohun camp there were many who felt a deep longing for a country where the mighty Padma flowed like an immense vein. Some of them were not fisher-folk whose livelihood depended on the river, nor were they farmers whose plots were made fertile by it. Padma never gave anything, except sometimes it came near like a curse and moved away again. All these people searched for shelter, afraid for their lives, yet they always tried to live near the river. Padma and all the small tributaries

\[^{41}\] Amiyabhushan Majumdar, Nirbaash, Calcutta, 1996. All translations from the Bengali texts quoted through the chapter are mine.
that were her relation... They belonged to the land where Padma flowed. Outside that land, lay the wide world but it was not home’ (50). The boundaries of the new nation state thus become contingent and unreal; it encircles what is not ‘home.’ When the order comes to leave for Dandakaranya, a woman named Sodamuni asks Bimala, ‘Will it be good or bad?’ And Bimala reflects on Dandak: ‘There will be plenty of trees in Dandakaranya. Even then – No, there will no longer be any trees. And forests? Trees will be felled mercilessly and towns will be established. Tractors will help cultivate fields. And if that happens, who will object to bulldozers demolishing forests? It was naked virgin fertility. It was a way to start anew, to be born again’ (7).

In spite of raising the question of the environmental impact of rehabilitation in a primeval forest-land, the novel does not enter into the real discourse of exile and banishment. Rather it skims the surface and the narrative superficially examines a few characters without exploring the impact of displacement in any great depth. The refusal of Malati to go to Dandakaranya and her organizing other refugees to protest the move is sketched in faint lines and the spirit of resistance remains unexamined. The colossal efforts the refugees make to rebuild their lives, in the absence of any integrated plans, certainly meant social adjustments and environmental costs that are only hinted at in the novel. Yet Amiyabhushan’s novel raises important questions that are relevant to Bangla Partition fiction. The idea of ‘ethnic’ stereotyping that we come across particularly in the ministry of Rehabilitation papers that often depict the Bengali refugee as ‘a bundle of apathy’ is overturned time and time again in novels like *Nirbaash*. This is a text that pictures the middle-class refugees not as victims but as pioneers whose efforts at self-rehabilitation make them agents capable of changing lives and environments. This comes out most clearly in the section where Bimala, along with a few others, raise a few huts in an abandoned land. ‘Next morning, everyone will get together to clear the jungle. The women will make fences after gathering twigs and branches. Young boys will help them. And the oldest woman among them, Ma Thakuran, she has a job as well. She will cook for every one. After sundown they will sit down to eat. Those who have small children must keep chira and muri handy. Only when the huts are ready will they sit in them to breathe a sigh of relief. Until they are ready, nobody gets to sleep.’ (65) The women, except Bimala, are not sketched sharply yet their presence pervades the novel. Their efforts to
reconstruct their homes, or their refusal to move to Dandakaranya, can be seen as the refugee’s new efforts at legitimization to become citizens of the new country.

Dulalendu Chattopadhyay’s two novels, although written much later is, to a large extent, autobiographical. *Ora Ajo Udavastu* (They are Still Refugees, 1983) and *Shikorheen Manush* (Rootless Humans, 1988) are two texts that describe his own life. As a young boy, he becomes homeless after the death of his father, an East Bengali working in Calcutta. The first novel describes the writer’s personal experiences in the Dhubulia refugee camp and the latter, his struggles in a refugee colony in Garia, a suburb in South Calcutta. *Ora Ajo Udavastu* is set in the year 1950 and describes the life of a middle-class family. Sumit, the eldest, is the protagonist and his widowed mother Sunanda choose to live in the camp so the children can be educated with government aid. The novel revolves around the daily life in the camp, the family’s struggle for survival, and their efforts to get education in the camp school. The camp spaces that the characters occupy, the bazaars, the schools, the fields and pasture lands are carefully described in the text, signifying how these spaces translate into labour that enrich the refugee’s community life: ‘When Sumit came, as a refugee, to the camp it was like a desert, dry and arid. But today it was verdant green. Everywhere he looked he saw houses, buildings, movement of people, as if the camp was alive. It could be said that the refugees, in order to stay alive, had given a new lease of life to the camp as well…’ (196). The small plot of land next to their house is Sunanda’s kitchen garden that supplements her meagre doles. The daily labour of feeding her three children and educating them are given a special status in the text: the mundane and the ordinary are raised to another level of consciousness that forms the basis of Sumit’s memory as he prepares to leave the camp at the end of the text to be rehabilitated in a colony in Garia. The novel however shows nothing of the turmoil of Bengali life outside the camp. The months of 1950s are marked by many popular protests against price rise and unemployment that throw no shadow on the camp inmates. The life within the refugee camp and outside the colony almost does not intermingle except through very passing images. Chattopadhyay’s narrative fails to give depth and resonance to Sumit’s struggle that remains bound by contingencies of individuality. The novel, however, lays bare the after-effects of the Partition on the
daily lives of the camp inmates: the smuggling across borders is possible with the help of a group of young men living in the camp who are eager to supplement the government doles as well as a new sense of insecurity for women living within its walls. Prostitution is rife and women are often raped and molested by camp officials. The novel discusses the rehabilitation plans of Dandakaranya and its effects on the camp inmates: ‘The government decided at this time to rehabilitate refugees in Dandakaranya. The directive was - anyone who refused to go there will no longer receive government help.....will the rootless people continue to face the blows that land on them or will they protest against the new rehabilitation plans?.....Soon, the refugees began to speak a language of rebellion - We will not be sent to Dandakaranya’ (110-111).

Ora Ajo Udvastu is a bildungsroman of a new kind. In the new nation state, growing up refugee in a government camp sets a different paradigm for a novel of realism and this is indicated in the title that has no sense of completion or of an end. Certainly, the novel charts Sumit’s journey from childhood to maturity, from innocence to knowledge but the configurations and milestones of that maturity are different. While out with his friends, Sumit sees a woman being dragged into the nearby jute fields. He is too young to understand the import of what he sees, but very soon he realizes the meaning of that experience: ‘That day Sumit had not understood why the woman had been dragged into the jute field, why she had screamed so loud, or why very soon her voice had become faint like a sleeping human’s. As he grew older, he understood how the scream of that unknown woman had become one with the past wails of many others, hovering through this free world as laments that no one can trace.’ (68) The novel gives a first hand description of a refugee camp that is not quite common in Bangla fiction yet its language is cliched and unimaginative. The novelty of theme does not set off an exploration of image and language. This has contributed to the fact that although the writer uses locality and memory to look at the exegesis of Partition and his novel is ‘a union of history and literature’ these texts have been consigned to oblivion by readers.

Narayan Sanyal (b. 1924) a popular novelist of the 1960s, penned a number of texts on the refugee question notably, *Balmik* (1958), *Aranya Dandak* (1961) and *Bokultala P.L. Camp* (1955). The novels capture the loss of moral values in rootless lives; for people whose existence becomes degrading while living in footpaths, station platforms and slums, morality is a luxury. Of the three novels, the last has a unique place in the Bangla literary canon. It is set in a permanent liability camp around the years 1954-55, but the protagonist is not an inmate but a camp official. The text is structured as a reconstruction of the diaries and letters of Ritobrata Bose, who comes to work in the Bokultala camp, set somewhere on the border of West Bengal and Bihar. Earlier, the camp-site was an army barrack used in the World War II, but the now abandoned barracks are used for a different kind of army: 'A series of trucks unload their passengers in the field in front of the Control building. The guests alight – not army soldiers but soldiers of death. They do not wear khaki, but torn and ragged clothes. Their minds are not suffused with thoughts of victories in battles but are shadowed with the humiliation of defeat in life’s battle: with the horror of their past and the terror of an unknown future! They came in large numbers. Thousands and thousands of refugee families who were the oldest primal foreign inhabitants of the newest nation state!' The reference to the army barracks string together the World War II experiences with that of the Partition, presenting an unbroken continuity of traumatic experiences in Bengal’s social and economic life.

In the uneven tenor of camp life, Ritobrata is also a refugee of sorts, exiled from the pleasures of Calcutta, writing love poetry to an absent girlfriend and bidding his time before he can leave for the city again. Yet he is not unsympathetic to the refugee’s plight. Their sufferings and deprivations give him new insights of what

---


45 We recollect the famous scene in Ritwik Ghatak’s film *Subarnarekha* (1962), the last of his Partition trilogy, where the young children play in an abandoned World War II aerodrome. With the Partition serving as a backdrop, the film is ‘about relational elements like history, war and its aftermath, mass displacement and loss of an old habitat.’ See Somdatta Mandal, ‘Constructing Post-Partition Bengali Cultural Identity Through Films,’ in Anjali Gera Roy and Nandi Bhatia, eds, *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement and Resettlement*, Delhi, 2008, p., 71.
Partition has come to mean to these destitute families. The physical environ of the army barracks, its constricted space in which families live with meager separations of ‘fossils of dorma walls’ leave no space for age old rituals of caste: in the same hall live ‘brahmins, kayasthas, baishyas, baidyas as well as the untouchables.’ (12) The eradication of caste lines is just one of the significant social transformations wrought by the Partition. The camp is an equalizer: everybody is a refugee here. They are also ‘former human beings’ who once ‘laughed, played, earned their livelihoods, spent, saved just like us.’ (18). It is a narrow physical space, eighty feet by twenty, occupied by eight families: ‘Someone was patting a child to sleep, some others were separating the ration rice from stone chips; in another section, cooking was being done on a small open fire.....darkness engulfed the entire hall and made it eerie. Most windows had no frames.....rotting dorma, broken tin sheet, has been piled on the windows. They have to save themselves from the onslaught of rains. But these prevented the entry of light and turned the entire hall into a dark chamber’(36). The eerie darkness is a reflection of the despair that permeates the refugees’ lives, a destruction of their social organization, an inscription of dispossession that permeates the postcolonial moment of liberation. Inside the camp, Ritobrata’s education takes new turns; he is shocked to learn that women from the camp are regularly trafficked; others ply the oldest trade in the nearby rail station. The government doles make the men into a new ‘class of perpetual professional legalized beggars’ a description Ritobrata hears from the Camp Superintendent (60). Ritobrata discovers that the turpitude of the men who prefer to accept dole than to work is reflected in the ways camp life makes them lose all sense of decency and propriety. One day he is witness to a quarrel that breaks out in L/29 barrack. The swear words and crude language he hears makes him ponder on the stark reality of post Partition Bengali society: ‘But these people were not slum dwellers. Among them were educated, civilized people, middleclass and lower middle class.....even some days ago, they belonged to a group in society. They performed puja, listened to kathakatas and panchali songs, sent their children to pathshalas....they were perhaps not all well off, but they had a sense of propriety and decency (59).’ Ritobrata’s assessment of the refugees may be a liberalist dream but

46 The ‘eerieness’ that Manto describes in Toba Tek Singh is a similar enunciatory site: a destruction of language and social organization.
one of the stark effects of the Partition on the refugee lives is an erosion of their sense of self and their human values. The corruption rampant in the Camp is a testimony to that. The camp officials steal, as do the refugees who make false claims for doles.

Although Ritobrata tries his best to perform his duties to eradicate the misery of those under his care, he maintains a distance from them through a sense of superiority. He unwittingly gets involved with a camp inmate, Kamala, but decides never to marry her: ‘How can he take a refugee girl as his wife?....He hoped to spend a few more days here before making his escape’ (132) Ritobrata’s middle class sensibilities that informs his position as protector/provider to the refugees is a patriarchal power structure that Sanyal is careful to replicate from society at large. It is also an indication of what the women inside the camp are up against. Kamala is one of the many women in the camp whose life has been marked forever by the shock of Partition. The traumatic life stories of the refugee women of the camp, Kamala, Kusum and Kamala’s mother, are symbolic of a whole generation of women who were killed, maimed, abducted and remained untraced during the Partition. Their untold stories form a major impetus of this narrative as it tries to unravel the mystery surrounding Kusum or restore Kamala to a life of dignity. Sanyal’s narrative thus operates on two planes: the outward life of the camp is the foundation on which he builds the personal tragedies of the refugee women. They have a stronger presence in the text than the men. Yet the structures of power, patriarchal and social, are not absent from the internal dynamics of camp life. The novel, however, fails to show a contestation of these structures by the women themselves. If power can be subverted, it can only be done by a man, as Ritobrata’s benevolent patriarchal guidance shows. At the same time, rehabilitation is the mode through which this power relation is validated. The daily tasks of giving dole, looking after sick inmates, rebuilding the barracks, supervised by Ritobrata, make us realize the limitations that operate in the very premise of rehabilitation: it is an unequal relationship between the giver and the receiver that replicates and continues existing power structures. Sanyal’s working life has been that of a relief official and he had visited Dandakaranya in 1960. The depiction of his protagonist may or may not have something to do with his own life experiences. However, what is interesting is the way he uses the motif of
rehabilitation in his text. The vision underlying rehabilitation in the novel is one of benevolent state patronage where the abject dependence of the refugees is used against them without going into the dynamics of support and benefaction.

Shaktipada Rajguru’s novel, *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi* (From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi),\(^47\) set in the 1970s, follows a group of camp refugees who are taken to Malkangiri in the Dandakaranya area. The novel opens in Mana transit camp where the camp inmates are people ‘uprooted from far away Bengal and like flotsam and jetsam have stopped at the banks of the infertile Mana’s banks. Twenty years ago they had come, like waves, in the hope of rehabilitation in the soil of Dandakaranya. Some among them, the fortunate ones, got homesteads, but a few thousand families were left behind who were still living within the surrounding areas of the Mana camp.’ (1) Sarat Das, a camp inmate, says, ‘For seven years we have lived on the charity doles….what is the good of reducing us to beggars? Instead of making the entire race beggars, give us land, a little homestead, let us work and earn our keep. In these last years of our lives, let us live as cultivators as we were born. We don’t want to live like beggars.’ The frustrations and aimlessness of the camp life is demeaning to human dignity, saps energy and creates a new class of people, born and raised in the camps who live a ‘life of charity and joblessness in the tents and sheds, in its incipient darkness of frustrations and lethargy.’ (2) The breakdown of familial ties and moral values throw the refugees into a darkness of chaos and disarray. ‘The remembrance of those days on the Sealdah platform, living in huts and going hungry, was etched deeply in Potla’s psyche. Nobody had saved his life; he had done it himself – by begging, stealing, getting kicked around.’ So when his father berates him for stealing and drinking he growls, ‘Don’t you dare. What have you done as a father? The government gives me dole, rations. Who are you?’ (p.13) When the camp storekeeper Khetubabu cajoles Ketaki to spend time with him in exchange for rice and sugar, she tells him, ‘We are like fodder to you all.’ (p.15) This ‘rudderless new class’ ‘who know no ideals, to whom everything has become meaningless’ is the real after-effect of the Partition. Rajguru’s novel is remarkable because, unlike many other tales of

Partition’s trauma and pain from the Punjab where ‘women and poor refugee men seldom tell their own stories....(and) do not author their own history’\textsuperscript{48}, Rajguru’s refugees, pushed out of West Bengal on a chimeral rehabilitation quest, articulate their experiences in their own tongues.\textsuperscript{49} There are no central protagonist/s in this narrative but a host of minor individualized characters who are drawn with real life brush strokes, dealing with real life situations. In that sense, Rajguru’s characters are no victims as they are agents of change and his novel captures the processes of transformation of this group from ordinary refugees to inhabitants and locals of Dandakaranya. Their individual experiences are not condensed into a collective experience although the collective is important in a novel where rehabilitation and resettlement form the discursive principles. This novel then, in more ways than one, recover the lost (his) stories of refugee men and women whose voices have hitherto been absent in any retelling of the Partition in Bengal.

The novel encompasses the reality of the Dandakaranya project in its most significant aspects. The larger plan that did not take into account the ground realities is explicated in the very opening lines of the text. The resettlement plan means clearing of vast primeval forests, building of roads, schools and hospitals and a new life for hundreds of men and women. But it also means a clash between the new arrivals and the local populace: a classic peasant-tribal confrontation over land. The novel is explicit in setting out this simmering discontent.

The Dandakarnya Development Authority reclaimed some areas and let the camp authority know that they were ready for settlers. The camp authority sent some families and completed their responsibilities .....and a new set of refugees came to take their place in the Mana camp in the hope of rehabilitation. The wheel was moving in this manner; from transit camp to the new settlement. But meanwhile some


\textsuperscript{49} Rajguru is careful to depict his characters as lower caste agriculturists who were the last wave to arrive as refugees after Partition. Ties to their land had kept them in East Pakistan till it became impossible for them to stay. For the enormous number of Namasudra peasants of Barisal, Khulna and Jessore, post Partition realities confirmed their inability to shape or influence broader political realities in East Pakistan, so by 1955 trans-border migration of scheduled classes assumed serious proportions. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ‘Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism and Partition in Bengal (1947)’ in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato eds, \textit{The Unfinished Agenda}, p., 190. In the novel they all speak a dialect that is lost in translation.
people realized the real import of things. A new group of politicians realized that Dandakaranya was no longer an inhospitable, difficult mountain terrain. People were living there; schools, hospitals and electric lights have transformed everything. The new arrivals have made the virgin lands fruitful. With central grants, Dandakaranya Development Authority has founded new settlements. This created a new feeling amongst the people who have always lived there. They want a cut of the pie too, and they have started agitating after inciting a few people. "Foreigners Out! They have no place in our land!" was a common slogan. In contrast there is the official nationalist discourse of pioneering work, clearing lands, making them fertile, harnessing wild nature to create a 'new Dandakaranya' and a 'a new nation.' (29)

This sudden and abrupt transformation of indigenous tribal land is of course an effect of the official rehabilitation plans, but instead of the clash between the indigenous population and the new arrivals, Rajguru shows instead the clash of man and nature that becomes the wide background on which the novel unfolds its narrative. In their first night in the new settlement amidst mosquito bites and howling of wild animals, the refugees spend a fearful night. 'The night passed sleeplessly.... For centuries the forestland had lived with its dreams intact. Today's humans stake their claim by completely destroying it.' (34) The feelings of despondence and alienation rife among the refugees vanish as they get to work on their own lands. The men work eight to ten hours to make the barren land of Dandakaranya fertile again. Their relationship to their work and the land they work upon gives a new meaning to their existence, their subjectivity. The novel compels us to ask 'whether it is possible to think about identity and place in more ontological ways, where belonging to a place, to a land, can also be very significant to the ways in which we think and feel our subjectivities, to our own ways of being in the world?'

50 The reason for this may be that the novelist is more interested in showing the cultural inability of the refugees to manipulate the unfamiliar ecological terrain. See A.B. Mukherjee, 'A Cultural Ecological Appraisal of Refugee Resettlement in Modern India,' in L.A. Kosinski and K.M. Elahi, eds, Population Redistribution and Development in South Asia, Jaipur, 1991, p., 102.

51 Priya Kumar, 'Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation' in Tan and Kudaisya, eds, Partition and Post Colonial South Asia, vol., II, p., 326. The cry 'Amra Kara? Bastuhara' that resounded on the lips of the thousands who came to West Bengal is a cry of identity that is historically contingent, yet Priya Kumar's question is a valid way in which identity and belonging can be read in Rajguru's novel; a way in which, particularly for these agriculturists, belonging to a land was their way of being in the world. Land was not just subsistence it was life itself.
Certainly the characters in this novel feel and think that it does. It can be seen in the clash between the older refugees and the young who are attracted to an urban way of life. The dichotomy between expectation and reality is made use of by certain politicians who do not want the refugees resettled in the area. They create a fear psychosis among the settlers by setting fire to their huts or cutting down their ripe corn. In a hostile land, with very little irrigation and water, these added provocations, where the ‘refugees are made to be pawns in a political game’ (74) make Dandakaranya the ‘dark forest’ of the myths in more ways than one. In the novel, the intrepid refugees pack up and leave Dandakaranya. They come to Hasnabad near the Ichhamati River whose one arm flows towards the Sunderbans and the other, taking the name Raimangal, flows past Bangladesh. However, their euphoria is short-lived as Sarat Das and others realize that they are now considered deserters: ‘They had no food, no shelter, nobody was responsible for them. No government cared for them. They were citizens of no country, their names had been deleted from humanity’s book.’ (126) Yet when night falls, ‘the air is laden with the smell of paddy fields and the scent of hasnuhana flowers.... The smell of Bangla’s soil and tune—how long they have been deprived of it.’ (137) The dream of building a home on this soil kindles their tired bodies and lightens all their exhaustions. But when a group of them decide to cross into Sunderbans they realize that all means to cross the river is barred to them. Young Girija realizes that ‘they will never let him go to the Sunderbans. This was a life and a death situation facing them. On one side was a powerful opponent, on the other a few thousand of these helpless unfortunate people. In this wide world there was no space for them.’ (133) The young and the old are now all united, determined to start a life where they can live with dignity, close to the soil. The estuarine delta of the Sunderbans with its mangrove forests is not easy to cultivate. The forests are thick with tigers and the rivers with crocodiles. Yet nothing can deter these men and women. The administration stops all boats that can carry the refugees but the men snatch a few and set sail.

The novel comes to an end when the settlement in Marichjhapi is attacked and destroyed by the police in 1979. The narrative ends with a stark message: a true

52 Contemporary newspaper articles went into an overdrive trying to extol the virtues of Dandakaranya, an area associated with Ram’s banishment in the epic Ramayana. The report of Amrit Bazar Patrika, 18 June 1957 carried a headline that stated that Dandakaranya was now in ‘public attention’ because ‘the legendary lore’s forest fringed soil’ would be a new ‘Haven for 1.9 million DP’s.’
history of what actually happened in Marichjhapi is yet to be written. The lower caste refugees, who die in the police firing, are expendable, their names forgotten and their memories erased. History has not taken up the arduous task of writing about them.

They have no more strength to fight. So much pain, bloody days of hunger and death have depleted all their strength. History has never written this story of facing impossible odds, of fighting to the bitter end with their lifeblood. All the words that would have described their lives will be lost, may be, it will be written one day from another distorted standpoint. But in the eternal story of humankind’s struggle this story will be written again and again. The love of life of these refugees and their struggles will remain etched in that history forever….but today they have been defeated. They have lost their all. (185)

In the history of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal, the name Marichjhapi is almost a forgotten chapter. Few people talk of it, even fewer have written about it, while discussions about it by historians have also been negligible. The reason for this can be seen in the presence of a large percentage of marginal communities and lower castes among the refugees who came to Marichjhapi for whom the elitist Congress ministers at the Centre had little sympathy, nor did the urban middleclass of Calcutta. The tragedy was that when a Communist government came to power in West Bengal, the characteristic of the nation state did not change. In 1977, with the Left Front government in power, the refugees who had been rehabilitated in Dandakaranya became hopeful that the new popular government who had always

53 Discussions about Marichjhapi in Indian Partition Studies are few with the exception of writings by Nilanjana Chatterjee, Ross Mallick and Annu Jalais. In Bangla, there are some writings, newspaper articles as well as essays that have been collected in a recent volume. See Madhumay Pal, ed., Marichjhapi: Chinna Desh, Chinna Itihas, Calcutta, 2009. The recent debacle of the Left Front Government in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls has made Marichjhapi come back in public memory. In Bangla, apart from newspaper reports, the best introduction to the subject still remains a book by Jagdishchandra Mandal whose Marichjhapi: Naishabder Antaraley, Calcutta, 2002 remains the most prolific account of the massacre. Where history failed, literature has been ample in its act of witnessing. Poets Subhash Mukhopadhyaya and Shankho Ghosh have written poems on Dandak. I have quoted from a poem by Subhash Mukhopadhyay at the beginning of the chapter. Shonkho Ghosh’s ‘Tumi Aar Nei Se Tumi’ and ‘Ultorath’ are two memorable poems on the refugees in Dandakaranya. Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novel Purbo Paschim, Calcutta, 1988, also talks of Marichjhapi but not in such telling details. Hareet Mondol, an underclass Partition migrant travels through various camps like Coopers’ Camp; is then pushed out to a camp in Charbetia and then to Marichjhapi, but his destination following the massacre remains unclear. See also Gangopadhyay’s brilliant story ‘Puri Expresser Rakkhita’ in Debesh Roy, ed., Roktomonir Harey: Deshbhag-Swadhinatar Golpo Shankolon, Delhi, 1999, pp. 334-352. Amitabh Ghosh’s novel The Hungry Tide, Delhi, 2004 has given Marichjhapi a representational space in the English-speaking world, so that other, older narratives are pushed to the background. Rajguru’s novel has been out of print for many years and has just seen a reprint in 2008.
espoused the refugee cause would now help them come back to West Bengal. The Left Front Minister Ram Chatterjee 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. ‘How many days did we eat a full meal in Dandak? We spent twenty years like that. Can’t we manage three months more? But I am no longer a refugee, my bastuhara title is at an end’ said the 55 year old Ratish Mondol who left for Marichjhapi to begin a new life. But Left Front policies had changed under the altered circumstances of governance. It was also acknowledged that the refugees in Dandakaranya, (under the organization of Udhvastu Unnyanshil Samiti) had refused to be a part of UCRC, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) refugee organization, since they felt that the refugee problem was a national problem, so their identity must not be part of any political group. The CPM in turn was miffed at the thought that their dream of getting electoral advantages in states like Orissa and Madhya Pradesh with a large refugee electorate might become redundant. The new Left Front government in West Bengal, that had come to power with the refugee vote, now urged these people to go back to Dandakaranya, refusing to entertain their demand of settling in West Bengal. Many refugees were sent back but around 10,000 Namasudra refugee families under the leadership of Satish Mandal, president of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti, set sail and settled in Marichjhapi. Although it was not an island that was strictly under the mangroves, the government was in no mood to relent. It declared Marichjhapi as a reserve forest and the refugees as violating the Forest Acts who were destroying ‘the existing and potential forest

54 Interviewed by Jyotirmoy Dutta, reprinted in M. Pal, Marichjhapi, ibid., p., 63.
55 There seems to be some dispute about the exact number of people who managed to settle in Marichjhapi but it can be any where 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: 1, 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. See Pannalal Dasgupta, ‘Opération Marichjhapi,’ reprinted in M. Pal, ed., Marichjhapi, ibid., p.,168.
wealth and also creating ecological imbalance. 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 hundreds 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. The silence surrounding Marichjhapi’s massacres was to continue for some time except stray efforts that tried to expose the lies, deceit and betrayals that came to signify Marichjhapi. Rajguru’s novel is the only fictional work that talks of Marichjhapi with such candour. That makes it exceptional given the silence that has surrounded Marichjhapi.

Certainly, Partition’s violent uprooting of a whole people engendered other ways of representation, a playing with the form of the literary text or the visual text of the cinema and there are many examples of that from the Indian subcontinent. But the question that comes to mind is whether Rajguru’s text employs new techniques of representations that differ from other Partition novels? Does Rajguru make a new and radical departure in the accepted narrative ideology of Bangla novels not only in his subject matter but also in his treatment? The answer to both the questions is ‘yes.’ This novel has a large canvas and the incidents and characters cannot be summarized but one can sketch a few of its salient features. In the novel, characters like Nishikanto, Kalu, Girija, Potla as well as the women like Ketaki and Lalita are sharply etched individuals. Their suffering and hardships are described without sentimentality, without melodrama. Rajguru’s novel is extraordinary because, unlike many other tales of Partition’s trauma and pain from the Punjab where women and

---

poor refugee men seldom tell their own stories and who appear as part of a crowd, this novel tells the refugee’s story as one of individuals who exist in their own right. We have, in the text, men and women who speak in their own voices and their voices are those of the marginalized and the poor. Much of Bengal’s Partition’s narratives, except a few, are from the lips of middle class men and women. So Rajguru’s text is a departure in the narrative practices of the times. In his novel, the displaced men and women are given an agency that is remarkable. They are not objectified as ‘victims’ in the statistical demographic paradigms of the nation state but are seen as players in the progressive life of a community. The novel celebrates their struggles as well as their humanity. In that sense, Rajguru’s novel captures the processes of transformation of a group of ordinary refugees to inhabitants and locals of Dandakaranya and later of Marichjhapi. These men and women are presented as individuals who are capable of changing their status of refugee-hood into meaningful choices of livelihood and places of sojourn. Rajguru’s depiction of the refugees in Dandak is very different from Narayan Sanyal’s, especially in the implications of rehabilitation they set out in their texts. In *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi*, the efforts of the Namasudra refugees to change their status and their lives are a contrast to the abject dependence of the middle-class inmates at Bokultala. The former forcibly take up means to set up a commune in Marichjhapi and transform, through their labour and political will, the discourse of refugee rehabilitation in post Partition India while the latter are shown trapped in apathy. In some ways then, Sanyal replicates the Rehabilitation Ministry discourses about the *purbo bongiyo* refugees. The difference in the time of composition may be the cause: Rajguru’s text, written in 1980, was composed exactly after a decade of the traumatically tragic Naxalbari uprising that took the young of Calcutta by the storm, many of them from refugee backgrounds. For the next few years, Calcutta would turn into a battleground. By the time Emergency was proclaimed in 1975 by Indira Gandhi, the Naxal movement had petered out. When the CPI (M) came back to power to form the Left Front, euphoria was high, but then Marichjhapi happened. Rajguru’s novel is written in a time of assessment, after the violence is over: it takes stock of not only the tragic happenings at Marichjhapi but even further beyond to search out the violence that lives at the heart of the nation state.