

Chapter- IV

**Revisiting the Dandakaranya and the
Marichjhapi Issue**

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As time rolled on the displaced Bengali Hindus started pouring into West Bengal in ever increasing number. Thus, the West Bengal Government simply claimed that it did not have the required vacant land to accommodate more refugees.¹ At the same time there was no sign of stopping the influx of the refugees from East Bengal. Accordingly, the Government of West Bengal advanced the 'saturation theory' according to which it was no longer in a position to receive and resettle any fresh batch of displaced person from East Bengal.² Thus, the policy of the Government to send the refugees outside of West Bengal was 'based on the logic that the state had reached the saturation point in respect of refugees.'³ Furthermore, the Government of West Bengal held that the refugees were not its sole responsibility rather ought to be shared with those of the neighboring states within the Indian federal system. Accordingly, in early 1956 a conference of the Rehabilitation Ministers was convened at the instance of the Government where it was officially announced that henceforth only those refugees would get State's help and relief who were willing to move outside West Bengal for resettlement. Accordingly, a high level committee was set up to report on the practicability of the land colonization schemes beyond the periphery of West Bengal for the rehabilitation of the Bengali Refugees. This committee submitted its report in 1957 and the National Development Council accepted its recommendations in the month of June of that year. As a consequence, the Dandakaranya⁴ Development Authority (henceforth DDA) came into being on 12th September 1958.⁵ DDA was an autonomous body and the issue of the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees was totally left up to it. The Dandakaranya plan got an area of 78,000 square miles consisting of the Districts of Koraput and Kalahandi in Orissa and the District of Bastar in Madhyapradesh.⁶ The cost of the Dandakaranya Project was 100 crores of which 23 crores went to administrative costs.⁷ However, to the refugees Rs. 100 crores Dandakaranya Project was one of disbeliefs as they suffered too long and too much in the camps in and outside West Bengal.⁸

Dandakaranya lies in a low plateau ranging from six hundred to three thousand feet above the sea level where the soil was arid and infertile and was thickly forested. Previously there had been no settled population at all. Its indigenous population is predominantly

nomads, mainly Gond forest people. Though extreme backwardness was the characteristic of this region yet it was full of forest produce and unexplored mineral resources. Mahanadi and Godavari are the main rivers which criss-cross it and flow through the northern and southern part of the region respectively. Both of these two rivers are perennial and a little amount of their water is utilized for the purpose of irrigation. Because of the poor communication system and the self-sufficient characteristic of the tribal inhabitants of this region, Dandakaranya had remained isolated from the rest of the country. Besides, it has a hot and humid climate as it lies within the tropics. The one hundred days spanning from June to September receives over 80% of the mean annual rainfall or about sixty to eighty inches and this uneven rainfall makes all the agricultural activities dependent upon the uncertain monsoon. The brooks and streams in the locality are seasonal and go dry as soon as the rain is over. There is an acute crisis of the underground water resources in this region. Furthermore, the porous soil contains a small content of clay and thus lacking in plant nutrients and ceases it to sustain double cropping.⁹ In spite of these unpromising physical features what encouraged the planners to select this region for the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees was the availability of the vast tract of the virgin land and the low density of the population in the Dandakaranya region.

However, the person who first thought about the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees in the Dandakaranya region was Sriramurti, the Chief Secretary of the Madras Government. After having retirement he was appointed as the 'Planning Commissioner' of the Central Government. Once, he was going to Delhi from Madras and by then he took notice of the place from the flight. He thought about the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees there and conveyed the plan to the Central Government. The Central Government accepted the plan and readily asked him to make a draft of the Planning. Accordingly, the Dandakaranya Project came into being.

For the rehabilitation of the refugees, the DDA, as per the recommendation of the Central Government, claimed the required land from the Government of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The total amount of land claimed by the DDA for the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees was 2, 11,377 acres; 1, 50,656 acres from Orissa and 60,721 acres from Madhya Pradesh. And the land released by those States during 1960-62 was as under: ¹⁰

Districts	Zones	Land in acres
Orissa	Umorkot Zone	20,392 acres
	Roygarh Zone	27,376 acres
	Malkangiri Zone	43,884 acres
Madhya Pradesh	Parulkot	55,279 acres
	Pharasgaon	4,930 acres
	Jamri	3,455 acres
Total	6	1,55,316 acres

Out of these released lands 1, 29,400 acres were found to be suitable for agriculture. Ultimately, 1, 10, 330 acres of land were fully reclaimed where 217 new villages for displaced persons and 61 villages for the Adivasis were established.¹¹

The first batch of settlers was sent in February, 1959.¹² The refugees were sent to Raipur from various relief camps of West Bengal and Bihar by a special train, from Raipur they were sent to Mana Transit Camp and then to the work-site camps. They were deployed there as labourers for building roads, reclaiming the unrewarding lands for cultivation. Ultimately, from the worksite camp they were taken to the villages for 'permanent settlement.' By the end of February 1960, 1,631 refugee families reached Dandakaranya¹³ and by 1965 over 7,500 refugee families started residing there. The landscape of this region was transformed by these developments, as an official account expressed:

'Modernism came with a bang and a clatter into this vastness. Monstrous engines roared into the jungle, ripping up earth, splintering giant trees that had defied a thousand storms as if they were match wood. The beast of the forest fled helter shelter, and the sleepy inhabitants of the villages snuggling among the clearings rubbed their eyes in wonder. What new breed of demons was these creatures belching smoke, filling the sky with their clamour?'¹⁴

Normally, fifty to hundred families were accommodated in a village and each village had two to four tube wells, deep masonry wells, a tank for bathing and for providing drinking water to cattle, a headwater tank for retting of Mesta, internal and approach roads and a Primary School for children. In the 217 villages established for the displaced persons, 849 tube wells, 200 masonry wells, 146 village tanks and 103 headwater tanks were completed. Besides, 4 tube wells, 46 masonry wells, 11 village tanks and 46 headwater tanks were in progress. Furthermore, 191 miles of main roads, 297 miles of link roads and 144 miles of roads connecting tribal settlements had been completed and 6 hospitals, 12 Primary Health Centres, Dispensaries and Mobile Medical Units, 192 Primary Schools, 9 Middle Schools and one High School and one Industrial Training Institute had been set up.¹⁵

By 1973 about 25,209 refugee families were moved to Dandakaranya and were settled in 300 new villages but out of them 7,992 refugee families returned to West Bengal being failed to be adapted to the new environment.¹⁶ Again out of these 17,217 families, who stayed back, 16,197 households took up agriculture as their occupation and 1,020 refugee families were engaged in non-agricultural occupations. By the early 1970s, 302 villages with 10,750 houses came into existence there and 1,600 houses were being built. In total 462 kilometers of main road, 669 kilometers of link road had been constructed and the total amount spent on the project was calculated Rs. 53.70 crores.¹⁷ In all 42,000 refugee families consisting of almost 2,25,000¹⁸ refugees were moved to Dandakaranya and most of them belonged to the Namasudra and Pundra Kshatriya communities with the profession of agriculture and fishery.

The first place where the refugees were given rehabilitation was Pharasgaon Zone. Here in 1959, 251 refugee families were resettled in the three villages. Of these refugees 205 refugee families were engaged in agriculture and 46 refugee families engaged in the small industry. And the second places where the refugees were given resettlement were at Umorkot and Raigarh. At Umorkot 1,240 refugee families were resettled and 2,546 refugee families were resettled at Raigarh. After Umorkot, Parolkot region of Madhya Pradesh experienced the resettlement of the refugees. By 1964, 2,239 refugee families were resettled there in all 45 villages. The Malkangiri region was established at last and here in 1964, 1,023 refugee families were resettled in 23 newly established villages. There was no such road here that could maintain communication among these villages.¹⁹

When the refugees finally reached the villages, 5.5 acres of agricultural land was allotted to an agriculturist family and in irrigated areas 4.5 acres would be allotted. Besides, a homestead plot of 800 sq. yards and 0.5 acres of horticultural land around the homestead plot were also allotted.²⁰ But there is a difference of opinion regarding the amount of land provided to the refugees there. Saibal Kumar Gupta who was the chairman of the DDA till September 10, 1964 expressed that from the time of Sukumar Sen it was fixed that each refugee family would get 6.5 acres of land for cultivation and 0.5 acres of land for homestead and gardening. Later on, each family was given 5 acres of land in total. Subsequently, it was decided that those refugees who were settled in such land where the water for irrigation was supposed to be available, given 3 acres of land to each family.²¹ Luthra's report however, expressed that each refugee family had been given only 4 acres of un-irrigated land or 3 acres of irrigated land.²² Besides, each refugee family was distributed loans of Rs.1, 700 for house building, Rs. 1,015 for purchasing bullocks and implements and Rs. 150 for digging well.²³ Furthermore, it was fixed that the agriculturist refugees would be given doles for three years while the non-agriculturist refugees were supposed to get it for three months.²⁴

The Dandakaranya Project was conceived as a long term solution to the rehabilitation problem of the Bengali refugees. And when by 1965 a significant progress had been done in attaining the project targets, the West Bengal leadership became hopeful thinking that at last a solution to the refugee problem was seemingly in sight.²⁵ But very soon their hopes dashed with the disaster when the refugees started deserting the Dandakaranya region.

The Dandakaranya Project could not attain its desired success. The Primary Report of the Sixth Planning Commission expressed that till date, 42,213 refugee families came to Dandakaranya and of them 30,159 refugee families got resettlement. Among these resettled refugees 8,836 refugees fled the resettlement site and the refugees who were waiting in the camp for resettlement, numbered nearly 12,000, of those 7,075 refugee families abandoned the camp and went away. The account mentioned below will reveal that when and from where the refugee families had left:²⁶

The last three months of the year 1965 witnessed the desertion of the 1400 refugees, of these 163 refugees fled from camps. The number of refugees fled from Umorkot was 256; 957 refugees fled from Malkangiri, and the number of refugees fled from Kandagaon and Parolkot was few and far between. The number of absconder in the second quarter of 1966

was 2,170; of these 233 refugees fled from the camp, 384 refugees fled from Umorkot and 1,482 refugees fled from Malkangiri. This time also the number of absconder from Kandagaon and Parolkot was negligible. In the first three month of 1967 in all 373 refugees absconded from the project site. However, from Umorkot 123 and 189 refugee families fled from Malkangiri.²⁷ In the same way, between 1966 and 1972, 1,600 and between 1972 and 1978 another 10,923 refugee families deserted the site and made their journey towards West Bengal.²⁸ And from 1965 to 1978 following refugee families were reported to have deserted the transit camp and rehabilitation sites:²⁹

Year	Number of families deserted
1965	1039
1966	1865
1967	581
1968	77
1969	169
1970	501
1971	103
1972	3465
1973	242
1974	149
1975	236
1976	71
1977	209
1978	10,329

But why did the project meet with such failure? A thorough enquiry into the subject may provide us with the desired answer. The notable characteristic of the Bengali refugees was that they were very much conscious about their culture and wherever they settled they remained very much rooted to their language and culture. As Chakrabarti observed that the Bengalis were the first to come into close contact with the British thereby of English Language. With the expansion of the British power the Bengalis followed the British into their newly conquered territories and acted as a native professional class in these territories. They had no thought of coming back to Bengal yet they tended to become a self-sufficient community with rigid mores which kept them aloof from the people in their areas of settlement. They nourished their language, literature and distinctive religion and the characteristic of a Bengali settlement in India is a Kali temple and a Bengali literary society. Thus, the Bengalis like the Jews have a deep seated nostalgia in their mental set up obsessed by the idea of final home coming to take rest on the lap of the mother.³⁰

The immigrant Bengalis never accepted their final break-up with the mother country. Thus the acute unwillingness of the Bengali refugees to leave West Bengal for uncongenial Bihar, Orissa and Dandakaranya can be explained, to a great extent, by a lively trepidation of the possible loss of their identity as a distinct cultural group. In this regard, it may reasonably be assumed that those Hindus who left East Pakistan and took shelter in the different parts of India especially in West Bengal were either politically conscious or very much particular about their own culture and tradition. There must have been some economic migrants but their number was few and far between. In this connection, it would not be inconsistent to mention here that once Dr. Kailash Nath Katju, the then Governor of West Bengal, and Hironmay Bandyopadhyay, District Magistrate of 24 Parganas and later on was in charge of Rehabilitation Commissioner, West Bengal, went to visit a squatters' colony, the squatters not only gave them heart-felt welcome but also made some arrangements for their entertainment through their cultural creativities. The small boys and the girls of the squatters presented songs, poetry recitation through their own language. Both Dr. Katju and Bandyopadhyay were highly impressed.³¹ The refugees who had raised their huts in the unauthorized occupation of land were definitely poor as they did not have the capacity to purchase land. In spite of it, the above mentioned incident was a proof that they had a deep passion for their culture, tradition and religion. Another instance of their close cultural attachment is that they had kept the name of the colonies after the name of various freedom fighters.

It is beyond doubt that a handsome amount of money was spent for the Dandakaranya Project. But at the time of the preparation of the plan the planners might have kept their good sense in the cold storage. They simply forgot that the Bengali Hindu refugees had abandoned their hearth and homes in order to save their culture, tradition, religion and above all the chastity of their women folk which were under question mark in East Pakistan. Thus, the United Central Refugee Council, the organization of the refugees, was against the sending of the refugees outside of West Bengal. Ultimately, it placed some conditions before the Government and demanded that the rehabilitation outside West Bengal should be in areas contiguous to West Bengal and the refugees should be provided with full opportunities to develop their life in their area of resettlement in their own way.³²

Right from the beginning of the project the refugees were very much reluctant to go to Dandakaranya. A study put forwards that-

‘the Bengali farmers, less mobile and more deeply anchored in the unique ecological setting of their deltaic homeland, perceived the distances involved as a great deterrent. Since the initial stage they had a little desire to move into the ecologically contrasted territory of peninsular India to reconstruct their life there.’³³

Besides, the continuous campaign of the Left Front leaders who urged the unwilling refugees not to go out of West Bengal but to start agitation demanding their resettlement had also hampered the refugees to move to Dandakaranya. As Calcutta witnessed a dense concentration of the refugees and the UCRC leaders who were mostly from the Left Front Parties took up the cause of the refugees very strongly and under their strong support the refugees, in many cases, established squatters’ colonies in the unauthorized occupation of land, started resistance movement against stopping of doles and the closure of the camps by the Government. The Left Front leaders like Jyoti Basu, Mr. Pramod Dasgupta, Mr. Radhikamohan Banerjee and others strongly opposed the decision of sending the unwilling refugees to Dandakaranya and insisted on rehabilitating them in West Bengal. On 13th July 1961 Shri Jyoti Basu wrote a letter to the State Rehabilitation Minister Sri P.C. Sen on the rehabilitation of the camp refugees. The letter³⁴ was as under:

Letter of Shri Jyoti Basu to the State Rehabilitation Minister on the rehabilitation of the camp refugees.

Sri P. C. Sen

July 13, 1961

Minster, Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation,

Government of West Bengal

Dear Sri Sen,

Prolonged hunger- strikes by the refugees lasting for more than a month in almost all camps in West Bengal has proved beyond doubt strong reluctance on the part of the refugees to accept the proposal of the Government regarding their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. As a matter of the fact, there has been no movement of refugees to Dandakaranya though they have been put to serious hardships and untold sufferings due to stoppage of doles. For more than a month refugees in almost all the camps have been on hunger strikes to voice their protest. It is unlikely that there will be a change in the attitude of the camp refugees if they are subjected to further hardships and sufferings. Such experiment was also fraught with serious consequences. Left to their own fate these camp families will hardly be able to rehabilitate themselves properly and will be a burden on the state. I, therefore, urge upon you to reconsider the policy of the Government in respect of the rehabilitation of the camp refugees to prevent the further deterioration in the situation.

The primary issues involved now is not continuation of doles to camp refugees for an unlimited period but their early rehabilitation and restoration of doles till that is achieved. We do not think that the rehabilitation of camp refugees in a manner acceptable to them is so very difficult as is often being suggested by the Government. For example, the families now in Sonarpur Group of camps may be easily fitted in Herobhanga Second Scheme. Families now in Asrafabad Group of camps may also be absorbed in the camp site which is an abandoned rehabilitation colony, the land of which is already in possession of the Government and in Ashoknagar Colony if the families are given facility of changing their category. Cooper's Camp can be liquidated in its present site if the Government implements the present scheme of converting that into a township with some modifications. Families now in Gopalpur and Kaksa camps in the district of Burdwan may also be partially absorbed in Durgapur Industrial area and partially in land elsewhere. Families now in the camps in the District of Midnapore may be rehabilitated in Garbeta Scheme. Such illustration may be multiplied. If the refugees are given the due facility for rehabilitation through bainanama scheme as well as change of occupational category in addition to the measures suggested above the rehabilitation of all families is now in camps may be completed within a very reasonable period and with much less cost than in places outside West Bengal. The number of such families is now almost half of what it was earlier and many have found rehabilitation in West Bengal although it was stated by the Government that West Bengal has reached a situation point. I feel therefore, that the rest may be found rehabilitation here provided there is willingness on the part of the Government. The enthusiasm that will be generated among the refugees if such

a policy is accepted will be no mean an asset for their proper rehabilitation. It is needless to dwell upon the necessity of restoration and continuation of doles during the period prior to their rehabilitation.

It has been made clear from our side times without number that despite the policy set out above for rehabilitation in West Bengal, there may be families who may be willing to go to Dandakaranya and we do not object to their going.

My views on the problems have been briefly outlined in the previous paragraphs. I believe that there is a scope for discussion on the matter for finding a proper solution to it. I am, however, going abroad for a short period, I shall try to meet you later when I come back. But in the mean time I request you to have discussion with the representatives of U. C. R.C., who will seek interview with you.

Yours sincerely

Sd. Jyoti Basu

Samar Mukherjee, CPM leader and erstwhile General Secretary of All India Council of East Pakistan Displaced Persons also despatched a letter to Pandit Nehru on 27th July, 1961 on the rehabilitation of camp refugees. His letter³⁵ goes as under:

Ref.No.24/61

27thJuly1961

From: Shri Samar Mukherjee , M.L.A.,

General Secretary, All India Council of East Pakistan Displaced Persons,

93/1 A, Bipin Behari Ganguli Street.Calcutta-12

To: Shri Jawharlal Nehru

Prime Minister of India,

New Delhi

Sub: Rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees now in Camp.

Sir,

1. A grave situation has developed due to continued hunger-strike by groups of refugees in almost all the camps in West Bengal. The hunger strike was first started by two batches of refugees of Kalabani and Sarasanka camps in the district of Midnapore on 6th June last. Since then it has spread to almost all the camps and at present there are about 100 refugees on hunger strikes in different camps.

2. We do not propose to deal with the various problems of other sections of refugees which are nonetheless acute. We like to restrict us here only to the problems of the camp refugees because their solution brooks no further delay.
3. The hunger strike by the camp refugees was started as a mark of protest against the measures of the Government to send them to Dandakaranya against their will and under compulsion by service of notice on them with the option of going to Dandakaranya or to quit the camp within a period of 30 days. It is far from truth that the purpose of the present movement is to continue payment of doles eternally and to delay the liquidation of camps. On the contrary, the main aspect of the present movement is for the demand of their quick rehabilitation in different schemes started or proposed in West Bengal by the Government and through *bainanama* scheme together with the facility of changing their occupational category.
4. Such demands by refugees are not only realistic but also can be implemented within a very reasonable period and at a cost lower than that four schemes outside West Bengal. This will be borne out by the following illustrations. There are about 1000 families now in Sonarpur Group of camps. All these families may be rehabilitated in Herobhanga 2nd scheme which was announced by the Govt. long ago but has not yet been implemented for reasons best known to them. About 600 families of Asrafiabad Camp may be rehabilitated at the present site of the camp which is the site of an unsuccessful rehabilitation Colony as well as in the nearby of Aahoknagar Colony where a large number of plots are lying vacant. Cooper's Camp may be liquidated in its present site if the Government implements the proposed scheme of converting the camp into a township with some modification. Families now in Gopalpur and Kaksa Camps in the district of Burdwan may be absorbed in Durgapur Industrial area. Families now in the camps of Midnapore District may be rehabilitated in Garbeta Scheme where it was proposed to accommodate 1500 families. But only 350 families have been sent there until now. It will not be out of place to mention that in reply to a memorandum submitted in 1958 the West Bengal Government said that about 13,000 families be settled on fallow lands in Garbeta. Such illustrations may be multiplied without any difficulty. We can dare say that if the refugees are given due facility for rehabilitation through *bainanama* scheme together with the facility for change of category in addition to the measures stated above their rehabilitation in a manner acceptable to them will not prove so difficult as is often suggested by the Government. It should also be mentioned here that the West Bengal Government stated in 1959 that of the 39,000 *bainanamas* executed by the camp refugees 21 thousand would be implemented. But not more than 50% of those have been implemented. These along with other measures were suggested to the state Government long ago. If these were adopted in time the camps would have been liquidated long ago and the present undesirable situation would neither have arisen nor the question of rehabilitation of camp refugees in Dandakaranya.
5. It should also be made clear that despite such a policy there might be families who may like to go to Dandakaranya. There can be no objection to that. It will thus be clear that the present movement has nothing to do with opposition to Dandakaranya Project as a whole. The movement only opposes sending refugees to Dandakaranya against their will when there is sufficient scope for their rehabilitation in West Bengal in a manner desired by them. It should also be mentioned here that

the Chief Minister of West Bengal as well as the Governor of the state gave assurances in categorical terms that no refugee will be sent outside West Bengal against his will.

6. It will be seen that the coercive methods adopted by the Government for sending refugees to Dandakaranya have failed in as much as only 5% of families served with notices have gone to Dandakaranya. A stalemate has reached in respect of rehabilitation of camp refugees. Any further experiment with such a policy is fraught with serious consequences. Left to their own fate these camp families will be hardly able to rehabilitate themselves properly and will ultimately be a burden on the meagre resources of the State. A rethinking of the whole question has, therefore, been necessary both for the proper solution of the problem and on human considerations.
7. It is high time that you should intervene immediately into the matter to prevent further deterioration in the situation which will result in loss of life of few refugees and untold sufferings to many others as well as for a satisfactory solution of the problem.

Yours faithfully

Sd. Samar Mukherjee

However, the Communist factor was not the sole reason that encouraged the refugees not to go to Dandakaranya. Rather it was just one of the many causes that acted in the refugees' unwillingness to go outside West Bengal. As noted earlier, instead of it, the cause of their reluctance to go to Dadakaranya lay in the mental set up of these displaced persons.

It was mostly the Namasudra Hindus who were sent to Dandakaranya for their resettlement and these groups of the refugees entered West Bengal in the mid 1950s and the early 1960s. On the eve of their displacement they were 'in a hopeless and hapless situation ...they are dehumanized, demoralized and degenerated human beings, having been denied the right of citizenship and elementary human rights to live a peaceful social life...worries are writ large on their faces.'³⁶ They entered India to save themselves, their culture and religion, not to destroy all these. It is recorded that a considerable number of them entered West Bengal by train and when the trains used to leave the boundary of East Pakistan and enter into West Bengal the women refugees would blow conch shells or simply make *Joker*³⁷ that indicated that they had ultimately succeeded in entering the kingdom of freedom. But when they were asked to go to Dandakaranya they discovered a sign of losing their freedom for second time. Thus, it was obvious on their part to express such reluctance to go there as Dandakaranya had a different geographical and cultural feature than that of the both parts of Bengal. However, the role of Udvastu Unnayanshil Samity cannot be overlooked in this regard. The Samity came into existence in 1973 in the

Mana Transit Camp. It played an important role behind the desertion of the refugees from rehabilitation sites and their re-arrival in West Bengal. There were some struggling members in the Samity whose aim was to bring the refugees in the Sundarban region and make arrangement for their rehabilitation there. From 1974 some sorts of excitement made its presence in the various transit camps in Mana. On 23 January, 1974 the refugees of Mana, Manabhata, Baroda, Naogaon, Kurud Camps started a 101 day relay hunger strikes under the leadership of UUS on five point demands. The demands³⁸ were:

- (a) Rehabilitation in Bengal (West Bengal) or here (Dandakaranya) through industrialization;
- (b) *Dole* should be provided up to three years from the date of rehabilitation;
- (c) The amount of *dole* ration should be increased;
- (d) Civil administration instead of military administration;
- (e) The rehabilitation sites should be shown before giving rehabilitation.

In 1974 a second boycott was under taken by the refugees against their dispersal resulted in deaths due to police firing. Three refugees were killed.³⁹ In the beginning of 1975, Ram Chatterjee of Forward Block (M) delivered a speech in the Kurud Camp in Mana and was said to have inspired the refugees to settle in the Sundarban region.⁴⁰ However, Ram Chatterjee expressed in the Legislative Assembly that he did not tell the refugees to come back to Sundarban. He told that he forbade the Congress Government not to send the refugees to such a distant place. The refugees were living there with great difficulty and in order to remove their difficulties he asked them to carry on struggle against the Central Government.⁴¹ During this time, the Central Rehabilitation Minister wrote to the State Rehabilitation Minister informing the role of 'Udbastu Unnayanshil Samity'. He further mentioned in his letter that now the rehabilitation Minister of West Bengal should come to visit Dandakaranya. And it should be communicated to the refugees that there was no such plan on the part of the Government of West Bengal for giving rehabilitation within West Bengal. In the Months of January and again in April 1975, the Chairman of the DDA visited Mana Transit Camp and on behalf of the State Government of West Bengal made them aware that the State Government had no plan of giving rehabilitation in the Sundarban region.⁴² In the month of May (from 16th to 18th May) 1975 the UUS held a meeting at Mana where among the other programmes, the issue of rehabilitation in the Sundarban region got importance. In the same year, the Organization took decision to start

a national movement for the resettlement of the refugees in the Sundarban area of West Bengal instead of rehabilitating them in Dandakaranya Project area. The Organization put out a hand bill that expressed:

In May, representatives of Mana Udvastu Unnayanshil Samity went by launch from Hasanaabad to Marichjhapi in Gosaba police station. Opposite this 125 square miles sand bank rising out of the sea is a 100 year old village. The people of the village told them that the tide did not rise above 5 feet. If we could have erected dykes 5 feet high to hold out the salt water and lived here for 100 years, why can't you? There is great potential for fishing. It would be possible for 16,000 families from Mana to settle just on the island, and nearby at Dutta Pasur another 30,000.⁴³

In such a situation, the rape of a refugee girl by the CRP in June 1975 made the situation more complex and the refugees raised voices shouting – '*Chalo Kolkata, chalo Bangla, chalo Sundarban*'⁴⁴ (Lets go to Calcutta, Bengal, Sundarban). However, the Government of West Bengal published a 'press note' on 13-06-1975 and informed the refugees of Mana that the State Government did not have any plan of giving rehabilitation in Sundarban to the refugees staying at Mana or the different refugee camps of West Bengal. And they were requested not to fall in the trap of any provocation.⁴⁵ But the refugees did not pay heed to the appeal and they along with some of the leaders of the UUS made a journey towards West Bengal. From 17th June 1975 to 25th June 1975 nearly 17,000 refugees left for West Bengal. But the incoming refugees along with their respective leaders were arrested and sent back to Dandakaranya. However, when the refugee leaders were released from jail they promptly made communication with the refugees and thus the issue of coming to Sundarban again got a new impetus.

In 1977, the Chairman of the DDA came to Calcutta and asked the then Rehabilitation Minister and the Chief Minister of West Bengal about the rehabilitation of the refugees in the Sundarban region, the Chief Minister in clear words informed him that there was no question of giving rehabilitation in the Sundarban region anew.⁴⁶ Thus, the Chief Minister made a request to the refugees not to come to West Bengal leaving Dandakaranya. The Rehabilitation Department of the Government of India also expressed a written petition requesting the refugees not to abandon the rehabilitation sites in Dandakaranya. The representatives of 25 different political parties went to the refugee villages and tried to make them understand not to leave the rehabilitation sites. The Chief Minister of West Bengal and the Commissioner of Rehabilitation Department of West Bengal went to Dandakaranya and talked with the refugees. At the same time, two Ministers of the

Government of West Bengal, six M.L.As and two non-Government members selected by the Government went to Dandakaranya and talked with refugees by travelling various refugee villages from 21st-25th March, 1978. The DDA Chairman and the representatives of the Orissa Government also accompanied them. They made it clear to the refugees that it was not possible to rehabilitate the refugees on the soil of West Bengal anew. They also gave assurance of immediate finalization of the Pateru and Satiguda irrigation projects.⁴⁷ However, all these attempts failed dismally and the current of Dandakaranya exodus could not be halted.

The AMPO Committee (a committee that was formed with the representatives of the States of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa) was asked to find out the reasons for the desertion of the refugees from the villages and the work-site camps. The AMPO Committee intimated that actually; since the very beginning of the Dandakaranya Project the refugees were leaving for somewhere else. On 3rd April 1978 the Rehabilitation Minister in his speech in the *Loksabha* held the 'propaganda' accountable for the running away of the refugees.⁴⁸ He told that a group of people in order to fulfill their mean end preached among the refugees that they would be given rehabilitation in the Sundarban and in better places somewhere else. By the month of November, 1977 this preaching campaign climbed apex among the refugees. The representatives of the concerned States, in their report, also held the 'campaign for possibility of giving better rehabilitation in the Sundarban region' responsible for the desertion of the refugees. In course of the inquiry, the roles of an important leader of the 'Udvastu Unnayanshil Samity' in the Dandakanya region and a Minister of the Government of West Bengal came to the light in this regard.⁴⁹ However, a non-government representative expressed in front of the investigating committee that the desertion took place because there was no programme for economic rehabilitation. The Chairman of DDA also expressed the same opinion. He also gave some important reasons in his statement for the desertion of the refugees from Dandakaranya- (a) Non-distribution of the land among the refugees completely; (b) Unfertile and unproductive hilly land; (c) Lack of irrigation; (d) Consecutive failure of crops; (e) Non-development of small and cottage industry.

Furthermore, due to the wrong preaching of the some of the local leaders in the tribal community about the refugees the local aboriginal people had become fearful. Besides, some of the Government employees behaved with the refugees roughly; the rocky hilly

soil was unable to produce required harvest; the callousness of the Government to implement the Irrigation Projects like Pateru, Satiguda etc, for near about two decades; failure of crops for at a stretch of two years due to drought; lack of good market for the produced crops etc. were responsible for their desertion.⁵⁰

Reasons for their Desertion

‘From the beginning, the refugees of Dandakaranya were perhaps under the evil influence of satern. The step motherly attitude of the Central Ministry and the lack of sympathy were the manifestations of that. Many of the officers had viewed this work as their job and not from the humanitarian view point.’⁵¹ Several factors were responsible for the desertion of the refugees and thereby the failure of the Dandakaranya Project. The causes were as under:

Firstly: the settlers were mostly from the fertile Indo-Gangetic delta with numerous canals and rivers. But the land which was provided to the refugees was mostly barren and unfertile; the yield was so low that the refugee families found it difficult to eke out a living from that land. As one Bengali narrative notes:

*Eto kalponay chhilona kakhona oder. Chardike jatodur chokh jay shudhu pahar parvat jungale bhora. Pathar balir desh. Ruksha ei Dandakaranya. Jal-kada, khal-bil, nadi-nala, sabujer samaroha chhara konow desh hoy, emon dharona chhilona aage.*⁵² (It was even not in their imagination for a while. The distance in all directions that can catch the eye sight is full of hill- Mountain and jungles. The country is of stones and sand. Arid is this Dandakaranya. Earlier it was beyond imagination that a country can be without water-clay, strait-marsh, river-canal, grand assemblage of greens.)

Such was the picture of Dandakaranya! The soil surveys revealed that in the Pharasgaon sub-zone ‘6 percent of plots were basically unfit for agriculture, 32 percent were poor and sub marginal, 53 percent could be of medium quality if there moisture retention capacity could be improved, and only 9 percent were of good quality’.⁵³ And the land of Parulkot and Umorkot was more or less of the same quality.

‘In fact soil survey reports indicated that the soils were fairly deep, generally acidic in reaction, medium nitrogen and organic content and poor in phosphate. The texture varied from sandy loam to clay loam with underlying heavy textured soil in places and moisture retentivity was not very satisfactory. The picture was different in Malkangiri where the soil varied a great deal in their profile, characters and surface textural

properties from that of Umorkot zone. In villages on either side of Malkangiri-Motu road the surface texture varied from sand, loamy sand to loam with sub-surface texture becoming heavier.⁵⁴

A conservative estimate expressed that a refugee family needed nearly 24 quintals of crops for its subsistence. But if the average production of the year 1963-64 is taken into consideration then it can be seen that in the Pharasgaon Zone only 26 refugee families out of 206 and in Parulkot zone only 1,130 refugee families out of 2,223 got above 16 quintals, in Umorkot 1,193 refugee families out of 2,834 refugee families got 14 quintals and 352 refugee households out of 1,023 refugee families got above 12 quintals.⁵⁵ The land was not appropriate for any form of settled agriculture. The indigenous inhabitants of the region were mainly tribal people followed a primitive form of cultivation known as *jhoom* (slash and burn agriculture). The forced refugee laborers had cleared the forest and in the past these forests gave home, habitat and traditional livelihood to the Gonds. The planners assumed with confidence that the march of progress would assist to 'civilize' and 'improve' the Gonds and were of the opinion that the Gonds would be transformed to the settled agriculture by dint of the 'demonstration' effect.⁵⁶ They believed that the agriculturist Bengali refugees would 'demonstrate the local people the process of the cultivation of the soil.

In fact, the Dandakaranya Project was not a rehabilitation scheme. Rather, it was believed that the policy of the Government of India was to expose the original inhabitants to settled agriculture by bringing the Bengali refugees to these regions. But in practice an opposite event took place in that sense that it was the refugee peasant settlers who could learn a little from the indigenous expertise in shifting cultivation and the sowing methods of the nomads.⁵⁷ Satyendra Narayan Sinha in his report mentioned that economic hardship mainly compelled the refugees to leave Dandakaranya.⁵⁸

Secondly: The refugees could not be brought to the rehabilitation sites directly. They were first brought to Raipur then from there they were taken to Mana Transit Camp and other such transit camps under the DDA. They were compelled to stay in the transit camps until the clearing of jungle and construction of the houses was complete. But the DDA could not attain the desired success in respect of the construction of the houses within the stipulated time. For the year 1977-78 the primary target of the DDA was to construct 2,641 houses but in practice it could construct only 1,650 houses within that time schedule. As a result, the refugees had to spend years together in the transit camps. And by

the time the camp life became unbearable for them. In the Mana Group of Camps, the refugees had been held for twelve years as virtual 'prisoners of war' and 'serfs' under military officers.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Cholera, Malaria, Diarrhea took an epidemic form in some places; especially the children and the olds suffered a lot. In such a situation, insufficient and poor medical facility made the situation grave. Poor medical facilities led to the high mortality rate among the settlers. Referring to a medical report of 1965 the chief administrator wrote that, a general adult man, in normal state, weighs 131 pound, where as an adult male refugee weighed only 83 pound. In the same way, an ordinary adult woman, in normal state weighs 120 pound, whereas in case of the refugee women it stood at 74 pound.⁶⁰ Hence, lack of adequate food and required medical facilities encouraged the settlers to leave the project site. Alok Kumar Ghosh has summed up the ill planned Dandakaranya Project in this way:

In all, Dandakaranya Project a delayed and 'hastily improvised scheme for dispersal of the refugees ultimately failed to rebuild the broken minds of those uprooted people who needed a tremendous psychological boost to contain their frustration. Naturally the refugees were not at all interested in their settlement at Dandakaranya where they had to live a kind of exiled and interned life not only away from Bengal but also separated from one another. The distance from one zone to the other in the project area increased their feelings of isolation, loneliness, non-identity and sense of helplessness. Consequently they could not be integrated psychologically with the rest of India and their natural relation to the 100 crore Dandakaranya project was one of mistrust. The alienation of the refugees from the Rehabilitation Project further grew with the realization that they were being forced to pay for the development of the backward regions of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.⁶¹

Pannalal Dasgupta, who was a well known political leader and had spent some days in Dandakaranya doing some social works there, wrote a note on the Dandakaranya Project that goes as under-

It is surprising to see that there is no such concrete plan for the Dandakaranya though it has widely been taken for granted that there is such a plan. The task does not appear before the Planning Commission and that the Parliament has yet no such paper to discuss and give sanction. It is yet a vague conception a desire to develop an under undeveloped area lying in its natural wastefulness and negligence of the thousands of years. Whatever little development has been undertaken has been done by un-coordinated interest, pragmatically approached.⁶²

Pannalal Dasgupta had met Sri Nilmani Routroy, Chief Minister of Orissa; Harish Chandra Bakshipatra; Minister of Koraput District, Sri Seetakanta Mahapatra; Home Secretary so that they cast a glance for a peaceful rehabilitation of the refugees. The DDA

that had been given the full responsibility of the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees, made an attempt for the physical rehabilitation of the refugees; no attempt had been made for their psychological rehabilitation that was badly needed.

Thirdly: another reason for the failure of the project was the detachment of the settlers from the 'fish-culture'. 'Unlike Bengal, with its numerous rivers, ponds, tanks, and *bils* where freshwater fish was plentiful, the rocky plateau of Dandakaranya could hardly have been less suitable for the pisci-culture the refugees knew so well.'⁶³ Furthermore, the settlers possessed a fear in their mind that their children might not be able to get education through their mother tongue. In fact, till 1968 Bengali was the medium of education from Primary to Higher secondary in the refugee inhabited areas. However, after 1968 Bengali was replaced by Hindi in Madhya Pradesh and Oriya in Orissa from class VI to class XII and these languages became compulsory there. Bengali became a third language. Though, after 1968 Bengali remained the medium of education till class V however, the opportunity of learning in Bengali slipped out of their hands.⁶⁴

Fourthly: the villages where the refugees were resettled situated at various places. Each village was separated from the next by a distance of about 20 to 30 kilometers over rocky terrain often covered by jungles and infested with wild beasts. If all the villages were situated in one particular region then the refugees could have shared their joys and pangs in their day to day life that could have helped them to attain mental strength. Furthermore, lack of electricity hampered the all round development in the rehabilitation sites. Till 1978, of the 227 refugee villages in Orissa and 154 refugee villages in Madhya Pradesh only 8 villages got electricity facility.

Fifthly: the region was situated in such a place and the communication system was so poor and expensive that it was beyond the capacity of the settlers to keep themselves in constant contact with the people of West Bengal many of whom were their relatives. 'Dandakaranya increasingly appeared as a land of banishment rather than the haven of hope it had been made out to be by rehabilitation administrators. In Hindu mythology too, it was to Dandakaranya that Lord Rama was exiled in the epic *Ramayana*.'⁶⁵

Sixthly: there was an acute deficiency of drinking water. Initially, decision was taken for digging one well and an additional tube-well for 30 families. But during the summer, those wells and tube wells appeared to be insufficient for the refugees. Furthermore, some

of those wells and tube-wells went either dry or out of order. Thus, it became a great difficulty for the DDA to supply required water for the refugees living in various villages under the DDA. When the Estimate Committee of the Parliament asked the DDA about the arrangement of drinking water the later conveyed that arrangements have been made for digging 1,803 wells and tube-wells in all 381 villages: tube-wells: 1,342; and wells: 461.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the success of the rehabilitation programme depended upon the proper implementation of the irrigation system. In this regard the DDA and the concerned States had left a mark of great failure. The irrigation facility was badly poor and insufficient. From the report of the Estimate Committee it was known that till 1978 only 7.7 percent land was under irrigation facility in the Kondegaon zone. Accordingly, in Umorkot Zone only 6 percent land was under irrigation facility. However, the desertion was on large scale from the Malkangiri Zone, the biggest sub-division of the Koraput District. The reason was that the land of Malkangiri was most rocky, and deficiency of water was very high.⁶⁷ Keeping in mind the situation in 1971-72 two irrigation projects were taken in hand for constructing dams in the Pateru and Satiguda rivers for flowing water in the villages of Malkangiri. It was decided that many villages in Malkangiri would start receiving water before 1979 and the whole project would be completed by the middle of 1979. However practically it did not happen at all. The failure of constructing the dams on time hampered the rehabilitation attempt in two ways-(a) it enhanced the cost of construction. For instance, the Parulkot dam was approved to be constructed in 1966 and the approximate cost of that was estimated as Rs.1.78 crore and it was supposed to be completed by 1975. But due to various reasons finally it was completed in 1979 and it shot the cost of the dam up to Rs. 5.27 crore.⁶⁸ (b) It increased the sufferings of the settlers to a considerable extent thus inspired them to desert the rehabilitation sites. Furthermore, Bhaskal and Satiguda dams were constructed at the cost of about Rs 80 lakhs and Rs. 139 lakhs respectively for the irrigation of about 45,000 acres of land.⁶⁹ However, the refugees could have a little advantage of those dams.

On 19.08.1977 the Chief Administrator reported that the drought condition in 1976, and the distress of the Malkangiri area, knew no bounds. On papers 33,838 acres of land was supposed to have been allotted for refugee rehabilitation. But due to drought one fourth of it was not at all cultivated and the remaining part was cultivated nominally. While in 1975 the production of paddy was 5.18 per acre, which came down to 1.95 quintal per acre in 1976. The other incomes also had decreased in such a manner that the annual income of a family had reduced from Rs. 2,535 to Rs. 1,441. Here the prices of goods particularly of rice and wheat was on the rise...In different projects and different areas particularly the widely spread areas of Malkangiri,

drought and crop failure were constant features. They were the real factors for which the refugees in groups deserted the villages and camps.⁷⁰

Seventhly: while providing resettlement the Government had classified the refugees into agriculturists and non-agriculturists. As most of the refugees were agriculturists thus they were given lands for cultivation and making houses. Initially, the project was based on the theory 'once an agriculturist always an agriculturist.' But barring agriculture, another way through which attempt was made for resettlement was by engaging the refugees in the business of independent small industries or giving works to the settlers in some industries conducted by the Dandakaranya Project.⁷¹ By 1964 four industrial centers were established in Dandakaranya which were directly controlled by the Department of Industries of the Government of India. The centers were established in Boregaon, Jagdalpur, Ambaguda and Govindpally. But right from the beginning these centers including the largest one that was established in Boregaon, were making losses and the number of refugees who got jobs in these centers was meagre and their wages was less than that was fixed by the Act.⁷² 'The three main forms of trade and services that developed in the region were: grocery and carpentry, co-operative manufacturing units and transport. Many of these units were meant to cater to the demands of DDA officials... The local people being poor and cash strated could not afford to purchase the goods and services produced in these trading units.'⁷³

Eighthly: it has already been noted that the Bengali refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya were mostly considered to be the so-called low caste Hindus. Thus, a sense of caste discrimination might have added to their mental agony.⁷⁴ Furthermore, they had an adversarial relationship with the indigenous tribal population in Dandakaranya Region. At the time of conceiving the project the planners did not take into consideration the ecological and cultural setting of the tribal population who had been living in this region for centuries. A study suggested that Rehabilitation plans and their implementation by official agencies 'ignored the inherently contradictory nature of the tribal and peasant outlooks. The peasants had a vested interest in land while the tribals regarded the forest as a common resource.'⁷⁵

Both the tribals and the settlers failed to eradicate the abhorrence that was pertaining between them. The tribal people humiliated the settlers by calling them '*Bangali*' simultaneously, the settlers replied by calling them '*junglee*', 'naked people' etc. Besides,

the settlers possessed some sorts of fear about the indigenous tribal population. It was reported that the *tribals* molested the women of the refugees, snatched the babies from their mothers in order to sacrifice them in front of their deities, stole the crops from the field and even beat them.⁷⁶ The relation between the refugee settlers and the local tribes were strained and culminated tension between them. This tension was one of the many reasons that led the refugees to escape back to West Bengal.

Ninthly: the refugees were very much in anxiety regarding the title deeds of the lands given to them. Though they were given the land initially after their arrival at the rehabilitation sites in Dandakaranya yet the issue of giving title deeds was yet to be concluded. In 1978 when the members of the 'Estimate Committee' went to visit refugee areas of Koraput, the refugees made objection that though the Government had given land to them but they were not given the 'title deeds'. And hence, they were very much anxious about it and they exposed it to the members of the 'Estimate Committee'. The delay of giving title deeds to the refugees inspired them to leave the rehabilitation sites and seek refuge into West Bengal.⁷⁷

Tenthly: the issue of right to vote was hanged till 1978. And it increased their dissatisfaction. The issue of right to vote was raised in the Parliament in July 1978. But was intimated on the part of the Government that citizenship certificate was needed for granting voting right. And it was further communicated that for giving voting right; applications have been invited from the refugees. Thus, within November, 1978, 24,361 refugees applied for citizenship certificates and among them 21,989 refugees got citizenship certificate. The issue of voting right was supposed to be solved by 30 June 1978. However, the Estimate Committee criticized the concerned department for remaining the matter unsolved till then. Furthermore, the refugees expressed before the Estimate Committee that though ninety percent of the refugees belonged to the Namasudra peasants of East Bengal, however, neither the Government of Madhya Pradesh nor the Government of Orissa agreed to recognize them as Scheduled Caste. Though, ultimately Orissa Government recognized the refugees as Scheduled Caste but the Government of Madhya Pradesh did not do that.⁷⁸

All these factors led the settlers to desert the Dandakaranya Project area and enter into West Bengal. In June 1977, the Left Front came to power in West Bengal. The early days of 1978 experienced the first wave of desertion of the refugees from Dandakaranya who

had started travelling from Orissa's Malkangiri to West Bengal. In 1978 alone, the wave of desertion went over 10,000 families.⁷⁹ More than 70% of the refugees under the leadership of the Udvastu Unnayanshil Samiti either selling or leaving behind all sorts of belongings which they had accumulated for long 15 years made their presence in West Bengal. The massive desertion of the refugees from Dandakaranya had been described as 'migration in reverse gear' by a news report. The report noted,

The returning refugees present a picture of gloom at the Jagdalpur Bus Stand and at the Raipur Railway Station. Men, women, and children in torn rags have a look of infinite sadness on their faces. Heavy the sorrow, as the poet has said, that bows the head when love is alive and hope is dead. They say that their love for West Bengal is alive as their hope about Dandakaranya is dead. The refugees say that all their Dandakaranya days are dark and dreary...refugees say they are deserting 'because of the humiliating condition in which they lived.'⁸⁰

In the Months of March and April thousands of refugees deserted Dandakaranya and assembled at the outskirts of the city of Calcutta especially at Barasat, Basirhat, and Hasanabad in the Districts of North 24 Parganas. At first the Bharat Sebashram Shangha took the initiative to assist and attend upon the refugees. It took the responsibility of planned help and service from 21st March, 1978 with the permission of the State Government. It gave 200 gm of coarse flour (*aata*) per head. The State Government had also dug 10 tube wells.⁸¹ The refugees had formed a bazaar at Hasanabad. The petition that was arranged to be distributed among the refugees in the name of Chief Minister Jyoti Basu on 27th March for their 'go-back' could not be distributed among them because those who had gone to distribute the petitions were either humiliated or insulted by the refugees.⁸² Though, the refugees at the initial stage were perplexed at Hasanabad, but now they had gained strength, and they had the only words on their lips that they must go to Sundarban.⁸³ In April 1978 there were 11,106 refugees at Hasanabad, 16,929 refugees at Char-Hasanabad and 5 thousands of refugees were residing at Kumirmari and Bagna.⁸⁴



The refugees assembled at Hasanabad in West Bengal.⁸⁵

Chief Minister Jyoti Basu urged to the refugees from Dandakaranya in the following way:⁸⁶

Dear brothers and sisters,

I take a great pity for your present unbearable condition. I have heart-felt sympathy for you. Already some of you have passed away. Many have fallen ill and been attacked with diseases. You are almost under the open sky with indescribable sufferings.

The process through which you have come from Dandakaranya helps to understand to a great extent that you had or have sufficient inconveniences. The evil advice of the some of the persons and the false information and the wrong assurances that brought you here are wrong and completely misleading, in these few days, you must have understood with the experience of your own life.

These crooked persons have pushed you into danger by giving you false provocation and taking advantage of your simplicity. Those who have brought you here by making you understand improperly that there is land in Sundarban and you will be given rehabilitation there, where are they today? After misleading you and pushing you into difficulties they have kept themselves hidden and enjoying a joyous life. Keep note of them and keep yourselves aloof from them. Your sudden arrival has encumbered the Left Front Government

of West Bengal and pushed thousands of local people into inconvenience. You have been brought at Hasanabad without the minimum sense of responsibility and a conspiracy is being made for creating a conflict between the refugees and the local people.

I would like to make you aware of the fact that there is no possibility of fresh settlement in Sundarban. No arrangement has yet been made for the countless local agricultural laborers and poor people. They have even not been given the required land. There is no more vacant land in Sundarban fit for cultivation or making settlement. There the river carries salty water, producing crops through cultivation is very difficult and time taking. The land is low and water is to hold by putting dams. You understand that it is not possible in any circumstances for making resettlement of people anew in Sundarban. The misconception that has been created in your mind regarding the rehabilitation in Sundarban is solely target oriented. You certainly have understood it by your present experience.

A team of the representatives of the all political parties of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly have visited the Malkangiri region. After making a spot investigation they have understood that the irrigation facility in the agricultural land will be available there within coming 1979-80 that means within 1¹/₂ - 2 years. Land is fertile and is expected to produce crops twice or thrice in a year. After residing for long days there and enduring all sorts of sufferings when some possibilities and light of hopes have come to the sight just then due to the provocation of crooked persons leaving behind that hearth and homes you are passing through unbearable sufferings and have fallen into state of sheer uncertainty. We are determined to put an end to your unreasonable sufferings. The Left Front Government is fully sympathetic towards you and has kept a vigilant and conscious eye on your problems. I have personally discussed with the Prime Minister regarding your problems. We have made a strong appeal to the Central Government for providing you with the required food at least to keep you alive and all sorts of assistance for agricultural activities after your return to Dandakaranya. In this regard the Left Front Government will do all these that it thinks to be done.

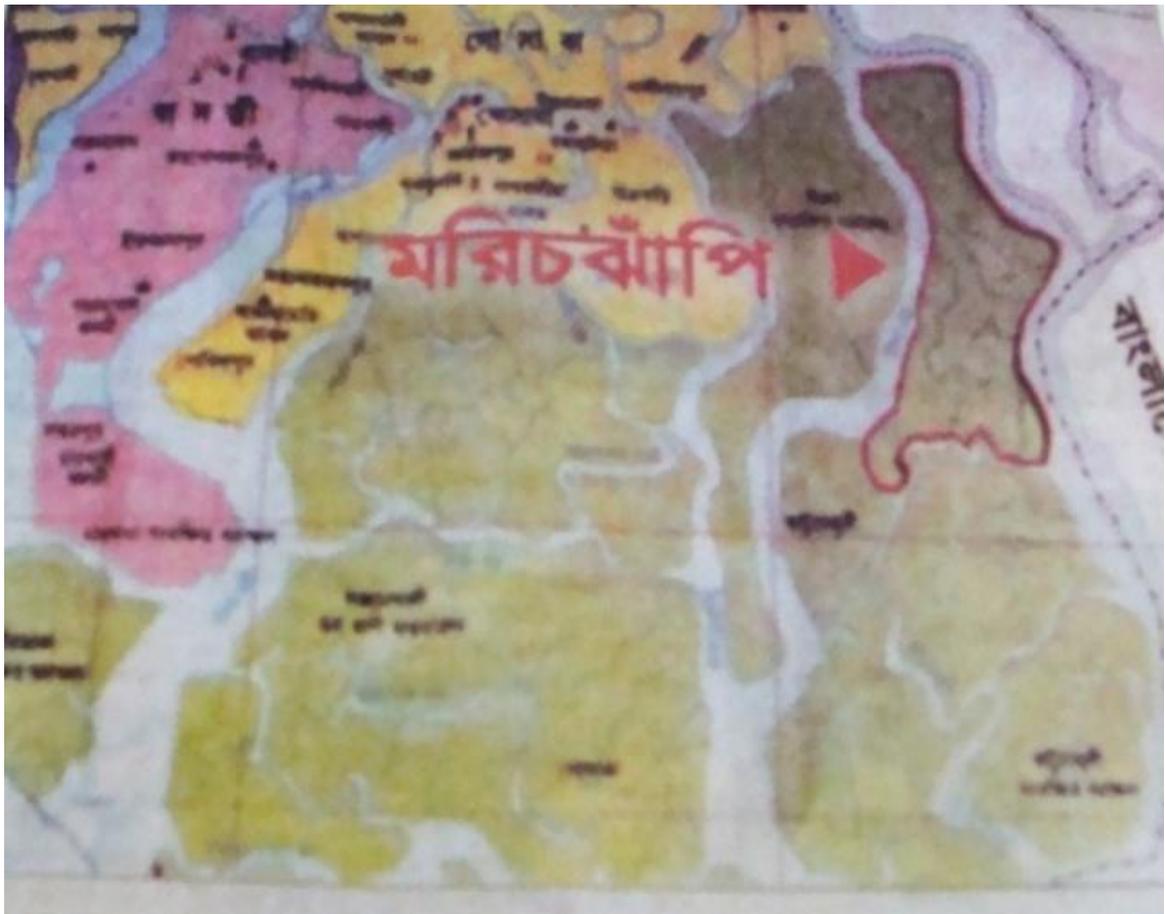
You have already endured lot of hardships. It must not be allowed to continue. You are being pushed into difficulties by giving you suggestion to cross the river from Hasanabad. The condition of that side of the river is worse. There is no arrangement for relief. There is also no arrangement for drinking water. You are being requested to come back this side of the river so that every one of you can take the advantage of the immaculate relief arrangement that has been developed in this side of the river and so that you are not deprived of it. Before going back to Dandakaranya come back to the relief camps that have been set up for you on the part of the Government. Take advantage of the relief camp along with your children and all the members of your family.

I think that you will show an iron determination to rebuild your hearths and homes permanently and nicely that you have constructed in Dandakaranya through the labor and sufferings of long days.

I, personally and on behalf of the Left Front Government of West Bengal can say it that all sorts of arrangements will be made, so that, with the cooperation and assistance of the Central Government, there you can have smooth rehabilitation, full honor of citizenship, various required certificates, equal opportunities in respect of law and order, and can live permanently with honor.

So, I again request you to go back to Dandakaranya, establish yourselves there, the Left Government of West Bengal is with you in this enterprise and will help you whole heartedly.

The refugees, however, did not pay heed to the appeal of the Chief Minister rather the number of the deserters increased keeping pace with the passing moments of time. Meanwhile the refugees who assembled at Hasanabad and Kumirmari now rushed towards the Sundarban, their destination.



Red mark indicates the Island of Marichjhapi.⁸⁷

By June 1978, about 45 thousands of Dandakaranya-refugees arrived at Marichjhapi that was an uninhabited thirty-nine mile long and eight miles wide-island situated at the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta in the Sundarban region in West Bengal. Marichjhapi ‘had been cleared in 1975 and its mangrove vegetation replaced by a government programme of coconut and tamarisk plantation to increase state revenue. However, though this was not an island covered in mangrove forest, the state government was in no mood to tolerate such a settlement.’⁸⁸ After arriving at Marichjhapi they had named the place as New

Netajinagar.⁸⁹ The refugees reportedly had set up, by their own efforts, fisheries, workshops, small scale and cottage industries, bakeries, primary school even a dispensary. The memorandum⁹⁰ that was submitted to the Members of Parliament when they visited Marichjhapi expressed that:

...We started our new lives with a full arrangement of daily consumption such as living house, school, markets, roads, hospital, tube wells, etc. We managed to find out sources of income, also establishing cottage industries such as Bidi factory, Bakery, Carpentry, Weaving factory etc. and also built embankment nearly 150 miles long covering an area of nearly 30 thousand acres of land to be used for fishing, expecting an income of 20 crores per year. That may easily help and enable us to stand on our own feet. Moreover, after one or two years washing by rain water, preventing saline water to flow over, these lands will yield a lot of crops such as paddy and other vegetables.

We have distributed land in Marichjhapi among six thousands refugee families in the shape of paras, villages and anchaks. Nearly a thousand families built their houses in different plots in group system and have been residing there about a year.

But the Government of West Bengal could no longer remain silent. It objected that the refugees were 'in unauthorized occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sunderbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts'⁹¹ and that refugees came 'with the intention of settling there permanently thereby disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.'⁹² Thus, after July 1978, the West Bengal Government did not allow any refugee family to enter into Marichjhapi. In the month of July 1978, nearly 1,000 refugees were detained in the Howrah Station who left Dandakaranya to reach Marichjhapi and were transferred to Kashipur near Burdwan.⁹³ The West Bengal Government gave an ultimatum to the 'illegal' occupants of Marichjhapi to vacate the island by 31st March 1979. But when the Government saw no sign on the part of the refugees to abandon their new settlement the Government, on January 26, 1979 started an economic blockade of the settlement.⁹⁴ But the refugee leaders with the help of Pannalal Dasgupta and Saibal Gupta filed a case in the High Court. The High Court, on 7th February 1979, instructed the Government not to prevent the entry of drinking water, essential food grains, medicines and doctors into Marichjhapi.⁹⁵ Eventually, the Left Front Government ordered a forcible eviction of the refugees from Marichjhapi with the help of the police. Finally, on 17th May 1979 Marichjhapi was made free of the refugees and the Government claimed that 'it had succeeded in 'freeing' Marichjhapi from the illegal encroachment of 'deserters' from Dandakaranya'.⁹⁶ As per the report of the

Estimate Committee, till 1978 a total of 14,388 refugee families came back to West Bengal. Of them 10,260 refugee families went back to Dandakaranya. And it meant that 4,128 refugee families stayed back in West Bengal.⁹⁷

The Marichjhapi issue exhibited the appalling failure of the Dandakaranya Project. After the Marichjhapi episode a Committee of the Indian Parliament investigated the project in 1979 and it condemned the authorities for 'the callous neglect and unimaginative, lackadaisical and bureaucratic approach displayed by the DDA in handling problems of displaced persons and in executing the development projects taken up for their resettlement.'⁹⁸

Thus, the Bengali refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya under DDA Project came back to West Bengal immediately after the Left Front Government came to power in West Bengal. But the Government expressed that the rehabilitation of those persons in West Bengal was not possible as till then many refugees were waiting in the various relief camps of West Bengal for their rehabilitation. In such a situation the departure of a large number of refugees from Dandakaranya must have increased the burden of the Government. Therefore, the Government tried to unburden itself by simply sending the refugees back to Dandakaranya.

Many have criticized the Left Front Government of West Bengal for the 'Marichjhapi episode'. It is said that before coming to the power the leftist leaders have done a lot for the rehabilitation of the East Bengali refugees; they also made proposal for the rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees in the Sundarban region.⁹⁹ But after coming to power they made a shift from their earlier stand point. The reason might have been that if the Dandakaranya deserters were allowed to resettle in the Sundarban region then there was a huge probability of making such a demand on the part of those refugees who by then were living outside of West Bengal such as Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Nainital in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other such places. Furthermore, the current of exodus was yet to be stopped. However, under the request of the State Government the DDA made an assurance of giving following assistance¹⁰⁰ to the returnees from West Bengal:

- (a) Every agricultural family was sanctioned a loan of Rs 500 for purchasing seeds and fertilizers.
- (b) A loan of Rs 750 was sanctioned for purchasing bullocks.

- (c) 2 quintal of rice whose price was not more than Rs 350 was granted to every refugee family.
- (d) Arrangement was made for giving 'dole' of Rs. 60 to every refugee family.
- (e) Those who till then did not have the houses sanctioned for the refugees they got a temporary grant of Rs.25 for making kitchen. Alongside, arrangement was made for starting 'food for work' until their arrival to the villages and work-site camps.

The Estimate Committee of the Parliament expressed satisfaction for the arrangement made by the DDA and expressed opinion that the rupees that had been sanctioned for the refugees as loan should be granted as assistance for good. Besides, it recommended for Rs. 900 instead of Rs. 750 for purchasing bullocks. Arrangements were made for the returning refugees to go back to their respective sanctioned houses in their own villages. The refugees once again started a struggle for rebuilding their lives in the barren land of Dandakaranya. By the time they made the unfertile rocky terrain, the hills, jungles, the aboriginal society and all else as their near and dear one. The unknown Dandakaranya became a known place to them. They gradually came out from the narrow Bengali identity to be the citizen of greater India- they are by now in the process of becoming the Indian Bengali Citizen of Dandakaranya.¹⁰¹ And for making the relationship normal between the local aboriginal people and the refugees many initiatives had been undertaken. Pannalal Dasgupta established 'Tagore Society' to smoothen their relationship. Besides, various fairs were arranged for bringing the tribal people and the Bengali refugees on a common platform. Arrangements were also made for public-feast and thus both the Bengalis and the *Adivasis* took their meal sitting nearby. There were also arrangements for *Adivasi* and Bengali cultural programmes. Thus, an environment of cultural exchange was created that gradually made the relation to some extent friendly and cordial between them. In this regard, besides Tagore Society, the role of Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sebasram Sangha, Missionaries of Charities are also notable.

However, it cannot be assumed that the settlers are free from all sorts of difficulties. Initially, when the refugees were brought to the rehabilitation sites they were given 6 acres land (later on reduced to 3 acres in the Pateru rehabilitation region). As time rolled on, the number of the members of the refugee families got increased and it pushed them into difficulties; especially the joint families are facing much more problems. The amount of the land in comparison to the number of the family members appeared to be insufficient

and in spite of having their land purchasing capacity they cannot do it. Because the area is tribal inhabited and thus non-tribal persons are not allowed to purchase land there. As a consequence, they are compelled to go to some other states such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Andhra Pradesh etc. in search of work.

Notes and references

1. However, Ross Mallik mentioned that in 1976 there were 578,000 acres of vacant land in West Bengal out of which 247,000 could readily be reclaimed for cultivation. Mallick, Ross, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No.1 (Feb., 1999, pp.104-125), p.106.
In the same way, Dilip Halder noted that as per the statement of Dr. R. Ahmed, Agriculture Minister, in the Assembly on 6th March, 1956, there was 8 lakh acres of uncultivated arable land available. And for settling 35 thousand cultivator families out of the total 45 thousand families in the camps in the year 1958 only 1 lakh 11 thousand acres of land was needed if every family was given 3 acres for agriculture and $\frac{1}{2}$ bigha as homestead land. Halder, Dilip, *Atrocities on Dalits since the Partition of Bengal*, Mittal Publications: New Delhi, 2008, pp. 30-31.
2. Das, Samir Kumar, 'State response to the refugee crisis' in Samaddar, Ranabir, (ed.), *refugees and the state-practices of asylum and care in India, 1947-2000*, Sage Publications: New Delhi, 2003, p.136.
3. Mandal, Monika, *Settling the Unsettled- A Study of Partition Refugees in West Bengal*, Manohar: New Delhi, 2011, p.194.
4. Ironically, the place is associated with exile in the Ramayana according to which Lord Rama was exiled there. 'In Balmiki's Dandakaranya there was some 80,000 sq. miles of forest area comprising parts of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra and Maharashtra.' Ghosh, Shankar Dastidar, 'An Account of Treachery at Dandakaranya', in Halder, Dilip, *op. cit.*, p.132.
5. *The Twelfth Year of Freedom, 1958-59*, All India Congress Committee, New Delhi, p.151.
6. Initially, the Dandakaranya project consisted of the areas of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Later on Andhra Pradesh was excluded from the Dandakaranya Project area.
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 11. *The Twentieth Year of Freedom (1966-67)*, editor, P. N. Vesuvala, All India Congress Committee, New Delhi, p.392.
 12. *The Twelfth Year of Freedom, 1958-59, 1958-59*, All India Congress Committee, New Delhi, p.151.
 13. *The Thirteenth Year*, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, August 15, 1960, p.222.
 14. Rao, U. Bhaskar, *The Story of Rehabilitation*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division: Faridabad, 1967, p.202.
 15. *The Twentieth Year of Freedom (1966-67)*, editor, P. N. Vesuvala, All India Congress Committee, New Delhi, pp. 392-393.
 16. Kudaisya, Ganesh, *op.cit.* in Low, D.A, and Brasted, Howard, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.116.
 17. *Ibid.*, p.117.
 18. Sengupta, Barun, ‘Dandaker Udbastur Katha Ke Bhebechhi’, Anandabazar Patrika, 13 April, 1978, in Pal, Madumay, (ed.), *Marichjhapi Chhinnadesh, Chhinna Itihas*, Gangchil: Kolkata, 2009, pp.45-46.
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 21. Gupta, Saibal Kumar, ‘Dandakaranyer Udvastu’ in Pal, Madumay, (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.28-29.
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 26. Gupta, Saibal Kumar, *op.cit.*, in Pal, Madhumay, (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.27.
 27. *Ibid.*, p.27.

28. Kudaisya, Ganesh, *op.cit.*, in Low, D.A, and Brasted, Howard, (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.121.
29. 6th Parliament Estimate Committee 30th Report, p.4.
30. Chakrabarti, Prafulla K., *op.cit.*, p.208.
31. Bandyapadhyay, Hiranmay, *Udvastu*, Sahitya Samsad: Calcutta, 1970, p.37.
32. Chakrabarti, Prafulla K., *op.cit.* p.219.
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35. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-44.
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45. Pal, Babul, *op. cit.*, p.117.
46. 6th Parliament Estimate Committee 30th report, p.6.
47. Pal, Babul, *op.cit.*, pp. 118-9.
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83. *Ibid.*, pp.37-38.
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85. The refugees assembled at Hasanabad in West Bengal. source: <http://bangalnama.wordpress.com>.
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97. 6th Parliament Estimate Committee 30th Report, 1978-79, p.36. Besides, it has also been argued that 'Out of the 14,388 families who deserted [for West Bengal], 10,260 families returned to their previous places...and the remaining 4,128 families perished in transit, died of starvation, exhaustion and many were killed in Kashimpur, Kumirmari and Marichjhapi by police firing.' Mallick, Ross, *op. cit.*, p.111.
 But Amiya Kumar Samanta wrote that no single refugee residing in Marichjhapi was killed; only two tribal women of Kumirmari lost their lives due to police firing. The Government must have created pressure on them to leave the island, but the Government did not board them on the launch forcefully or drive them away by charging *lathi* or opening fire to them. Samanta, Amiya Kumar, 'Marichjhapi', in Pal, Madumay, (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.245.
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