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Riverside Settlement Strategy of Namasudra Refugees in Burdwan District after 1971

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the Namasudras who came to West Bengal as refugees from Bangladesh during and after the Liberation War of 1971 solved their own housing problems without redistribution of land by the West Bengal or Indian government and special reference to Burdwan District. The discussion notices to the government camp of refugees who were totally dependent on the state for resettlement and prioritizes the various government resettlement arrangements within West Bengal. The inquiry looks out the related issues of resettlement of squatters. After all, traces on their own initiatives to be settled in the fallow lands throughout the Burdwan district. Studies of refugee rural settlements in Bengal have focused on limited geographical areas or groups of refugees characterized by distinct linguistic or ethnic characteristics.

Keywords: Namasudra, Refugee, Problem of Rehabilitation, Riverside Settlement, Agriculture.

Introduction: The Namasudras/Matuas are the sons of the soil of Bangladesh and West Bengal. The Matua community is an essential part of the different ethnic groups and races settling in Bengal with their distinctive cultural and linguistic features. The establishment of the 'Matua' sect and the Matua religious belief in the social background of 19th century Bengal is a significant religious, socio-economic, and educational fact. By the initiatives of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, the *Chandal* community, an outcaste gained knowledge of right and social consciousness. Recovering themselves from a Brahminic hegemony and lack of professionalism they participated into agriculture, fishing instead of street sweeper, cremation, etc. On one hand they were going through challenges like social consciousness and development and at the same moment a big challenge like partition of 1947 and migration of 1971 naturally brought overall problems in their life.

No such family was able to bring their real assets from their living places, and being the only earner of the family, male members had to go out to earn, and some of them were government employees in present Bangladesh. The shifting from a government employee to

daily wage labour made a tough challenge for them. But the situation was a struggle for existence, and there was no other option to sustain their life. The major changes occurred in female and children's life. Most females and children were habituated to secure life in every sphere; naturally, adapting to this new environment was more difficult for them. The first phase of migration was less horrible compared to the subsequent stages. Most high-class or middle-class families migrated before the liberation movement in 1971 (Mollick, 1999).

But the migration of 1971 was terrible as we have very few instances like this massive migration in a short time in the history of migration. Moreover, this migration was lower-class, low-educated centric. They had no plan like where to go, what to eat, or how to sustain themselves with their family. Lack of intellectual power always brings sorrow and poverty, and the proverb successfully applied to the migrated people in 1971. The people of the first migration phase had an extra facility, as their many relatives and acquainted inhabitants were here in West Bengal. But these lower-class migrants had no connection or accommodation arrangement, even for a few days. So, these vast migrated persons gathered on rail stations or open roads. That affected all the sectors like the economy, society, and cultural life of West Bengal.

This was the actual scenario of the concerned time. More or less, every railway station across the borderline and less far from the city of Kolkata in West Bengal was seen as the Ranaghat rail station mentioned above. The scenario of Sealdah, Dumdum, and Howrah rail stations was more horrible compared to Ranaghat and other surrounding places. Every family was obliged to settle down on the platforms temporarily. It became impossible to sustain there as refugees were migrating widely by that time. Eventually, they came to the footpath or slum areas near rail stations with their family.

Scholarly Interpretation of Refugee Settlement: Before we go into the subject, we need to interpret on a question why pre-historic people settled on riverside? In India, The Indus Civilization is the biggest instance to the subject, as river valleys provided easy access to water and had fertile lands for the downtrodden people. Adwaita Malla Bardhana portrayed a river-centric livelihood of a marginalized village.¹ Migration after the Liberation War in Bangladesh had not received much consideration to the scholars, compared to the migration of 1950s and 1960s. Although, a very few have interpreted on the trauma, lack of rehabilitation, and self made settlement by the refugee. According to Partha N. Mukherjee, by the second week of December 1971 about 6.8 million evacuees had been housed in camps and another 3.1 million were staying with friends and relative (Mukherji, 1974). The government's efforts to resettle Bengal's Hindu refugees, as scholars of partition and modern India have come to recognize, proved a failure of catastrophic proportions (Sammadar,

¹ The book '*Titas Ekti Nodir Naam*' (in Bengali), depicted the essentiality of a river on marginalized people. They were highly depended on the river resources, like fish, water for small irrigation, and moreover the an active nature. At the termination point of the book author showed the declination of the village with the disappearance of the river. Interestingly inhabitants of the village obviously came across the most miserable situation and migrated to an another riverside place.

1999). These homeless and needy people are known as "refugees" or "displaced persons". They started living along the river like squatters (Mandal, 2018). After partition in the 1950s, 49.81% of the people and according to Census 1971, 39.23% after the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971 entered Nadia district from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).² Refugees tend to concentrate here on their former relatives or similar demographic connections. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Roy Chaudhury stated, after the partition, the comparatively rich Scheduled Castes who came from East-Pakistan bought land or cleared forests and settled in places like Majhdia, Bagula, Betai, etc. That is, apart from government assistance, they started to struggle for life in West Bengal on their own initiative (Bandyopadhyay & Anasua, 2014).

Alternative Way of Riverside Settlement: Most refugees possessed the lands surrounding North Calcutta; such places are Jadavpur, Vijaygarh, Sonarpur, and Barasat. Generally, the families that were economically well-developed started their livelihood there. On the contrary, families who couldn't successfully bring reasonable assets from their left motherland suffered land or accommodation problems. Either they had to rely on the government (both the State and Central Government) or to find the solution independently. There is no issue that governments have solved the problem for a major part of a refugee through the process, but what's the story of refugees who wasn't granted land? On the other hand, as a matter of government policy, no political parties were allowed any role in relief administration, nor were foreign relief agencies allowed to work at the evacuation camp level (Secretariat, 1971). Carrying the issues, they dispersed in several directions to find accommodation. The places are Burdwan, Birbhum, Nadia, Hooghly, Medinipur, Bankura, Malda, and Dinajpur, some also in Assam and Tripura. These were marginal people who were uneducated, resourceless, and unorganized. Because of that, they are forgotten in the present historical studies.

The influx of refugees, according to the Census Superintendent cause of the spectacular growth in population between 1941 and 1951 in as the 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Jalpaiguri, Howrah, Burdwan and Hooghly went to places where there was industry or plantations, 'neglecting agricultural parts.'³ But not all districts of the state were equally affected by the influx of refugees. Most of the refugees from the western parts of East Pakistan came to the eastern districts of West Bengal. Displaced persons from central and eastern parts of East Bengal preferred to resettle themselves in and around Nadia, 24 Parganas (then undivided 24 Parganas) and Kolkata (Nandy, 2017). By December 1957 the refugee influx reached the highest point in the east. The number of the refugees crossing the international border went up to 316,000.⁴ For instance, after partition in the 1950s, 49.81% of the people and 39.23% of the people after the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971 entered Nadia district from

² Demographic Diversity of India, Census 1971. Kolkata: State and District Statistical level data.

³ 1951 Census, Volume VI, Part I-A, p. 139.

⁴ *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, Home [Pub.] Department, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1956, p. 17.

East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).⁵ But, most of the refugee's self-sufficiently adjusted and rehabilitated that is why after five decades of refugee crisis, their condition has not improved.

They were sent to refugee camps in various districts of West Bengal, as there were no vacant place in Nadia, Both 24 Parganas, and Calcutta. The buildings and premises of Government schools and colleges had been used for the camps as a means of temporary settlement, but not rehabilitation. To escape the misery and misery of daily life, many voluntarily migrated from the camps to the villages, towns and suburbs of West Bengal to find their own way of survival. But that number was not less. Ignored and disrespected by the local people, cheated by the government and government bureaucrats, these groups of refugees gradually spread to different districts of West Bengal to survive. Those people whom the government thought to be incompetent and idle, eventually joined forces and started building refugee colonies overnight in different places. In this struggle to establish their colony, many had to sacrifice their lives, but even so, their prowess remained. Landlords could not ultimately stop the refugees with government support. Refugee colonies were thus increasingly formed in the districts of West Bengal (Chaudhury, 2009).

Three classes of people took shelter in and around Calcutta. First, a group of people resorted to self-sufficiency and were able to earn a living. Secondly, those who occupied lands and houses were also protected by the government. Third, those who had nothing lost everything and became completely dependent on the government. Those who sought government assistance were in a life-or-death situation (Samaddar, 2003). Apart from those who were destitute, many refugees began to return to normalcy through forced resettlement. The rest have to go to penitentiaries outside West Bengal or taste death in government asylum camps.

Refugees had no choice but to take shelter with multiple family members at their own discretion. A large part of refugees who came towards Rarh Bengal accommodated themselves on the banks of the rivers. There were several reasons behind this, however, such as the scarcity of unowned land in the locality, although there was not enough money to buy it, and in some cases the local people did not want to sell it. Another major reason was agriculture, since most of them were well accustomed with the agricultural work before the migration. Consequently, they were divided into groups and settled different riversides of Burdwan district. The Ajay River is the borderline of Burdwan and Birbhum districts, refugees settled on the both side of river river bed. Debipur, Deul, Basudha, Dekuri, Pallishree, Chhora Colony, Gopalpur, Supur, Guskara, Katwa, Dainhat, Kalna are some places on the Ajay and river Ganga bank where some groups of refugees settled. Sadar Ghat, Rasulpur, Durgapur, outskirts of Asansol main city are some major places of refugee settlement the bank of river Damodar. Almost all the riversides of Burdwan District were transformed into the refugee area, and later agricultural hub area. In the case of Durgapur-Asansol belt, the motive of settlement was different. Since, Durgapur was a major camp for

⁵ *Demographic Diversity of India, Census 1971*. Kolkata: State and District Statistical level data. Volume-X, Issue-II

refugee settlement for certain times, the settled refugees gradually joined with the steel industry and coal industry as a labour.

Lack of land for inhabitation in Calcutta, both the South 24 Parganas, and Nadia compelled them to find another place. Leaving the thought of Dandakaranya wondered new land where they could survive. Chief Secretary in his interview with newspaper reporters said that 1200 refugees took temporary shelter at Burdwan railway station, they did not seek any help from the government. At least 500 refugees have reached Sealdah station but have refused to be shifted to any other refugee relief camps. During this period 50 persons swam across the river and their destination was Bagna area.⁶ Burdwan was previously known as granary of paddy that helped them taking the quick decision. Gradually, transforming the barren lands into fertile they effectively enlarged the variety of agricultural crops and enriched the rural economy. Continued immigration from Bangladesh has significantly increased the population of the small village Gaitanpur is located on Damodar riverbed under the jurisdiction of Khandaghosh police station in Burdwan district. In most cases, the agricultural lands adjacent to the house are usually "owned" by the householder. This system has facilitated employment of women members as family labor in particular sectors (Lahiri Dutt & Samanta, 2004). The process is also applicable for the other riverside refugee settlements in Burdwan district.

Conclusion: The ongoing migration took difficult figure from the 1971 due to various political, economical and religious issues. This massive amount of migrated people changed the demographic scenario of Burdwan district as well as West Bengal, and riverbeds produced a new means to survive to them. Along with the agriculture, fishing became another profession for many dwellers. According to urbanization process, through the cultivation and other side profession they gained economic sustainability; therefore, started to relocate into the heart area of the society. Eventually, their alternative settlement strategy fulfilled the requirements of the refugees for a sustainable livelihood.

⁶ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, April 9, 1978.
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