

Turning Refugees into Forced Labourers – A Case Study of the Dandakaranya Project

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Abstract: *The Partition of 1947 led to an exodus of refugees, who crossed the borders, leaving their homeland and relaxing into the unknown. The Bengali refugees from East Pakistan, who arrived in India in the latter half of the 1950s, were completely dependent upon the State for their rehabilitation and resettlement. These people came in the hope of resettling in West Bengal mainly or in Assam / Tripura at least. However, by the time of their arrival, all three states had reached a saturation point, hence it was not possible for them to accommodate any further refugees. Thereby, in June 1957 at the National Development Council meeting, the Dandakaranya project was launched for the rehabilitation and resettlement of these Bengali refugees in the Dandakaranya region of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (present-day Chhattisgarh). However, from the very beginning, this project worked with a dual motive. The other motive of this project was to use these refugees as a workforce in turning the uninhabitable and unproductive Dandakaranya into an economically productive zone. This paper aims to trace the process of turning unfortunate refugees into forced labourers. It attempts to draw attention to the atrocities performed under the cover of providing rehabilitation and resettlement to the helpless Bengali refugees of East Pakistan.*

Keywords: Migrants, Forced Labour, Dandakaranya project, Rehabilitation and Resettlement

The Partition of British India led to a great exodus of refugees. Compared to the western part of India, where there was a sudden upheaval of violence, forcing people to migrate all at once; in the case of the eastern part, the refugees mostly came in waves, which could be broadly categorised into three phases of migration. The refugees who arrived in the first and second phases were socio-economically stable, as such they did not completely depend upon the State for their rehabilitation and resettlement. However, in the second half of the 1950s, the third phase of refugees arrived, who crossed the borders, devoid of any capital. They were mostly landless peasants, belonging to the Namashudra community. When they came to India, they were completely at the mercy of the State and depended upon it for their existence.

The inception of the Dandakaranya Project:

Most of the refugees who came from East Pakistan preferred to stay within the state of West Bengal. However, West Bengal alone couldn't provide resettlement to all the incoming refugees from East Pakistan. West Bengal was already flooded with refugees, hence there was an urgent need to find a new place for the rehabilitation and resettlement of these refugees. For this purpose, a fact-finding committee was formed in the year 1952, which was known as the Committee of Ministers. This committee consisted of then Finance Minister Shri C. D. Deshmukh, Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr. B. C. Roy and Minister for Rehabilitation Shri Ajit Prasad Jain. It looked into the question of rehabilitation of displaced persons and submitted its report in the year 1954. According to this report, the problem of refugee rehabilitation was considered a national problem, as these refugees were a product of the Partition. Therefore, this committee decided in favour of resettling the East Pakistani refugees in other states of India, rather than keeping them in West Bengal.¹

This led to the inception of the Dandakaranya project. This project happens to be the brainchild of Sri S. V. Ramamurthy, the advisor to the planning commission of India in the timeframe between October 1952 to November 1960. Ramamurthy identified the vast stretches of Dandakaranya as the perfect fit for rehabilitation and resettlement of refugees, coming from East Pakistan. In November 1956, Ramamurthy presented a report where he highlighted the low population density of the region and stated that Dandakaranya with its enormous area of about 80,000 sq. miles could offer large-scale settlements within itself.² This attracted the attention of the government and the Dandakaranya region started getting considered for refugee rehabilitation. Thereafter, in June 1957, at the National Development Council meeting, Dandakaranya was officially chosen as the rehabilitation and resettlement site for the Bengali refugees of East Pakistan.

Located in central-east India, Dandakaranya comprised parts of the states of Madhya Pradesh (present-day Chhattisgarh), Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. However, the state of Andhra Pradesh had to be excluded from the project, due to its opposition to the resettlement of East Pakistani refugees within its area. Thereby, the project went ahead with the states of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, each releasing vast acres of land to provide rehabilitation and resettlement to the refugees. The project comprised four zones known as Malkangiri, Umerkote, Paralkote and Kondagaon, with its headquarters situated at Koraput in Orissa. While Malkangiri and Umerkote were located in the undivided Koraput district of Orissa; Paralkote and Kondagaon were situated in the undivided Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh. The total area covered under this project was approximately 30,000 square miles. The Dandakaranya project finally started functioning from the year 1958 and it was maintained by an autonomous body known as the 'Dandakaranya Development Authority' (D.D.A.), which received financial assistance from the central government of India.³ Sri S. V. Ramamurthy eventually became the first chairman of DDA. The project continued for thirty years, after which it was wrapped up in the year 1988.

Dual Motive of the Dandakaranya Project:

Though rehabilitation and resettlement of the refugees were cited as the primary reason behind the Dandakaranya project, there was another motive that simultaneously worked behind the launch of this project. It was the intention to convert the vast stretches of Dandakaranya into an economically productive zone. The area was covered in dense forest, inhabited by tribal groups, who followed a primitive way of life, therefore the region was not much productive in terms of its contribution to the growth of the national economy. The policymakers of this project hoped that by sending Bengali refugees, (who were essentially well-versed in the art of modern agriculture) to Dandakaranya, they would be able to incorporate the modern way of life into the tribal areas. In 1960, the Central Rehabilitation Ministry declared that the Dandakaranya scheme was conceived with the twin objective of rehabilitation of displaced persons from camps in West Bengal and the advancement of the interests of the local tribal population. However, these tribals were socio-culturally different from the refugees and they possessed a distinct identity of their own. These people were civilized in their own way, which did not fit into the typical definition of civilization that the modern world knows. They depended upon the forest and its resources for their living. The Dandakaranya project aimed at providing rehabilitation to the Bengali refugees by cutting down the forest covers of the area, thus leading to a direct clash of interests between the two communities.

The policymakers of the Dandakaranya project assumed that providing resettlement to the Bengali refugees, who were essentially from the agrarian background and well-versed in the practices of modern agricultural techniques would act as a demonstrative effect on the tribals of the region who intrinsically practised primitive economy. However, these assumptions failed to take into consideration the inherent contradictory nature of the agrarian and tribal economies.⁴ The tribal economy essentially functions as a closed ecosystem revolving around the forests and they do not aim for any kind of surplus production, whereas the basic feature of an agrarian economy is surplus production and extraction by cutting down forest covers and preparing the land for cultivation. Surplus productions are no doubt essential for the growth of a state, therefore the policymakers of the Dandakaranya project were ultimately driven by the dual motive of providing the Bengali refugees rehabilitation, along with culminating the habit of growing surplus among the tribals of the region, which could, in turn, boost the economy of the State.

Refugees as Workforce:

The Bengali refugees of East Pakistan were forced to go to Dandakaranya for their rehabilitation. They never possessed any intention of resettling in faraway Dandakaranya. However, the State stopped providing them with any kind of relief and doles, thereby leaving them with no other option rather than accepting the Dandakaranya project. Most of the refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya were extremely poor and thus they totally depended upon the

reliefs provided by the State for their mere existence and could not possibly survive without that. They lived in refugee camps and had nowhere else to go. With the announcement of the Dandakaranya project, the refugee camps of West Bengal were quickly shut down one by one. The way by which these refugees were made to leave the camps in West Bengal and go to Dandakaranya was completely forced by nature.⁵ Though there was some resistance against this forced migration, these resistances proved to be completely ineffective. In July 1958, at a conference of State and Central Ministers, it was decided that all the refugee camps should be closed down by 31st July, 1959 and also the system of doles be discontinued, 'due to the demoralising effect which the Camps and the doles had on the inmates.'⁶ Hence, the helpless refugees were left with no other option rather than accepting Dandakaranya as their site of resettlement. These refugees were initially kept in transit centres, situated within the project area before they were assigned their place of resettlement and taken over there. Mana Camp near Raipur became the primary transit centre associated with the Dandakaranya project and the period for the refugees staying in this camp varied from a few days to some years. Though the refugees were supposed to be taken to Dandakaranya for their resettlement, most of the time they were not taken to their resettlement sites at first, rather upon their arrival to the transit centres, they were taken to the work site camps and kept over there as forced labourers. The construction of work site camps and temporary housing for the East Pakistani refugees was justified in the preliminary report of the project in the following words:

"The programme of reclamation of land and construction of villages cannot possibly keep pace with the scheduled movement of displaced persons into the area in view of the decision to close the camps in West Bengal by 31st July, 1959, and to provide employment for approximately 35,000 families, 75 percent of whom may be agriculturists, until they are permanently resettled either on land or in non-agriculturists pursuits. Temporary arrangements have therefore to be made expeditiously not only to house these families but also to look after them and educate their children".⁷

Thereafter, in June, 1960, it was decided by the government that every attempt should be made to utilise the refugees for the developmental work of the area, during the intervening period between their arrival in Dandakaranya to their movement to the site of their permanent resettlement.⁸ Here, we can find a tendency of the government to use the refugees as a tool, for developing an underdeveloped area. The Dandakaranya project was not the only instance of using the helpless East Pakistani refugees in the process of State expansion, the same aspect can be well noticed when refugees were sent to Andaman Island, for their rehabilitation and resettlement. Dandakaranya was a secluded region, where there was a serious shortage of manpower. In this scenario, the refugees were used as cheap labour in many so-called developmental works by the government. In the majority of the cases, no opinion was ever taken from them and they were made to do

extreme work in return for menial pay. Any kind of refusal in doing these jobs essentially resulted in the annulment of their doles and other reliefs, thus leaving them with no other option for their sustenance. Initially, most of the work site camps were founded to use the refugees in building roads. Later building of canals, dams, buildings and other construction-related works were also added to the list.⁹ However, most of the refugees who were taken to Dandakaranya were agriculturists, and therefore they were highly reluctant to work on these construction-related jobs.¹⁰ A study group from the Estimates Committee, during their visit to these work site camps, found that adequate facilities had not been provided for the inmates of these camps. No clothing, except a blanket, was given to the refugees living in these camps. There was also no arrangement for proper education of the children and a great scarcity of drinking water prevailed, along with a lack of medical facilities. The work assigned to the refugees of these worksite camps did not provide them with full-time employment and even the wages for those works were not paid to them regularly. Most of the refugees were not even aware of the final place of their resettlement and had no idea regarding the fact that how long they have to stay in those work site camps. These factors gradually resulted in dissatisfaction among the refugees, forcing them to desert the Dandakaranya project in general.¹¹

Desertion of refugees from the project sites ultimately turned out to be the biggest controversy faced by this project. However, the officials in charge failed to acknowledge this problem. In the eyes of the officials, the refugees were nothing but some workers who were throwing a fit and denying to do their job, thus deserting.¹² But the real picture was much more complex. These refugees were used as forced labourers, who were put to work without their consent. Their rehabilitation and resettlement under the Dandakaranya project was not free of cost and it did come with a huge price. Even in the official reports, it was clearly stated that the refugees were 'expected to realise that they shall have to eke out their living by hard manual labour.'¹³

The Dandakaranya region did not provide the refugees with enough growth opportunities. Even after they were taken to their permanent site of resettlement, it was immensely difficult for them to survive over there. The major focus of the project was agriculture. Initially, the agriculturist families were given seven acres of land, for cultivation. Though seven acres of land might sound quite impressive, in reality, it's the quality of the land and not its quantity which ultimately determines the yield produced from the land.¹⁴ The terrain of Dandakaranya was rugged and its lands were infertile in comparison to the fertile riverine plains of East Pakistan, from where the refugees originally belonged. Further, the land that was allocated for the refugees was mostly shallow, with less water retention capacity, while the Bengali refugees were mainly accustomed to the semi-aquatic and plain land cultivation, hence it was extremely difficult for them to cultivate in the new environment. This acted as a major blockage in the growth of cultivation.¹⁵

The refugees were not given any title deed (popularly known as *Patta*) of the land, allocated to them under the Dandakaranya project. Thereby they

possessed no official ownership of the land cultivated by them.¹⁶ This essentially reduced them to the status of landless agricultural labourers. To survive in the new unfamiliar place, these refugees needed some kind of financial assistance. In this regard, the government supported them by providing them loans but nothing was given to them in the form of grants, they were expected to pay back every amount they took from the government. This ultimately drove the refugees in extreme poverty. Shaibal Kumar Gupta, the chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority (1963 – 1964) strongly believed that the primary cause behind desertion in the Dandakaranya project was the unsatisfactory economic condition of the refugees, which ultimately forced them to leave this project.¹⁷ However, the government refused to accept any fault on their part and tried to hold the refugees accountable for everything that went wrong with the Dandakaranya project. On 23rd April 1970, Shri Bhagwat Jha Azad, the Minister of State in The Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation made a statement in the parliament where he categorically stated some factors behind the desertion of rehabilitation sites under the Dandakaranya Project. According to him, some of the reasons for desertion are as follows:

- (i) the initial trying experience of resettlement in newly opened up areas reclaimed from forest lands; (ii) the reluctance on the part of some families to work hard and to establish themselves in vocations other than those practised by them prior to coming to India; (iii) the lure of cash doles and continued camp life; and (iv) some propaganda by other interested elements.¹⁸

Through this statement, it was evident that the government bureaucrats completely tried to blame desertions on the unfortunate refugees. They were portrayed as lazy and not willing to work hard, therefore deserting the sites provided to them for their rehabilitation and resettlement. However, in reality, these refugees were far from being lazy, the officials could have easily understood this factor in case they adopted a more humane and sympathetic approach. The refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya essentially belonged to the non-creamy layer of society. They were mostly agriculturalists, who had the experience of hard work. However, ultimately they were mere humans and therefore it was natural for them to leave the project, in case they were not able to absorb all the difficulties coming on their way.

Lokhi Rani Das, of Malkangiri, narrated how she was converted into a forced labourer under the Dandakaranya project. Das stated that she, along with other refugee women had to carry heavy stones, sand and other construction materials, during their stay in the work site camps of the project. The scenario quite remained the same even after her family was given a piece of land for agricultural practices, as at that time she had to work in the fields, for the survival of her family. According to her, she along with her fellow refugee women of East Pakistan, were unfamiliar with the kind of hard menial work that they had to perform under this project, as in their homeland they were mostly accustomed to doing household chores only. Das attempted to run away from her resettlement site not once but thrice. However, all her attempts to

escape ultimately failed, as each time she was brought back into the same place by the authorities of the project.¹⁹ This story of Lokhi Rani Das draws our attention to several significant factors. It is not just an incident of a woman not willing to work hard or not liking her place of resettlement, rather it showcases the helplessness of the refugees. Women especially were the worst hit in this scenario and their condition was much more critical, as they were already tormented by the loss of their safe space called 'home'. These women refugees of East Pakistan, who hardly ever came out from the four walls of their homes, found themselves in the dense forest of Dandakaranya and they were expected to accept it as their new home. Along with this, they were also expected to work menial jobs to make ends meet. Coming out from the four walls of the household and turning themselves into a workforce is a typical feature of refugee women, as they have to support themselves and their families for survival. However, the nature of their work tends to differ from place to place. For instance, unlike the refugee women of West Bengal, who had the opportunity to work in offices, the ones who were sent to Dandakaranya, had to perform more physically challenging jobs like working in the fields, carrying heavy loads for construction, etc. Shaibal Kumar Gupta stated that an ordinary refugee family usually had only one adult male member for whom it was immensely difficult to plough and sow all the seven acres of land given to them for cultivation, especially within the short window of the cultivation period. It was also difficult for a single person to eliminate all the fast-growing weeds which are a characteristic feature of lands that are reclaimed out of a virgin forest. Therefore, even women flocks of the household, who previously had no experience of working in the fields had to come forward and lend their hands in sowing and weeding of the field.²⁰

The Dandakaranya project provided the East Pakistani refugees with rehabilitation and resettlement. However, they also have to pay a huge price for that. The poor helpless refugees were burdened with the enormous task of transforming an uninhabitable forest into an economically productive area. They were not only used as cheap labours in the construction works under this project but they were also made agricultural pioneers of the vast stretches of Dandakaranya. In this regard, historian Uditi Sen aptly stated that

"To access rehabilitation, the displaced agriculturists of East Bengal had to prove their mettle as agricultural colonisers in independent India. Only then was the government of India prepared to invest in their rehabilitation".²¹

Thus, the State's intention to provide these refugees with rehabilitation and resettlement was driven by its desire to transform the vast Dandakaranya region into a productive area, from where the State's economy could be boosted. In this process, there were numerous incidents of the refugees being tormented, violated and forced to provide their labour so that the State could expand its resources. Thereby, in the name of rehabilitation and resettlement, the refugees were ultimately reduced to a mere tool for the developmental projects of the State.

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