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NPTEL ONLINE
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Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 42 - REFUGEE, DESH AND NATION

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Continued.....

- On 13 August 1957, Amrita Bazar Patrika reported “trenchant” criticisms in the Lok Sabha “about slow progress of rehabilitation of East Bengal displaced persons ... delays in execution of schemes, [and the] lack of proper planning” by the Rehabilitation Ministry. By 1957, the Union Minister was to announce that there was no more room for Refugee Rehabilitation in West Bengal (Sengupta, 104).

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- Over 40 lakhs of Hindus had already come from East Pakistan and of them a little over 30 lakhs were in West Bengal alone. During the last two years, 1955 and 1956, the exodus had been the heaviest, the figures being 560,000.
- In case of this heavy exodus, comparatively little has been said about how the experience of middle class and educated refugees from dominant caste background varied from the experiences of poor refugees from subordinate caste groups, within the same ethnic or linguistic group.
- When it comes to scholarship on Bengali refugees, questions of class and caste difference are inadequately addressed.

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- Mallick (1999) and Chatterji (2007) - Dalit or schedule-caste refugees, who were primarily Namasudras (a largely rural depressed caste hailing from eastern Bengal, who mostly follow the heterodox Matua sect, and used to be classified as ‘Chandals’ in the colonial census before 1911), were the last to leave East Pakistan.
- Dalit refugees of East Bengal often survived violent communal attacks, which left them destitute. Lacking social and cultural capital, they were pushed out of Calcutta and dispersed to far-flung and marginal lands for resettlement, such as Dandakaranya and the Andaman Islands.

Rehabilitation of Bengali Refugees in the Andaman Islands

- In 1949, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy had started insisting that since the refugee crisis was born of a national decision to partition India, it would be unfair to expect West Bengal to shoulder the entire burden of rehabilitation of refugees from East Pakistan.
- The Islands were brought to the notice of the government of West Bengal by H.J. Stooks, the Deputy Secretary of the short-lived Development and Rehabilitation Board, enquiring if West Bengal would agree to send some refugees for resettlement to the Andaman Islands if a grant of Rs 1,300 was made available (Andaman Files, NAI, 1947). Dr. Roy agreed to the proposal.

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- The goal of Central Government was not to rehabilitate refugees, but to recruit settlers and laborers for the Islands.
- In 1949, Bengali refugees were the last group of people to be considered as potential recruits to rescue a failing plan of post-war reconstruction of the Andaman Islands that had been designed in 1945 keeping ex-servicemen in mind.
- Once a clear line of supply had been established between the refugee camps of West Bengal and sites of settlement in the Andaman Islands, an integrated scheme of colonisation and development of the Andamans was launched in 1952.
- Bengali refugees constituted over 85 per cent of the agriculturists settled in the Andaman Islands between 1952 and 1961.

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- 1952 and 1961 - heydays of refugee resettlement in the Andaman Islands when 2,413 families of Bengali Hindu refugees resettled in the Andaman Islands. The vast majority of the refugees settled in Andamans came from the districts of Barisal, Jessore and Khulna in East Bengal.
- In 1956, families were sent to be resettled in the Andaman Islands and the government promised that soon “20,000 acres of forest land are to be cleared and made available for 4000 agriculturist families from the mainland” (Amrit Bazar Patrika, 11 April 1956).
- It was also suggested that the labour for clearing the forests in Andamans be recruited from among the refugees (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2000). In deporting the refugees to states other than West Bengal, the government attempted to present the problem as a ‘national’ problem.

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- According to a statistical estimate made by Dr. Ray, out of the entire group of Andaman deportees, 11 per cent were landless peasants, 33 per cent carpenters, turners, small shop managers, tailors, fishermen, etc, 1.5 per cent labours, and only 6 per cent land-owning class and an assortment of other classes (speech on February 1 1949, Basu, *Udbastu Andolan* 45).
- The Dalit refugees were urged to live up to the criteria of “socially useful” people. For example, Prafulla Chandra Sen (Chief Minister of West Bengal 1961-67) suggested that these people make Andaman agriculturally one of the highest rice-producing regions (Arpita Basu 66).

Refugees from East Pakistan at Andaman



Refugees from East Pakistan at South Andaman.

Refugees and the Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Plan

- The Dandakaranya rehabilitation plan was conceived in early 1956 to resettle the East Pakistani refugees. At the National Development Council meeting in June 1957, it was formally decided to develop Dandakaranya as a place for permanent resettlement (not rehabilitation) of Displaced Persons.
- Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury - Whereas in the early 1950s, the Namasudra populace would be covertly shipped off to the Andamans, by the mid-1950s, the government policies explicitly proclaimed their caste bias by using coercion to transport the Namasudras for settling in the unirrigated tribal lands of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (Bandopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016 8).
- Following the dwindling in Jogen Mandal's leadership among the camp refugees, from the early 1960s, the government started forcefully dispatching the Dalit Bengali refugees to Dandakaranya, and by 1965, 7,500 refugee families were settled there (Ibid 12).

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- A large number of refugees, who were deported to Dandakaranya had to face a hostile, inhospitable, alien environment, and in Dandakaranya, desertion became a regular feature. The government also utilised the manpower and cheap labour of the refugees to develop a backward area (Gupta 1999; Ghosh 2000; Das 2003).
- Dandakaranya, scheme - plot of 6.5 hectares was given to each family and loans were disbursed for building houses and purchase of bullocks and agricultural implements. But it was clear from the start that the refugees had to “make do with the worst lands, hitherto regarded as uncultivable”
- S.K. Gupta – In Pharasgaon zone, “6% of the plots were basically unfit for agriculture, 32% were poor and sub-marginal, 53% could be of medium quality if their moisture retention capacity could be improved, and only 9% were of good quality.”

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Refugees from East Pakistan at Dandakaranya.



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- Shifting of refugees to Dandakaranya in the post-partition years never worked properly. In East Pakistan the near total departure of the Hindu upper-caste landed elite and urban middle classes meant that communal agitation had to be directed against the Hindu untouchables who remained.
- Later refugees came from the lower classes, who lacked the means to survive on their own and became dependent on government relief. Lacking the family and caste connections of the previous middle class refugees, they had to accept the government policy of dispersing them to other states, on the claim that there was insufficient vacant land in West Bengal.
- The Congress government effectively broke up the social mobility of the Namasudra group and scattered them in refugee colonies outside Bengal, thereby enhancing the dominance of the traditional Bengali upper-caste elite (Bose, 7).

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- The land of Dandakaranya where the untouchable refugees were settled in other states was forests in the traditional territory of tribal people, who resented this occupation. The conditions in many resettlement camps were deplorable, and grievances led to resentment and movement, which began at Mana group of camps in Dandakaranya and the refugees decided to launch a national movement for resettlement at Sunderbans area of West Bengal.
- Pannalal Dasgupta - Dandakaranya had fallen prey to the miscommunication among the West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh state governments and the Dandakaranya Development Authority.
- The infrastructure, promised vociferously by the Indian Government, also failed to materialize. Electricity was not available over large areas and there was often an acute shortage of drinking water. The lack of medical services and the rough terrain led to frequent epidemics with a high rate of child mortality that unsettled the refugees.
- Dandakaranya, the mythological place of the “dark forests” where Ram was exiled, appeared to the new settlers less as a land of hope than a place of banishment. It was not surprising that, within 1964, cases of desertion began to appear in local dailies and reported in the national press.

Dandakaranya Episode through Shaktipada Rajguru's *Dandak theke Marichjhapi*

- Shaktipada Rajguru's novel, 'Dandak Theke Marichjhapi' (From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi; Rajguru 1996), set in the 1970s, follows a group of camp refugees who are taken to Malkangiri in the Dandakaranya area. The novel opens with description of inmates in Mana transit camp:

“...uprooted from far away Bengal and like flotsam and jetsam have stopped at the infertile Mana's banks. Twenty years ago they had come, like waves, in the hope of rehabilitation in the soil of Dandakaranya. Some among them, the fortunate ones, got homesteads, but a few thousand families were left behind who were still living within the surrounding areas of the Mana camp. (Rajguru 1996, 1)”

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- In case of Shaktipada Rajguru's novel *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi*, Sarat Das, a camp inmate says: “For seven years we have lived on the charity doles ... what is the good of reducing us to beggars? Instead of making the entire race beggars, give us land, a little homestead, let us work and earn our keep. In these last years of our lives, let us live as cultivators as we were born. We don't want to live like beggars.”
- The frustrations and aimlessness of the camp life is demeaning to human dignity, saps energy and creates a new class of people, born and raised in the camps who live a “life of charity and joblessness in the tents and sheds, in its incipient darkness of frustrations and lethargy” (Rajguru 1996, 2).

Thank You

