



The Refugees Movement in Midnapore

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Abstract

The refugee of East Bengal took shelter in Midnapore district also. The government of West Bengal tried to rehabilitate them in Dandakaranya but the communist party opposed the government policy and they shouted for the rehabilitation of the refugees in Midnapore. They proposed the place situated on the both sides of river Keleghai. At initial stage the government did not agree to settle down the refugee in Midnapore as it created imbalance in society and economic structure. But as a consequence of restless agitation of the refugee the government unofficially agreed to rehabilitate the refugee in Midnapore.

Key Words- Refugee, Communists, rehabilitation, movement, Midnapore, government, Pasture land, local people.

Introduction: In the last days of the colonial rule in India and especially from the time of outbreak of riot in 1946 many people, mostly Hindus, came to West Bengal from East Bengal which was known as West Pakistan after the partition of India and emerged as a sovereign state named as Bangladesh in 1971. The communal politics in the last days in colonial India produced riot between the Hindus and the Muslims for creating a separate Muslim sovereign state as Pakistan. The fear-psychosis situation of riot forced to drive the Bengalee people of East Bengal to in India leaving their immovable property for their existence of life. These homeless, destitute people were called as refugee people in the Indian context.

The refugees came from then East Bengal to India and came continually till the birth of the Bangladesh in 1971. These exodus people took shelter especially in West Bengal, Assam and Tripura for their socio-cultural and linguistic conformity with these regions of India. Midnapore district was one of the shelters - place of the refugees came from East Bengal. After coming in West Bengal, initially the refugees lived in a camp or in the tent. After spending a few anxious years they finally settled in the district of Minnapore. But this was not happened not in a simple way. The district Communist party of India came forward for settling down the refugees in Midnapore district.¹ With the help of the Communist party the refugees were able to rehabilitate in Midnapore.

Dandakaranya Proposal: It was a hard task for the government to rehabilitate the refugee people in Bengal. Actually, it ought not to send back the refugees in their original homeland for the newly emerged socio-political condition of East Bengal as well as on the humanitarian grounds. So it stood remain as a duty of the government of West Bengal to rehabilitate the refugees. For this reason the government proposed the Dandakaranya scheme to rehabilitate the refugees in India. The scheme announced the region of Dandakaranya, in Madhya Pradesh as the rehabilitation place of the refugee people. There were some reasons on the part of the government behind putting forward the Dandakaranya scheme on the issue of the rehabilitation question of the refugees. Bengal, a very densely populated state, would hardly be able to take pressure of these surplus populations of the refugees. The society and economy would have been broken if the refugees took shelter in Bengal. Moreover Bengal would become a poor and ruinous state as there was no guarantee of financial assistance of central government to accommodate refugee people.

Under such circumstances the Bengal government took decision of sending refugees to Dandakaranya. From the above views it was clear that the government by placing the Dandakaranya scheme tried to serve the both purposes. On the one hand, Bengal's society and economy would be secured from taking burden of extra pressure of population of exodus element and on the other hand

the rehabilitation problem of the refugees would be solved by sending the refugees at Dandakaranya. It may be remembered that the rehabilitation problem of the refugee was turned a critical stage as the Communist Party of India was organizing the refugees on the issue of sheltering them in Bengal as well as in Midnapore.

Unwillingness of refugee to accept the proposal: In the meantime refugees, who took shelter in Midnapore, did not agree with the government scheme to go to Dandakaranya. They appealed to the government that it was better to make an arrangement to take shelter in Bengal as Dandakaranya was not any kind of ethnic and linguistic similarity. Moreover this region was infused with fierce animal. Every moment was danger if they would force to live in the jungle area. So they expressed their deep unwillingness to settle down at Dandakaranya with the forest animals. But the government was very active for the implementation of Dandakaranya scheme.

Political Development of the Communist regarding refugee Rehabilitation: In the meantime the Communist party of India [CPI], Midnapore district committee came forward to support of the refugees taking the issue of their rehabilitation in this district of Midnapore. The party took the rehabilitation programme from an humanitarian outlook and they also wished to spread their sphere of influences on the refugees. Saroj Roy, then the district secretary of the CPI accepted the matter seriously and in the meeting at Subhas Pally with refugee people he discussed the matter of rehabilitation of the refugees before the audiences. He urged them to be organized for putting up the agitations on the issue of the rehabilitation in the district of Midnapore. In another meeting at Garhbeta on 17th December, 1957 Roy said that the Communist party requested repeatedly to the government to solve the refugees settlement problem but the government was indifferent to think an alternative scheme of Dandakaranya.²

He also told the audience that he personally requested to the government officers for setting up a committee to solve the rehabilitation problem of the refugees who took shelter in the different camps of Midnapore but the government did not make any response to his call. So it was only the refugees who could force the government to solve their own problem if they would unite under the leadership of the Communist party. From this speech of Saroj Roy it was assumed that till then the refugees demanded their rehabilitation in Midnapore in an unorganized manner. It was the Communist party that organized the refugees for the fulfillment of their demands of rehabilitation here in Midnapore. CPI leaders of Midnapore district committee thought that it was a challenge for them to rehabilitate the refugees in Midnapore neglecting the government scheme. At the call of refugee committee a meeting was held at Midnapore where all the prominent district CPI leaders were invited.³ Saroj Roy presided over the meeting and Narayan Choubey, Ananta Majhi, Satya Kinkar Ghosal, Deben Das and others prominent CPI leaders in the district remained present in this meeting. This meeting was held at the District Kishan Sabha Office where Mohit Mitra remained present as a chief guest and the meeting proposed an alternative plan of rehabilitation of the refugees in Midnapore.⁴ It was very the opposite to that of the government scheme in regard to solve the problem of the rehabilitation of the refugees.

Keleghai Proposal: The CPI offered the *Keleghai* scheme to rehabilitate the refugees.⁵ The substitution scheme of *Keleghai* made an urgent request to the government that there was sufficient land remained open on the both sides of the bank of river *Keleghai* and the refugees would be happy if the government would make an arrangement to settle down the refugees in this ample open land on the both sides of river *Keleghai*. By this kind of arrangement of land to accommodate the refugee in the above place there would hardly be any inconvenience to the local people and the refugee people would feel homeliness by getting the same socio-cultural environment in which they belonged in East Bengal. The inclusion of the foreign element on the bank of river *Keleghai* would marginally affect the socio- economical balance of West Bengal. They further requested the government to accept the proposal of *Keleghai*.

Efforts to solve Refugee problem through peaceful manner: Besides these, the Communist urged the refugees to boycott the Dandakaranya scheme and make prepare them to be organized to fulfill their demands. Refugees from the different camps and the colonies attended this meeting at Midnapore. Sarsana camp of Dantan brought the highest number of refugees while Jhargram camp brought the next highest number of refugees in this meeting.⁶ Moreover, this meeting took the resolution that the refugee people would boycott the Dandakaranya proposal of the government and the CPI would launch the refugee movement very shortly and for making the movement successful

and the refugees were asked to collect the subscription to send through volunteers for organizing the refugee movement in Midnapore.

This meeting also urged the general people of Midnapore to cooperate the refugees to fulfill their demands. Refugees were told enthusiastically that they would be supported by the progressive minded of people of Midnapore as well as the supporters and sympathizers of the Communist party. Narayan Choubey, the another important leader of CPI in the Midnapore district committee urged the refugees to live along with the local residents in their respective camps areas with fraternal affection and mutual co-operation without disturbing and hampering the normal activities life of the locality. The refugees were further asked to make strengthen their union to fulfill their demands.

The CPI of Midnapore district was anxious about the destitute and deplorable condition of the refugee people. So they eagerly and heartily wanted to solve the refugee problem as soon as possible. For this purpose the CPI leaders organized a district committee meeting at the district party office at Midnapore from 23rd March, 1958 to 26th March, 1958 to take resolution for the solution of refugee problem and to settle the party's strategy and tactics for organizing refugee movement in the above context.⁷ All the members expressed their grave concern about the deplorable conditions of the refugee people especially in the scenario of the present food problem of the state.

It was evident that the CPI leaders took the refugee problem as important as the problem of the food crisis of the state. The CPI leaders and the workers were not confined themselves in speeches and meetings, they also decided to launch the refugee movement as quickly as possible with the issue of the rehabilitation problem of the refugees. On 30th March, 1958 some refugees of Khairullahchak refugee colony contracted with the CPI leaders and workers to draw their attention for participating in the ensuing refugee agitation which would be launched by the CPI party very shortly.⁸ So it was assumed that till date the Communist leaders played a pressure-politics game with the government by expending words on the issue of the refugee and thereby the Communist leaders were spreading their sphere of influence over the refugee people within this time. After setting up the stronghold on the refugees the CPI launched the refugee agitation.

Launching Refugee Movement: The activities of the CPI leaders on the issue of the rehabilitation of the refugees took an intense character from the last month of 1958.⁹ On 28th December, 1958 the CPI party of the Sadar North committee held a meeting at the district party office where the leaders like Kamakshya Ghosh and Rabindranath Mitra remained present. Both Ghosh and Mitra expressed their views that till now the government did not agree to implement the Keleghai proposal of CPI to settle the refugees permanently here in Midnapore, so it would be wise to launch the refugee movement in a large scale and in well-organized manner. It was also stated that these two Communist leaders asked the workers to mobilize the kishans and the labours of this region to protest strongly regarding the inhuman action of the government towards the refugees. So, from this time and onwards the Communist leaders directly organized and controlled the refugee movement.

From this time the Communist leaders demanded again and again to implement the *Keleghai* scheme in place of Dandakaranya proposal and urged the government to withdraw the later. They showed reasons that if there was an opportunity to rehabilitate the refugees in the district of Midnapore why the refugees would force to go to remote areas as Dandakaranya where the ethno-cultural and linguistic dissimilarity might be hampered the normal functions of life of the crossed border people. The physical, mental and the spiritual uneven development of these people may bring harm to the political development of the state. They urged the government to implement the *Keleghai* proposal on a humanitarian ground, thinking the destitute condition of the refugees. As the government did not response to the call of the opposition party, so the CPI organized the refugee movement in a large scale. The object of the movement was to obtain the right of the refugee people to rehabilitate in Midnapore, but practically the movement showed the strength of the CPI on the migrant people. The CPI party launched the refugee movement by offering civil disobedience movement. On 15th January, 1959 at Jhargram the Communist leaders offered the civil-disobedience movement at the each Sub Divisional Office and at the court compound.¹⁰ They asked all the people to support their movement. The refugee movement was supported by people including the Kishan and the labours who were also urged to come forward for strengthening the refugee movement.

Offering Civil Disobedience as a strategy of movement: On 16th January, 1959 the CPI leaders organized the refugee movement at Midnapore town where the strategy of offering civil disobedience was also taken for demanding permanent settlement of the migrant people in Midnapore. About the

300 refugees participated in Midnapore where they agitated before the various government offices especially at the collectorate compound and at the court compound. For spreading the mass-base of the refugee movement the refugee council held a meeting at Jhargram on 17th January, 1959 when almost all of the Communist leaders of the district attended. The refugee council took note of spreading the refugee movement among all the refugees' camps and colonies existed throughout the district with the help of the Communist party.

Intense Character of the Movement: In another meeting at Garhbeta held on 26th January, 1959 Roy condemned the government policy of solving the refugee problem. Criticizing the Dandakaranya scheme vehemently, Roy stressed that the refugees denied going to that area where the livelihood pattern of the migrant Bengali - Hindu-people could be changed which was socially and morally unjustified. On the meeting at the Kalabani transit camp held on 29th January, 1959 Roy again criticized the Dandakaranya plan as well as the government for delaying the settlement issue of the refugees and stated that the civil-disobedient movement would be offered at the different places of Midnapore to meet the demands of the refugees.¹¹

He also addressed the audience (about twenty refugees attended at the meeting) not to give up hope to settle in Midnapore permanently. In another meeting held on the same day at Kesiary where 20 refugees of whom 04 were women remained present. Roy urged the refugees to be organized under the banner of the Communist for the fulfillment of their demands. In this meeting the refugees from Kalabani transit camp, from Mahasole camp and from Tukiapara camp remained present. It was very interesting to note that there were 275 Kishans attended the meeting for strengthening the refugee movement and providing the moral support to the refugees.

Organizing the movement in a large scale to pressurize the government on a greater degree on the issue of the refugee settlement in Midnapore the CPI leaders had taken a new strategy at the 16th annual conference of the Midnapore district Kishan Sabha held at Bullak near Tamluk from 20th March 1959 to 22nd March, 1959.¹² The conferences called the representative of refugee to participate mandatory in the refugee movement from all camps and colonies existed in Midnapore. It was further instructed that the number of the participants in the movement should be increased and the funds would be created for the smooth conduction of the refugee movement in a large scale.

They also decided that they would appeal the villagers and the Kishans to take part in the refugee movement to create sympathy of the government towards the refugee people. According to this strategy the CPI workers were directed to take the responsibility for making understand the villagers about the necessity of the taking part in the refugee movement on a humanitarian ground. People from East Bengal came here leaving their properties only for the sake of their life and religion. So, it was our duty to extend our co – operation towards the destitute, homeless people who wanted to settle here.

In this annual conference Roy asked Smt Mira Dole of the Dudkundi refugee camp to sent at least 10 refugees from her camp to take part in the ongoing refugee movement in Midnapore.¹³ Three refugee members were given responsibility from Roy to make an extensive propaganda among the refugees in the various refugee camps and the CPI workers were directed to come in touch with the villagers near the camp of the refugee with a view to enlisting their names in the refugee movement. The workers were also directed to take an extensive propaganda to get sympathy of the villagers towards the ongoing refugee movement.¹⁴ It was also noted that Sm Mira Dole paid Rs 10/= to Roy as a donation to the refugee movement fund and three mounds of rice to feed the Satyagrahi of the refugee movement and other participants.

In the meanwhile the Midnapore district refugee council secretariat Baithak was held at the District Kishan Sabha Office on 6th February, 1959.¹⁵ In this Baithak the CPI leader Kamakshya Ghosh ensured the refugee members about involvement of the Kishan members of CPI in the refugee movement and they were also told that the refugee movement would be connected with the food movement as both movements would be launched jointly. From this time the CPI in the Midnapore district committee conducted the refugee movement with a new strategy and a new method. Roy organized the refugee movement of 600 refugees of the different camps of Midnapore and waited upon a deputation with 16 representatives of refugees before the Zonal Rehabilitation Officer in Midnapore. On 17th July, 1960 at the meeting of the refugee council at Ballichak Roy was addressing before refugees and urging them not to leave Bengal.¹⁶

He again warned the refugees that Dandakaranya was a place full of fierce animals and he strongly demanded the rehabilitation of the refugees in Midnapore. Besides the politics of meetings, deputation, procession and offering the civil disobedience movement, Roy took the policy of the frequent visit to the different camps of the refugees to give them moral support for settling here. His frequent visit to the different camps provided an inspiration to struggle with government policy and it worked as a tonic effect to the refugees to be organized more rigidly against the refugee policy of the government. During his travel at the Dudkundi camp near Jhargram on 21st July, 1961 he suggested a method of agitation in favour of hunger strike of the refugees in batches of their respective camps till their demands were fulfilled.¹⁷ With the introduction of the hunger strike as a new method of the agitation of the refugees in batch by the members of the one camps followed by the members of another camp and so on, the movement transformed into a higher level.

On 11th August, 1961 a meeting was held at the district Kishan Sabha by the call of district refugee council. The CPI leaders decided that they would frequent visit to the different camps to provide moral and political support to the hunger strikers. With the hunger strike in batches by the members of the camp the CPI leaders were in favour of continuing the civil disobedience movement before the different governmental offices situated near the refugee camps.¹⁸ They wanted to continue the hunger strike movement and civil disobedience movement jointly at the same time. At same time people were determined with their proposal. In the meantime the government took the decision of cutting off doles of the trans-border people who did not agree to go to Dandakaranya. So it was noticed that more than 200 families were deprived from government financial help.

Here was a picture of number of families to cut-off doles of the different refugees camps.¹⁹

Name of the camp	No of families
Mahasole	31
Sarsansha	43
Kadamdiha	17
Tuyapara	17
Jhargram	100

The above picture showed that the government pressurized the refugee people to abide by the Dandakaranya proposal. In protest, the Communists again launched the refugee movement taking the two parallel issues of rehabilitation of the refugees in Midnapore through implementation of *Kelaghai* scheme and against the cutting of the dole of the refugee families. The Communist organized a big procession of the refugees on 5th May, 1961 in the Midnapore town in protesting against the government decision of the cutting of the doles of the refugees and supporting the Demand Day called by the refugees.²⁰ Over the thousands of refugees joined in this procession from the various refugee camps like Kalabani, Sarsanka, Tuyapara, Mahasole etc.

The long procession traveled the main streets of the Midnapore town and shouted according to their demands. At last the procession reached to the office of Additional District Magistrate, Midnapore where they waited upon a deputation to the Additional District Magistrate, Midnapore under the leadership of Rajani Maity and Kamakshya Ghosh. The deputation requested the government not to cut off the doles and also demanded to refund the same amount of doles which had been cut-off to repress the refuge movement and they also urged the government to settle the refugee in the Midnapore.

Substitute Garhbeta- Chandrakona proposal of government and its effects: In meantime the government took the decision to rehabilitate the exodus people in this district. For this purpose the government chose the fallow land covering about 4-5 square miles on the border of the Garhbeta – Chandrakona.²¹ It was actually a khasland but local people used this area as a pasture land. The local people did not take the decision of the government heartily. At the primary stage the local people threatened the refugees to settle in the pasture land and they also theft the bundle of straw and other materials for making hut of the refugees. From this time the government blamed the CPI workers for putting up hindrance in the process of settlement of the crossed border people. Hearing this blame, the CPI leadership got worried especially when the government ensured that the Communist leaders like Harendra Dokra, Rabindranath Mitra, Subhendu Mondal were involved in the theft case.²²

Role of CPI to normalize situation: The CPI leadership at this time tackled the situation very cautiously and they arranged the meeting with the local people of the Garhbeta-Chandrakona region and wanted to realize the reasons from them for putting up the resistance in the rehabilitation process

of the refugee people in this region. This meeting revealed the fact that the local people did not agree to lose their right on the pasture land which was being used for long time by them and their predators. Knowing the sentiment of the local people the CPI organized a movement taking the sentiment of the local people in opposing the government's plan to rehabilitate the refugee people in Garhbeta-Chandrakona area. The CPI wanted to implement the Keleghai scheme in place of the Garhbeta-Chandrakona scheme. So, the Communist's strategy for organising movement in this respect did not blow the interest of the permanent residents of this area, rather it provided an inspiration to the local people as the party was struggling to keep up their right on pasture land for grazing and breeding the cattle.

However, the CPI leadership expressed their grave concern to the government's measure of cutting of doles to the refugee family who came in touch with the Communists. In the meantime the CPI leaders and the workers took resolution in its meeting that they would build the closed relationship between the villagers and the refugee people for the smooth rehabilitation process of the refugee in the Midnapore.²³ The CPI leaders came to realize that without the help of the local people the settlement of the refugee people would not be possible in the district. This realization of the Communist leaders reflected in a letter written by the Subhendu Mondal to Soraj Roy on 21st September, 1961.²⁴

Subhendu Mondal wrote that the CPI would organize a mass meeting in the union no 25 in Garhbeta police station to solve tension between the local people and the refugees. He also wrote that the excitement was created between the local people and the refugees by the wrong policy of the government as the government chose the wrong site for the rehabilitation of the refugees. The land in the Garhbeta-Chandrakona area was not the open land as it was stated that the land had been used as a pasture land. For keeping up the pasture land the Communist party under the leadership of Saroj Roy and Subhendu Mondal organized the agitation with the help of the local people.

For organizing the agitation the Communists leaders along with the some local people were arrested and convicted. The CPI discussed the matter with the local people and negotiated with the government officers for normalizing the situation. From this time the CPI, on the one hand, was organizing the movements with the issue of keeping up the pasture land and on the other hand the party was engaged in discussing the matter with the government officer to handle the excitement between the refugees and the local people. Not only had they discussed with the government officer but also with the refugees and with the representatives from both sides for several times.²⁵ The party did not want to lose the support both of refugees and the local people.

Here the CPI leaders acted as a bridge between the local people and the refugees. In the meantime the government was anxious to the development of the food crisis of the state and agreed that increased development of adjustment and mutual cooperation of both sides would make a platform to solve the refugee question. It might be said the communist made such conducive platform through their restless agitation. The government unofficially agreed to the activities of the Communist party but it did not show much interest in the implement of keleghai scheme. It assumed to be right as there was no further steps were taken on the part of the government in the matter of rehabilitation of the cross border people in the district of Midnapore. With the efforts of the Communist party the refugees began to settle down in their respective camp area in the district and the refugees took the various professions for their livelihood.

Conclusion: When the exodus people were being assimilated with the local people the government indirectly agreed to the process of assimilation. The rehabilitation of the refugees was possible for the continuous organized refugee movements conducted by the CPI leaders and these movements were involved with the local issues such as food movement and pasture land movement. There were so many local people were also involved in the refugee movement on the issue of their rehabilitation. This association and the interaction of both communities helped the refugees to settle down in Midnapore. The communist party of India, Midnapore district committee played the role of matrix in the process of rehabilitation of the refugees.

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