

Insights on Camp Refugees of Bettiah and Bisnupur; an anti-dispersal satyagraha of 1956-57

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Abstract

In this article I shall demonstrate how the government of West Bengal had no definite rehabilitation policy for the East Bengal refugees. The government of West Bengal focused on the fact that there was no land to accommodate additional people. Subsequently, the ministers held a conference at Darjeeling and decided that West Bengal had reached a saturation point. So all efforts would be taken to rehabilitate the refugees outside West Bengal. With that end in view they established Bettiah camp in 1956. Here mostly *Namasudra* refugees were sent. But they could not settle there. A number of factors became detrimental for their proper rehabilitation. As a result a large number of refugees deserted camp. Consequently a deserters' *satyagraha* was launched by the refugees. Caste played a huge role in this. Toward the end of 1957, dispersal policy was applied by the government. The refugees of Shiromanipur camp and Basudevpur of Bankura were chosen by the government for dispersal. The refugees resisted the government order. Hence an anti-dispersal movement started. Bisnupur *satyagraha* commenced in January-February 1958. It was an anti-dispersal *satyagraha*.

Key words: Bettiah, Namasudra, Shiromanipur, Basudevpur, dispersal, satyagraha.

Introduction

Partition left about 11.4 million or 42% of Hindus in East Pakistan. In 1947 nearly 1100000 Non-Muslims migrated to West Bengal (Chakraborti 1990:147).ⁱ According to the statistics of the relief department, the number was much higher. They mostly settled in Calcutta. 95% fell within the category of *Bhadrolok* class. In 1948, the influx accelerated to such extent that an inter-dominion had to be convened by the governments of both India and Pakistan. Rehabilitation ministers of both the countries came to a consensus on the point of discouraging exodus and the creation of a condition to check the mass exodus. It is important to mention that the middle class constituted the first flux of migrants. By the end of 1949, the rate of migration diminished. The first phase was thus over.

The second phase of migration, began in February 1950. When organized killing and looting, at Bagerhat, commenced in East

Pakistan, the migration restarted. It was after the Delhi-Pact of 1950. The pact provided for the return of the migrants to their homelands, on both sides of the border. It assured them of their complete proprietary rights. But evidently the act failed to achieve its goal. The introduction of passport for travelling from Pakistan to India prompted yet another exodus. Prior to the introduction of the passport system, there was a refugee influx in May 1952. It occurred on a regular basis. Gradually the number began to swell up from second week of May 1952. The number of daily arrivals was estimated to be 70-80 as against 33 a day in April and 25 a day in March. About 98% of the refugees immigrated to West Bengal via Bongaon. The rest migrated via Banpur. They came from Barishal, Faridpur, Jessore. 95% of the refugees were *Namasudras*.ⁱⁱ From early 1950s, a different group of refugees, who belonged to the lower strata of the society was faced by the authorities. The influx of these groups of refugees turned the situation in Bengal

critical for the government. The camp accommodation and the question of dole became multi-faceted. West Bengal government wanted to share its responsibilities with central government and other state governments (Kudaisya 2000:147).ⁱⁱⁱ Those who arrived after 1950 were selected to be rehabilitated outside West Bengal. In 1956, a conference was held at Darjeeling where rehabilitation ministers of Eastern States took part. There it was decided that the largest camp, would be established outside West Bengal at Bettiah.^{iv} Bettiah was considered a farmhouse of the agriculturists. After 1950 mostly agriculturists were sent outside Bengal. According to Kudaisya, camp residents were mostly *Namsudra* by caste and were mostly agriculturists. The arrival of this group changed the scenario. They lacked any personal contact. They had no special skills. This made their condition from bad to worse. Thus they depended on the government's charity. This further worsened their condition. Their future thus became tagged with rehabilitation outside West Bengal(Kudaisya 2000:150).^v From May 1952, there was a rush of *Namasudra* refugees in West Bengal. The only major and main reason for sudden influx was economic distress prevailing in East Pakistan. These refugees used to earn their livelihood by working as day laborers in Land. By then most of the upper and middle class Hindus had migrated to India. This section of people was left without any financial resources or even employment.^{vi}

The political leadership in West Bengal argued that pressure of refugee influx must be shared by the federal government by providing financial assistance and neighboring states agreeing to host and resettle the refugees within their territories. However by mid-1950, nothing was done for the purpose outside West Bengal. In absence of any concrete plan, the refugees organized themselves in all kinds of cooperative activities. Refugee colonies sprang up in and around Calcutta. But there was a large section of rural folk who did not possess any special skill or capital which could be used for employment. They had a natural craving for lands. The agricultural refugees came mostly from the

backward class like the *Namasudra*. They were engaged in paddy cultivation besides boating, fishing and carpentry. The exodus of this group aggravated the situation. This group was dispersed to Bettiah. But a number of factors were responsible behind their desertion of the camp of Bettiah. First of all, the refugee versus non refugee relation proved to be a detrimental factor for settlement of refugees outside West Bengal. Apathy of the people had roots in the economic condition. Secondly the camp life was extremely poor. And thirdly the caste issue played an important part in Bettiah desertion, followed by their *satyagraha*. We shall discuss them in details the following section.

According to Nilanjana Chatterjee, from 1950-55, no definite rehabilitation policy was undertaken by the government. The government of West Bengal at that time focused on the fact that there was no land to accommodate the additional people. Thus it becomes evident from even from the early days of 1950s, the refugees were sent to other states such as Bihar and Orissa. But there too, the question of rehabilitation had yet to take a proper form and shape. This made the refugees struggle in the relief and transit camps of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, for quite some time. The government had yet to rehabilitate them. It was only after 1955, the government of India really began to tackle the problems of displaced persons from East Pakistan, on a national basis. A conference of ministers held at Darjeeling, decided that West Bengal had reached a 'saturation' point. All efforts would be made to find suitable lands for settlement of East Pakistan refugees outside the state(Chatterjee 1992:165).^{vii}

In 1955, state's rehabilitation minister Renuka Roy, categorically declared that "we reached a saturation point, and whereas we must satisfactorily help to settle them who have come earlier; it is beyond the power and capacity of this state to provide land for cultivators and homesteads in urban areas for those who are newcomers"(Roy 2012:197).^{viii} As a consequence, in December 1957, the dispersal policy was practically implemented for the refugees Basudevpur camps 1,2,3 and

Shiromanipur camp of Bankura district. A notice was subsequently served on the inmates to move to rehabilitation sites in Rajasthan. The government stopped the doles who refused to obey the orders.^{ix}

Bettiah and Bisnupur Refugee Satyagraha Movements Of 1957

Backdrop of the struggle: In the mid-1950s, the government of West Bengal established two refugee camps at Bisnupur(Bankura), for the East Bengal refugees. Another camp was established by the government at Bettiah(Bihar), for the same purpose. The camp at Bettiah was created mainly for the Namasudra refugees, who migrated to West Bengal after the 1950 riots in East Pakistan.^x Consequently Basudevpur 1 camp was established in 1954 in Bankura district, whereas Basudevpur 2 and 3 camps were established respectively in 1954 and 1956.^{xi} Shiromonipur camp on the other hand was established by the Bengal government in 1953-54(Byapari 2018:19).^{xii} Those Namasudra refugees, who were sent to Bettiah, could not settle there. Numerous factors prompted them to desert their camps. The government at that time also dispersed off the refugees at Basudevpur and Shiromonipur of Bisnupur off to Rajasthan. Bisnupur refugees did not accept this governmental policy of dispersal laying low. Bettiah refugees on the other hand, who had abandoned their camps, were led by the Scheduled caste federation. These deserters stayed at Howrah Maidan, Dumdum Cantonment and eventually became part of another large group of refugees who, had no migration certificate. Thus the mid-1957 witnessed the deserters' satyagraha, followed by a satyagraha against the dispersal to Rajasthan.

The Bettiah and Bisnupur satyagraha: According to an IB report, Bettiah deserters' organization was sponsored by Scheduled Caste Federation. The organization encouraged the refugees, to leave their camp at Bettiah. Some of the most prominent faces amongst the leaders were Sudhir Mondol, Khirod Mallick, Satish Majumder. They were also incidentally Namasudra by caste. Later, the government

arrested Sudhir Mondol and Satish Majumder at Howrah Maidan. One Suren Adhikari, of Lakminarayan Road, of Dumdum Road cantonment met the refugees and the leaders of the Scheduled Caste Federation who had led the refugees from Bettiah. He attempted to encourage the refugees of Dumdum cantonment railway station as well. He urged the refugees to disrupt the railway's services of Calcutta Bangaon railway line and encouraged them not to go back to Bettiah(Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:100).^{xiii}

According to a report by IB officers, dated 5.5.57: About two months back, a large number of refugees, deserted their camps in Bettiah, in North Bihar, and came down to Calcutta. Their grievances were bad facilities. As a large number of these refugees came without tickets, many of them, were prosecuted and lodged in the jail, for a few days. After their release, a number of Bettiah deserters increased gradually, and a large number of them finally settled in Howrah Maidan, Howrah Station and Dumdum. They were also mixed up with other categories of refugees, who tripled down from East Pakistan without migration certificate.^{xiv}

Interestingly in the Howrah Maidan region, Samaj Sevi Sagha provided relief to the refugees. It was a Congress sponsored relief organization of Calcutta. It was headed by Arubindu Basu, (ex-Forward Block) and had recently started relief work at Howrah. Apurbalal Majumder, and other leftist leaders were suspicious of these organizations. An incident occurred at Howrah Maidan. On 25th April 1957, Arubindu Basu, the president of the organization, received an anonymous letter, threatening him with violence and arson. He was warned and asked to leave. He reported this to Officer in Charge of Howrah Police Station. Consequently a general diary was lodged at the PS. Subsequently policemen were posted inside and outside the camp by the OC for smooth functioning of relief work. Apurbalal Mujumder and Arubindu Basu discussed the matter.^{xv} Here it is pertinent to mention that Apurbalal Majumder himself was a *Namasudra* by caste. Maybe that was the reason behind his

hold over the *Namasudra* deserters. The leftist organizations too worked in multidimensional ways against the relief organization. They stamped it as a Congress organization. At the same time they felt, if the organization could not provide full dole, they should not be allowed to work at Howrah Maidan. This propaganda left great impact on the refugees. Gradually trouble began to brew between the refugees and relief organization(Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:101).^{xvi} Arubindu Basu, and Kuber Chakrabarty, were organizers of the relief organization.^{xvii}

Amongst the refugees, one group under the influence of leftist parties, was against the relief organization. They tried to destroy, rice, milk, bread, supplied by these organizations to the refugees, who were willing to accept those from these organizations. This group, would later play a vital role. Refugees demanded ten *chataks* of rice, and five *chataks* of rice for adults and minors respectively, and arrangement to rehabilitate them within West Bengal. On 2nd May 1957, despite the demands of the refugees, the volunteers supplied five *chataks* of rice to adults and two *chataks* to minors. Female refugees forcibly snatched three bags of rice weighing, six mounds of rice from Paschim Banga Samaj Sevi Sangha. The organization consequently reported the incident to the District Magistrate of Howrah. And lodged a written complaint to the Howrah Police Station. Subsequently a case was started against the refugees.^{xviii} Acting on the complaint, police superintendent along with other officers, arrived at the spot to investigate. The female refugees refused to return the rice to the police. The spirit was infectious and transmitted to their male counterparts as well. Some police personnel were badly injured in this strife. At this point the DM himself visited the spot. The female inmates surrounded and 'threatened' him when he arrived. The SP and ASP had to rescue him. The DM at first asked them to disperse. He called them 'unlawful'. But failing to get any result, he issued another warning. Finally he ordered the Police to fire teargas. As the wind was

unfavorable, the teargas also failed to yield any result(Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:101-102).^{xix}

Amongst the refugees of Howrah Maidan, Sudhir Mondol and Satish Majumder were the 'ringleaders' of the Howrah Maidan incident. These two men belong to the Scheduled caste federation. IB believed them to have instigated the refugees to come to West Bengal from Bettiah and Sudhir Mondol was their *Namasudra* leader. He allegedly propagated himself to be a relative of ex minister of Pakistan. After the incident of Howrah Maidan, the IB began to keep a close vigilance on the activities of Sudhir Mondol, as he was involved in 'lot of mischiefs' to the government's scheme at Bettiah. As Mondol attended a secret meeting at Howrah Maidan, on 5th April 1957, in the office of DSP, he was viewed by the IB with suspicion.^{xx}

Mondol was considered a threat to the government at that time. He was held responsible for troubles in Bettiah.^{xxi} When the Howrah incident took place, simultaneously on 17th April 1957, some leftist leaders, met the Chief Minister of West Bengal in a deputation for, rehabilitation of these Bettiah deserters.^{xxii} The Chief Ministers advised the leaders to persuade those deserters to return to Bettiah. They should discuss the matter with the Bihar government for better administration of the camp. This however did not satisfy the leftist leaders, who insisted on rehabilitation of these refugees within West Bengal. The leaders started a protracted discussions with the Chief Minister of West Bengal. They wanted to form a joint enquiry committee between Congress and opposition Members of the Legislative Assembly. They hoped to enquire into the actual condition of Bettiah camp. Subsequently on 27th April 1957, leaders of the leftist parties organized a press conference. They announced that an action committee had been formed with representatives of different leftist parties, trade union organizations, refugee organizations, to launch a *satyagraha* movement in order to force the government to concede to the demands of the Bettiah deserters. Hemanata Basu of Forward Block was the convener. Suresh

Chandra Banerjee. Jibonlal Chatterjee, Apurbulal Majumder were some of the other participants.^{xxiii} The refugee council of action emerged from the action committee. The refugee council of action were involved in meetings, processions, demonstrations.

Between 10.30-11.55AM, about 250 refugees including women and children who deserted Bettiah(Bihar), assembled at Wellington square from Sealdah station and Howrah Maidan, in procession. Between 12.00-12.30, a short meeting was held under the presidenship of Suresh Chandra Banerjee(MLA). The leftist leaders viz. Jibonlal Chatterjee and others were also present in the meeting. Dr Banerjee in his speech said that although their immediate demand was food and shelter, their ultimate demand was economic rehabilitation which the government failed to bring about.^{xxiv} It was why refugees deserted that camp.

Dr Banerjee urged the government to take steps to rehabilitate them within West Bengal. But the government refuse to entertain these proposals of the leftist parties. As a result, the latter had to recourse to peaceful *satyagraha* from the date.^{xxv} IB reported that at about 3PM about 50 persons on 6th May 1957, 50 persons including East Bengal Hindu Refugees, who have come from Bettiah camp assembled at Wellington Square. They came from different parts of Calcutta. Members of different political fields also participated in it. About 3.45PM, a procession of 300 refugees of Howrah and Sealdah camp, reached Bowbazar Street. Later it converged at Wellington square. The political party leaders such as Hemanta Kumar Basu(MLA) and Makhan Pal (RSP), Jatin Chakraboorty (RSP), Manaranjan Das (UCRC), Sailen Basu (CPI), Jibonlal Chatterjee were also present.^{xxvi}

IB further reported that:

On 7th May 1957, about 200 refugees assembled. At about 4.15PM a procession of about 300 refugees, being led by Chittanath(UCRC) came to Wellington square, from refugee action committee office. At about 4.30 PM, a meeting was organised there with Jibonlal

Chatterjee(DV)^{xxvii}-president of UCRC in the chair. He bitterly criticised the rehabilitation policy of the government and said that movement would be continued till their demands were fulfilled. He also declared that 456 refugees, were going to offer satyagraha, under the leadership of Bina Rani Ghosh, Satyendra Chatterjee, and Bhubendra Roy. The three leaders were garlanded. At about 4.45PM, a procession of about 500 people, including the satyagrahis, started for Dalhousie square, via Dharmatala Street and Esplanade East. At about 5PM reached in front of 4 Esplanade East. There a meeting was organised under the leadership of Jibonlal Chatterjee. Speakers including Hemanta Basu, Jatin Chakraborty, Samar Mukherjee, Haridas Mitra, bitterly criticised the rehabilitation policy of the government. He also declared that 456 refugees, were going to offer satyagraha under the leadership of Bina Rani Ghosh, Satyendra Chatterjee, and Bhubendra Roy.^{xxviii}

The agitation continued. Jibonlal Chatterjee presided over a meeting. The leaders urged the government to set up a non-official enquiry committee. The committee would look into the cause of desertion of refugees from Bettiah.^{xxix} IB further reported "that at about 5.30PM the satyagraha broke the police cordon. And were taken into the custody. All total 477 refugees(Male 109, Female 158, Children 210) were arrested on that day".^{xxx}

Later, on 9th May 1957, Shibnath Banerjee and Dulal Basu led a procession of 350 refugee demonstrators, from Wellington square along Dharmatala Street. It assembled at Esplanade East, near Curzon Park, at 5.20PM. Some speakers delivered speeches, on the same issue. The refugees bore badges styled 'give us food, and shelter, save the hungry and starving; else take us to jail'. Under "the leadership of Shibnath Banerjee, 238 refugee demonstrators, including about 150 women and children courted arrest at about 17.55 hours as they tried to force through a police cordon across the road. They were removed to jail. A large number of people lived on both the sides of the road and watched the refugees offer satyagraha. The following leaders

were found present at the venue of the arrest, amongst the refugees. 1. Jibonlal Chatterjee (DV)".^{xxxvi}

On 11th May 1957, 200 people attended a meeting, under the leadership of Forward Block leader Amar Basu. Amar Basu and Sailen Basu delivered short speeches, criticizing the rehabilitation policy of the government. And supported the demands of Bettiah returned refugees. Hemanta Basu announced the name of Nogendranath Nandi who would lead the *satyagraha* of the refugees to Dalhousie square. Nogendranath Nandi was voluntarily arrested, in the last SRC movement. Gradually the number of crowd swelled to 250. Sailen Basu announced that of late the arrested refugees were not taken to jail; instead the police forcibly took them to far off places and left them there.^{xxxvii}

A meeting of 200, consisting of mostly women, was held under the aegis of Bastuhara Sangram Parisad. It was held at Wellington square on 16th May 1957. Shanti Sarkar of DV chaired the event. It appears that Aruna Sindhu Acharji and Basudev Bhattacharji collected funds at the time the meeting was being held. Side by side, 190 children broke through the police cordon of the 'prohibited' area. These children were arrested, along with 90 other people.^{xxxviii} 28 of these refugees were from Sealdah, 2 were local people.^{xxxix} Refugee action committee also organized a meeting of 300 people, including women and children of the refugees on 20.5.57 at Wellington Square. Jibonlal Chatterjee chaired the meeting. Later Haridas Mitra (of Praja Socialist Party), became the chairperson. He spoke about the plight of the camp refugees, including Bettiah deserters. Sailen Basu (CPI) directed the refugees to start *satyagraha*. He urged the *satyagrahis* to surround those police who were nearest to the UCRC office or the leftist party office, if they were dropped at some unknown place. Jibonlal Chatterjee declared that Pabitra Nandi would lead the batch of *satyagrahis*, toward the Dalhousie square on the same day. After the meeting 300 people proceeded via Dharmatala street, toward Dalhousie square with the banners of UCRC and RAC. As the processionists reached the crossing

of Dacres lane and Esplanade Row East, the police prevented them from proceeding farther. Haridas Mira felicitated the *satyagrahis* and spoke against the government's attitude toward the refugees. Refugees led by Pabitra Chandra living at Howrah Maidan^{xxxv} and Manoranjan Halder^{xxxvi} offered *satyagraha*. Haldar lived at Sealdah. The refugees broke through the police cordon and were consequently arrested. There were three arrested refugees who were from Bettiah camp and the rest were from other camps.^{xxxvii}

From these reports it is evident that surprisingly a large number of children (stated above) participated in the *satyagraha* and they too were arrested. On 14th May 1957, Bimala Bala Roy courted arrest along with her two minor sons. She was arrested on charge of breaking the section 144 CRPC. She had come from Barishal a few back, as it became impossible to live in Pakistan. At last she was sent to Bettiah camp. She could not stay there. It was the irony of fate starving Bimala Bala was arrested as she was demanding food and shelter. On the same day Nihar Rani Roy, was also arrested. She was not more than 30 years of age. She had been starving for a few weeks. It made her very weak. She lost consciousness. As soon as she gained her consciousness, she surrendered to the police.^{xxxviii} On 27th May 1957, 70 women were arrested (Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:118).^{xxxix} In case of Bettiah the *satyagraha* remained peaceful throughout. Batches of *satyagrahis* regularly offered *satyagraha* peacefully. It was essentially a deserters' *satyagraha* movement. Like other partition victims, residents of refugee colonies in Champaran could not forget the communal riots. It left these people as Hindus. Their lives took yet another turn. The manner in which they arrived in West Bengal, remained imprinted on their minds. They remembered how they were transferred unwillingly to other areas on a pretext. It was simply an excuse. West Bengal would not accommodate all the displaced persons. Thus Bettiah camp was established after 1956.^{xl} According to Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, for many inmates of the camp their 'Bengaliness' was the reason behind their

desertion(Sinha-Kerkhoff 2000:80).^{xlii} This *satyagraha* became the backdrop of another *satyagraha* at the end of 1957. That *satyagraha* was not a deserters' *satyagraha* but a *satyagraha* against dispersal. Caste was a huge factor during both these *satyagrahas*.

In December 1957, the dispersal policy was implemented for the refugees of Bankura district(Basudevpur and Shiromanipur camps). 100 inmates of three camps of Basudevpur, camps numbers 1,2,3, were served notice to move to rehabilitation sites at Rajasthan. The government stopped the doles of the refugees who had refused to obey the order. Manaranjan Byapari was one of the inmates of Shiromanipur camp. He said that his family belonged to Namasudra caste and was from Barishal. In his autobiographical work, he mentioned how this camp mainly sheltered laboring castes such as Namasudra, Ponds, Muchis etc(Byapari) .^{xliii} This camp had two tube-wells. As a result there was a severe crisis of water in the camps. There was no source of water in the vicinity. As a consequence a long queue of women at the wells was a permanent sight. Byapari's family of five received total of 25 rupees and 13 annas. This was called 'dole'. Every fortnight, they were rationed some dry rice and lentils. The day after, he would receive the dole, the author's father used to take half day's leave from the camp office to go to Bisnupur Chowk market to shop. That was the day, the family would have a good meal of fish curry and good rice. The government's godowns provided them with old stock rice. It used to cause the refugees various forms of diarrhea. There was no washrooms within the camp. The inmates used fields and overgrown ground to relieve themselves. The healthier inmates, especially the women tried to complete the task before sunrise. They would use the area behind the tents for the purpose. As a result, the hinterland of the tent would be filthy, full of human excrement. There was tremendous heat in the district. It aggravated the situation. Deaths occurred regularly. There was a medical officer but there were no medicine in the camp(Byapari 2018:15-17).^{xliiii}

The inmates of Basudevpur camp applied for byananama(a sort of contract with the government) prior to the notice served to the inmates of Basudevpur camp. But the government refused to grant byananama. The refugees made byananama with the camp adjacent areas. Moreover the UCRC also acquired land and handed them to DM for the rehabilitation of these refugees. The main grievance of the refugees was that byananama system had worked smoothly for a long period. But the government made it complicated. The government on the other hand claimed that refugees who came after 1958 must be rehabilitated outside West Bengal. As a mark of protest against this declaration, the refugees decided to launch a *satyagraha* by March 12th 1958. It was decided by president Hemanta Basu and Ambica Chakraborty in a press conference.^{xliv} The refugees held protest meetings in January and February 1958. Processions paraded in the streets of Bisnupur. The participants demanded the restoration of doles, of the families who had refused to abide by the government order to shift to rehabilitation site in Rajasthan. On 3rd January 1958, the refugees held at a meeting at Basudevpur camp number 2. Pran Krishna Chakraborty chaired the meeting while Ambica Chakraborty, Hemanta Basu, Shasthi Das Sarkar were among the speakers. Local CPI workers such as Dibakar Dutta moved throughout the Bisnupur camp shouting their slogans.^{xlv} When the SDRO of Bankura visited the refugee camp of Bisnupur on January 13th 1958, the inmates encircled him and demanded the sanction of dole. They prevented him from moving farther. After this incident some female refugees raided the Kitchen of standby police station. According to IB Files, they 'assaulted' the police personnel. The men had 'encouraged' them to do so.^{xlvi} On January 16th Hemanta Roy, Dibakar Dutta, Himangshu Mukherjee, Shasthi Das Sarkar presided over a procession. It assembled in front of the SDO's bungalow and squatted there. Hemanta Roy articulated the grievances of the refugees. He stressed on the suspension of the dole of the families who had

refused to go to Rajasthan. The refugees had another grievance regarding the scarcity of wells and tubewells in the camp. They were insufficient in number. Three days later many men women and children paraded the streets of Bisnupur and demanded the restoration of dole. The DM assured them their demands would be conveyed to the higher authorities. The demonstrators left the place with these assurances. In the meantime a meeting was held at Bausdevpur camp number 3 under the presidentship of Dr Hemanta Roy. On the same issue a meeting was organized at Shiromanipur camp on the occasion of Demand Day. It was organized by Nikhil Chakraborty, Bimal Naskar, Dibakar Dutta, Gynendranth Biswas. They explained the significance of the Demand Day. Processions were taken out and public meetings were held in transit camps under Bisnupur ps each day from 1st February to 4th February, in observance of Demand Day and to protest against proposed rehabilitation of refugees outside West Bengal. So far the movement remained peaceful(Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:136).^{xlvii}

Meanwhile the refugee movement became more violent in other refugee camps. Twelve camp inmates of Basudevpur camp, armed with 'deadly weapons', all of a sudden, attacked the store keeper when rice was being distributed amongst the inmates of the said camp. But it was not a unanimous decision. Some inmates were not in favor of looting this store. They had in fact tried to dissuade the others. They even handed the violent ones over to the police. As the news spread to other camps, refugees from other camps assembled near camp number 2. They wanted to overawe the 'loyal refugees'. Refugees like Bisnupada Halder, son of Kalikanta of Basudevpur were chased out. He was later caught and confined in a tent by Khirod Malakar of camp number one.

He was forced to write on a piece of paper that he would not under any circumstance complain to the police and would join hands with the agitators. Two cases were lodged. Case number 1 was lodged under section 147/148/307/354/IPC owing to the complaint of

Birendranath Banerjee. This case was lodged against Kamalakanta Biswas, Nagendra Biswas , Sridam Chandra Das, Amulya Bhakta, Mahendra Biswas, Makhanlal Sardar, Niranjana Sardar, Nagendra Goldar, Pachi Bala Goldar(wife of Nagendra), Ghori Bala Biswas, Gyanada Chowdhury(wife of Nogendra Chowdhury), Rajlaxmi Biswas , Basi Bala Das and Sridam Chandra Das. Among them, Kamala Kanta Biswas, Nogendra Goldar, Ghori Bala Biswas, Rajlaxmi Biswas, Pachi Bala Goldar, Gyanada Chowdhury were arrested and taken into court's custody. Case number 2, dated 18th February 1958, under section 342/380 IPC was lodged against an unknown inmate, on the complaint of Bisnupada Halder of camp number 3.^{xlviii} Afterward, Prankrishna Chakrovorty was invited by the refugees. Accordingly on 19th February 1958, he visited the Basudevpur camp. On the same day, the refugees organized demonstrations and meetings. At the meeting, the refugees bitterly criticized the governmental policies. On 21st February Dr Hemanta Roy presided over a meeting. Here the refugees declared that the refugees would start a *satyagraha* at Bisnupur if their demands were not met within a week. Refugees were asked to enroll as volunteers. They were to raise Rs.1000 as funds to meet the expenses of the Bisnupur *satyagraha* movement. The meeting generated Rs.250 for the cause(Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:137).^{xlix} Prankrishna Chakraborty and Ambica Chakraborty led this movement. The final stage of *satyagraha* was decided upon at a meeting held under the aegis of UCRC at Subodh Mallick Square. 20,000 volunteers gathered for the ensuing movement. 3000 more were kept in the reserve bench. Fund was also collected for the movement. Volunteers were encouraged to organize parades in four camps of Bankura.^l Namasudra leaders did not lead this Bisnupur *satyagraha*. Conversely in case of Bettiah, Apurbalal Majumder, was a Namasudra leader. He led the Namasudra deserters-refugees. His leadership changed the dynamics of the movement from time to time. On one hand his relationship with the Namasudra deserters-refugees and his dealing with Dr B C Roy on the

other was a part of the refugee politics of the time. Bidhan Roy used the association of deserters-refugees with Apurbalal Majumder. He used this connection of deserters-refugees and Apurbalal Majumder for final settlement. When the deserters returned to West Bengal, they had no camp to stay. They lived at Sealdah, Dum Dum cantonment and Howrah and suffered as a result. Therefore there was no question of raising a fund by these deserters.

It is pertinent to mention that Apurbalal Majumder was a 'one man group' in the action committee. Being a *Namasudra* by caste, he could easily be the spokesman of *Namasudra* deserters in the action committee. His own activities can be traced back even before the formation of action committee. Majumder attended a meeting of refugees held on 30th March 1957 at Wellington square of Calcutta. In this meeting, the issues of Bettiah deserters were highlighted. Later, he wrote to the District Magistrate of Howrah, narrating the various miseries of the deserters, mentioning the death due to lack of medical aid, accommodation, and cash dole for them. He stressed that unless immediate steps were taken the refugees, would be forced to occupy any unoccupied building for their shelter. Refugees residing at Howrah Maidan, decided to march to Wellington square, Calcutta, under the leadership of Majumder. It was to attend the meeting under the banner of UCRC and squat in front of Chief Minister's residence. Subsequently the refugees at first assembled in batches, at Nityadhan Mukherjee road, near Praja Socialist Party's office, near Howrah. A number of other leaders accompanied Majumder. Apurbalal Majumder and Bholanath Das (RSP), went to see the DM of Howrah at his residence. The DM persuaded them to refrain from leading the procession to Calcutta. The DM assured the refugees, that relief would be provided to them. In the initial stage, Majumder led the movement. But according to IB report, after three days, UCRC gained control over the movement(Sengupta Chatterjee 2019:105).ⁱⁱ CPI wanted to broaden the narrow Bettiah refugee movement and include the issues of relief and fair price shops

for poor people in rural areas in their movement. Several leaders supported this view. But Majumder in course of time opposed any long drawn agitation of the Bettiah refugees. He urged the action committee leaders to force the central government to improve the condition of Bettiah and to encourage the deserters to return to the camp. Dr B.C.Roy's stand coincided with that of Majumder's. Dr Roy was not in favor of rehabilitation of deserters in West Bengal. Majumder wanted the improvement of Bettiah and not a continuation of a long drawn movement in West Bengal. Thus to Dr Roy, Majumder was more acceptable. Dr Roy wanted to direct the movement in proper line through Majumder(Chakrabarti 1990:174).ⁱⁱⁱ Majumder at that time went to Bettiah. He opined that prior to sending the deserters back, at Bettiah, the refugees ought to be assured of improved camp conditions at Bettiah. In the meantime, the action committee placed the demands before the government. They demanded joint enquiry committee. Apurbalal Majumder started to mediate the negotiations between the Chief Minister and the refugee leaders. The latter argued that they were willing to return to Bettiah on the condition that two months' dole would be immediately paid to them. At this time, the demands of the refugees were 1)improvement of Bettiah camp, 2)rehabilitation of the refugees within March 1958, 3)increase of cash dole by 20%, 4)opening of new ration and fair price shops, 5)opening of training and production center. Majumder also used the floor of the Assembly House to express his views. He made trips as well. He made spot inspection of Mihijam. There he discovered 9 families had been sent without any proper arrangement for settlement. Consequently one entire family died due to starvation. These people required government's support and facilities to rest upon. The government had made promises before they were taken to Mihijam. But the refugees received no relief. So the camp inmates started a hunger strike which continued for four days. After that on the assurance of the government, the refugees retracted the strike.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ In 1958 Majumder had contacted with the Bettiah camp.

He made contact with *Udbastu Seva Sangha* of Bettiah. Thus Majumder played a vital role in the Bettiah satyagraha.^{liv}

At Bankura district (Bisnupur), UCRC launched a *satyagraha* in front of office of SDO on March 12th 1958. Prior to the commencement of the *satyagraha*, refugees demanded the restoration of dole and proper rehabilitation and removal of other grievances. The leading *satyagrahis* were taken to the court. They were fined Rs. 50 each. The defaulters were jailed. A few words need to be mentioned here about the Shiromanipur camp. On 13th December 1957, a few inmates of the Shiromanipur camp PS Bisnupur, were refused doles by the government, as the former had refused to comply with the government order to leave the camp for a new site in Rajasthan. The aggrieved inmates, surrounded the camp superintendent successfully and compelled the super to sanction seven days dole. On 3rd day of the *satyagraha* nearly 39 *satyagrahis* were arrested and put behind bars for a month.^{lv} Bettiah *satyagraha* remained more or less peaceful but the Bisnupur *satyagraha* had different phases. In the earlier phase, the refugees remained peaceful. On March 18th, a procession of 700 reached Bisnupur court. Thus the erstwhile peaceful *satyagraha*, turned violent. A group of 600 refugees, rushed into the court of DDO(v) when magistrate B.B.Majumder was holding his usual court proceedings. The refugees were asked to leave the room but they refused to comply. They were prosecuted under IPC 228, in order to restrain them from creating any 'disturbance'. The magistrate ordered the police to remove the refugees from the court and keep them in custody. The demonstrators were adamant about not leaving the room, before hearing the judgment. Then the magistrate ordered the police to use force to remove them from his court. In the meantime, 600 more refugees gathered at the southern veranda of the court. As these people started brick-bating, the glass floors and windows of the courtroom got damaged as a result.^{lvi} The Bettiah satyagraha remained peaceful throughout as opposed to Bisnupur satyagraha which had once been

peaceful but turned violent at a later stage. We may assume from the sources, the *satyagrahis* who participated in Bettiah were have-nots. They had neither money nor any other funds. They were unable to enroll a large number of volunteers. Bisnupur *satyagrahis* had both numerical superiority and funds to organize a violent movement.

The magistrate of Bisnupur deemed the assembly of refugees to be 'unlawful' and asked these refugees to disperse as well. This order remained ineffective. The refugees continued to brick-bat. Thus it may be concluded that in the first phase of refugee struggle, refugees were able to hold their own against the police. During the second phase, the magistrate ordered the police to use tear gas. When the refugees tried to 'assault' the magistrate, the police used 3 shells and 6 grenades. Then they 'attacked' the SDO's bungalow. They also brick-batted. It damaged the property. The SDO also declared this assembly as 'unlawful' and asked them to disperse. This time also it failed to produce any result. Consequently the SDO ordered the police on duty to charge lathi in order to disperse them. After the lathi-charge the refugees dispersed. Before this incident, 21 had been arrested. Hemanta Roy and 27 other refugees were also arrested.^{lvii}

Here it is pertinent to mention the role of women, in the Bisnupur *satyagraha*. In early January, under of presidentship of Hemanta Roy, a meeting was held at Bausdevpur camp number 3. A large number of people participated in this meeting. A large scale participation of women was noticeable. They constituted 50% of the total participants. Here, Pran Krishna Chakraborty talked about further course of action. He said that if the government failed to pay any heed to their demands, the refugees would start a *satyagraha* movement. The refugees would launch a movement very soon. The women refugees met at Jhapormol colony for the *satyagraha*. A Provincial Mahila Samity was subsequently formed. Gyanada Mondol became the president. Renuka Mukherjee became the general secretary.^{lviii} We may thus conclude the Bisnupur camp's refugee women

were much more organized and pro-active than their Bettiah counterparts.

According to a D.I.O report, dated 13th June 1958, one Usharani Bhattacharya was a leading woman organizer of the refugees of Bausdevpur camp and Peardoba camp. She was a member of working committee of Bankura district, Bastuhara Parisad. She took a prominent role in organizing women of various refugee camps of Bisnupur subdivision.^{lix}

On March 18th 1958, she along with others took a leading role in 'attacking' a court building, magistracy and others (Case number 6, under section 147/332/427/IPC.). In the FIR, Usharani Bhattacharya, Janaki Biswas, Kanak Mondol of Peardoba camp were accused. As they absconded on March 18th, they could not be arrested 19th March. 41 refugees including the ones mentioned earlier were later arrested. These people were led by Kalipada Maitra of Basudevpur camp number 1. He had moved toward the court to start a *satyagraha*. From a correspondence between Usharani and PranKrishna Chakraborty, it can be deduced that, Usharani had been abused, assaulted and dragged into the custody by the police. She was not even a participant in that *satyagraha* movement. Perhaps her own activities failed to prove that she was a mere spectator. Of the demonstrators of 18th March, Usharani Bhattacharya, two women and one man were arrested at Bisnupur PS.

The remaining 37 *satyagrahis* were arrested under section 151 Criminal Procedure Code under the order of SDO Bisnupur. They were later released at night. According to the report of the DIB, the complaint of Usharani Bhattacharyya was invalid. The said report claimed that after the arrest she and other refugees were taken to a lock-up at Bankura sub-jail. During her incarceration, she was not at all abused or assaulted by anyone. No one had used any filthy language or abused her. According to the DIB report, all the leader including Usharani were released on 19th May 1958. Prior to that Usharani and her two companions were produced before the SDO *sadar* Bankura on 2nd, 16th and again on 30th April 1958. Usharani had

not placed her allegations (which she made before Prankrishna Chakraborty in a letter) before the magistrate. Thus it may be concluded that these allegations were untrue and in practice she was an active member of the organization.

Bisnupur *satyagraha* was a bridge between Bettiah *satyagraha* and the *satyagraha* against the Dandakaranya scheme. Bettiah *satyagraha* was not a *satyagraha* against the dispersal policy. It was a struggle / movement of the deserters. Danakaranya was a utopia. It had some resemblance with Bettiah. In between the two, lay the experimental schemes and implementation of schemes at various places. The government had selected Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh as sites for refugee rehabilitation. The people chosen for these were from the lower caste communities. On 23rd March 1958, was to be celebrated as Basudevpur Day throughout West Bengal. It must be mentioned here that stoppage of dole by the government was the vital instrument the government used against the refugees. In case of Basudevpur camp, the leaders who were put behind bars were not released till May 1958. There was a shortage of funds for conducting cases of the refugees. After a month, eventually the government and the refugees a compromise.^{lx}

According to a report published in *Anandabazar Patrika*, for the settlement of East Bengal refugees in Rajasthan, the government was ready to prepare three colonies. It was expected to rehabilitate many refugees in these three colonies. It would cost the government 33 lakhs. In Rajasthan per capita expenditure was Rs.5000. But in West Bengal, per capita expenditure was only Rs.3000. Moreover Rajasthan was a desert area. The government was ready to develop the land in that area but not in West Bengal. Around the time of Bisnupur *satyagraha* a staff reporter of the Statesmen (newspaper) went to Bisnupur. He inspected the situation in Bisnupur. He noted an engineer's words. The engineer said to him that the government proposed to spend Rs.1000 million to develop the Dandakaranya area. If they had allowed another 50 million to the

proposed allotment under the second 5 year plan in the Kangshabati project it would have been irrigated by 1961. An extra area of 2 lakh 50000 would have been irrigated. This would have eliminated the possibility of sending present number of families outside Bengal. The money which was meant to be spent outside Bengal, could have been spent in West Bengal. The land in the less developed districts of Bankura and Puruliya would have developed. The protests of the Bisnupur camp was thus a very natural response. It indicated the camp refugees in West Bengal, were ready to resist, any sort of dispersal policy.^{lxi} Bettiah Satyagraha which started in 1957, continued in Bettiah till 1958. Here it took a violent form.

Conclusion

The year 1957, is thus important for the camp refugees in West Bengal. It can be concluded that camp refugees of West Bengal and the question of caste were essentially intertwined. Till 1955, no planned policy toward the camp refugees was undertaken by the government. The West Bengal government instead was eager to send the additional refugee populace outside West Bengal. With this end in view, the government established the camp of Bettiah in Bihar in 1956. The refugees did not receive any warm or good treatment at this camp. The condition of the camp was extremely poor. Moreover the local people was averse to the idea of having additional pressure on the economy. A number of other factors further aggravated the situation. A branch of Scheduled Caste Federation worked among the Bettiah refugees. Moreover their 'Bengaliness' caused them to desert Bettiah. They came back to West Bengal in April 1957. They had to live at Howrah Maidan, Howrah Station, Sealdah Station and Dum Dum cantonment. They thus had no camp facilities at all. They decided to start their struggle from the scratch as they had 'nothing'. Therefore a *satyagraha* of the deserters started in May 1957. Toward the end of 1957, the government's dispersal policy, took a concrete

shape. Two camps of Bisnupur district came under the purview of this dispersal policy. The refugees of Basudevpur and Shiromanipur camps were selected for dispersal outside Bengal. The government served notice to 100 inmates of the camps. But unlike the deserters, they did not have any organized group of schedule castes or even camp leaders.

It may be further concluded that most of the deserters of Bettiah, were mostly *Namasudras*. A branch of Scheduled Caste Federation played a prominent role to encourage the deserters to articulate their demand to claim rehabilitation within West Bengal. Thirdly *Namasudra* leader Apurbalal Majumder, played a distinguished role in these deserters' movement. It was the first organized struggle of the camp refugees against the government policy. No such long drawn organized movement had taken place earlier.

Bisnupur *satyagraha* on the other hand revolved around three crucial issues. First of all, they resisted the government's dispersal policy to Rajasthan. Secondly they wanted the doles to be restored to the refugee families. And lastly they wanted the government to withdraw police cases of *satyagraha*, filed against the refugees. Bisnupur *satyagraha* ultimately turned into an anti-Dandakaranya agitation. It was conducted by Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sanmelan and United Central Refugee Council(March-April 1958).

Important Abbreviations

UCRC United Central Refugee Council
SBBS Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sanmelan
EIRC East India Refugee Council
CPI Communist Party of India
RCPI Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RSP Revolutionary Socialist Party
FB Forward Block
PSP Praja Socialist Party
SDO Sub Divisional Officer
DM District Magistrate
BMS Bengal Maha Sabha
CCBS Cooper's Camp Bastuhara Samity (Samiti)

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^{xxvii}Democratic Vanguard

^{xxviii}WBSA, Report of the meeting and demonstration, of the refugees on 7.5.57 organised by Refugee Action Committee, IB File, IB Department.

^{xxix}WBSA, Report of the meeting and demonstration, of the refugees on 7.5.57 organised by Refugee Action Committee, IB File, IB Department.

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^{xxxiii}Wide Section Number 262, Dated 16.5.57, under section 143/145/186.

^{xxxiv}WBSA, From SBDN Dated 17.5.57, IB Department.

^{xxxv}Pabitra Chandra was from Dhaka district.

^{xxxvi}Manaranjan Halder was from Khulna

^{xxxvii}WBSA, Note on SBDN Dated 22.5.57, IB Department.

^{xxxviii}*Jugantar* 14 May 1957.

^{xxxix}Sengupta Chatterjee, Swati, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, p.118.

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^{xli}Sinha-Kerkhoff, Kathinka.(December 2000). “Futurising the past”, *South Asian Refugee Watch*, Vol. II, p.80.

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^{xliiv}*Anandabazar Patrika*, 18th March 1958.

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^{xlvii} Sengupta Chatterjee ,Swati, *West Bengal Camp Refugees*, p.136.

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