

East Bengal Refugees in West Bengal, 24 Paraganas: A Case Study of Protest

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Abstract

In this article, the present author attempted to deal with the activities of the refugees in 24 Paraganas, West Bengal during the period 1949-64. The district of 24 Paraganas is important as it is situated in the bordering area. The article reveals the migration of refugees through Bongaon, 24 Paraganas. In course of time, camps and colonies (squatters and government sponsored both) were established in 24 Paraganas. From 1950-1958, various refugee organizations were formed. Leaders of these organizations fought amongst the refugees of camps of 24 Paraganas. The camps of 24 Paraganas are important for the struggle of the worksite camps, anti-Dandakaranya satyagraha, scheme of forcible occupation of land. The years 1950 and 1961-64, remained important for the question of migration for 24 Paraganas. During 1963-64, police activities in the border areas of the 24 Paraganas became anti-migrants in the name of administration.

Keywords: border-activities, camps, colonies, refugee-leaders.

Introduction

Undivided Bengal experienced freedom and partition from the colonial reign, more or less simultaneously. The trauma of partition was difficult to disassociate from independent Bengal. The post 1947 Bengal had a history of truncated Bengal. Bengal was divided into East Bengal in East Pakistan and West Bengal in India. Similarly Punjab was also divided. In the midst of such changes, two nations were born-India and Pakistan. Partition was followed by displacement of millions of people, who lost their homes and became refugees. From East Pakistan refugees migrated to West Bengal. A large number of refugees went to districts like Nadia and 24 Paraganas. The district of 24 Paraganas had a long history. Since the introduction of permanent settlement, even before that, it had a distinct history. In the post – partition West Bengal, there was a single district of 24 Paraganas. Separate North 24 Paraganas came into existence after 1980.

Some refugee camps in West Bengal were established in pre-1950 days. In the years 1954-55, a number of refugee camps were established by the government in 24 Paraganas-

- 1) Baltia camp (rural) was converted from transit camp to work site camp. It was established in 1955.
- 2) At Sonarpur, camp number 2 , 4-7, was established in 1954.
- 3) Transit camp at Rajpur Bazaar (urban) was established in 1955.
- 4) A transit camp was established at Bongaon 2.
- 5) In the same year, Bongaon, Panchpota 2 (rural) , Bongaon 3, Gagananandapur (rural) , Raipur , were established. ⁱ

Existing Historiography

The question of camp refugees and their struggles were highlighted by P.K.Chakrabarti. He dealt with the camp refugees of West Bengal and their struggles in two chapters of his book.ⁱⁱ Nilanjana

Chatterjee's doctoral thesis emphasized upon the question of rehabilitation of the refugees from East Pakistan.ⁱⁱⁱ Reference may be made of the article by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhuri. He dealt with the dispatch of the East Bengal refugees to Andaman.^{iv} T.Y. Tan and G.Kudaisya also wrote on the subject. The authors dealt with the East Bengal refugees in their book.^v Joya Chatterji wrote on the question of rehabilitation of refugees from East Pakistan.^{vi} Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury narrated her nostalgia of *desh* and the memories of partition.^{vii} Joya Chatterji's important work throws light on migration of refugees from East Pakistan, its different phases, government policies toward the refugees, rehabilitation and other aspects of refugee life.^{viii} Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita Dey wrote an article on the camp refugees.^{ix} Sekhar Bandyopadhyay referred to the refugees, describing them as 'bitter taste of freedom'. He also spoke about the refugees and the first election.^x Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta, wrote an article where they mentioned the voices from permanent liability camps.^{xi} Udit Sen wrote about building of Bijoygarh Colony in Calcutta.^{xii} Shibaji Pratim Bose in an article, mentioned the role of migrants and UCRC.^{xiii} Dwaipayan Sen dealt with the question of the defeat of *Dalit* politics in Bengal. In his book he mainly spoke about Jogendranath Mandal in pre-partition and post-partition days.^{xiv} Swati Sengupta Chatterjee in her book, spoke about the West Bengal Camp refugees, their dispersal and the question of caste.^{xv} Joya Chatterji wrote another book on this subject. There she spoke about the decolonization in South Asia and some other aspects involving the partition of India and migration.^{xvi} Anindita Ghoshal in her book mentioned the refugees in some states of Eastern India.^{xvii} Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury penned another book where they wrote about the story of *Dalit* refugees and partition.^{xviii} The earlier historiography had focused on the refugees but they have scarcely dealt with the camp refugees. There is almost no work done on the refugees of various districts of West Bengal. In this article, the present author has intervened by stressing on the coming of refugees, the establishment of camps and colonies and protests of camp refugees of 24 Paraganas on various issues.

Methodology

The author of the article has used a plethora of sources, including intelligence branch archival records, newspapers, various books and articles and interviews of refugees obtained from various other scholars.

Activities in Some Camps in Pre-1950 Days

In the 24 Paraganas, the activities amongst the refugees were started by P.R.Thakur. He tried to work amongst the refugees. He started working amongst the refugees of 24 Paraganas. He started to collect information about the camps and started preparing for *satyagraha*. The refugees at that point of time had some definite problems.

1. As evacuees they were not treated correctly.
2. Fee was demanded from them for living in the Indian domicile.
3. The refugees had discontent over the issue of stoppage of relief to the widows and children.
4. Their dole had been stopped since 13th December 1948.
5. The camp inmates had a distinct discontent over the shortage of medicine in the camps.

P.R.Thakur collected information about the camps. There was some discontent amongst the camp inmates. He established contact with the *samities* that existed in the camps. He got the information of the discontent of the residents through these *samities*. The important camps of the 24 Paraganas were – 1) Ichapur New North Lane. It had 4600 residents. The existing *samiti* was Purba Banga Jana Kalyan

Samiti 2) Ichapur North Lane. East Bengal Club was its existing *samiti* 3) Naihati camp. It had 8500 residents. It too had its own *samiti* namely Jana Sangrakhshan Samiti. P.R Thakur decided to start *satyagraha* in these camps. The *satyagraha* would take the form of hunger strikes. It was decided that gradually the number of hunger strikers would increase. Then the movement would get momentum. Thakur used his followers as volunteers. The camp residents worked under him.^{xix}

Afterward, P.R.Thakur's activities led to the establishment of Thakur Nagar Colony at 24 Paraganas. It ran on co-operative basis. It was the first colony of the Namasudras. Shri Nishapati Majhi, parliamentary secretary of non-military supply, toured in the colony. He appreciated the work of the residents. Further he asked the *Namasudra* residents, to think of themselves as residents of West Bengal, not as *Namasudras*.^{xx}

Developments in 24 Paraganas After 1950

In 1950, certain developments took place in the district of 24 Paraganas. For instance, on 16.2.50, a meeting of East Bengal refugees was held under the presidentship of Mahadev Bhattacharya at Delpara refugee camp, Naihati, 24 Paraganas. Mahadev Bhattacharya was the leader of the local refugees. He asked the refugees to keep peace. He further asked them not to be perturbed by the rumors spread by 'mischief mongers'.^{xxi}

From the report of SDPO Bongaon (24 Paraganas), it can be ascertained that on 9.3.50, some hutments of the Namasudra refugees, near Matha Bhanga p.s Bongaon(24 Paraganas) were burnt. Apprehending arrest by the police, the Muslim men of the village fled to the bordering Pakistani area. On the morning of 13.3.50, some abandoned Muslim huts were burnt. It was suspected that Muslim men themselves burnt these houses to incriminate the Hindus. Steps were taken to guard the evacuee property which was present on the border.^{xxii}

According to the I.B officers, there was a tendency among the Namasudra evacuees settled near Bongaon to terrorize the Muslim residents of the Indian Union. It was allegedly done to force the Muslims to emigrate to Pakistan by exchanging their houses and properties.^{xxiii}

In the evening of 30.5.50, 4 refugees of Atghara p.s Baduria(24 Paraganas) challenged one cart that was passing from Atghara with properties. It annoyed the local Muslims. On the following day, Abdul Malik (P.U, B iii), son of Lakiuddin in Atghara collected some Muslim men and raided the house of Dafadar Balaram Mandal, and Kiran Baidya of the place. They also assaulted one of the refugees and told them to leave the place at once. They further raided the Hindu houses of the village. They also tried to assault the refugees. The SDPO had to rush to the place along with the OC to bring the situation under control.^{xxiv}

In the early 1950, there were 14 refugee camps in 24 Paraganas. The camps were at Haltu, Kasba, Dhakuria, Tilpara, and a portion of Jadavpur on the eastern side of the railway line. A working committee was set up in each camp to look after the problems of the camps. Some of these working committees worked under the influence of Revolutionary Socialist Party of India, Forward Block, and Congress. A central refugee rehabilitation council was formed with the members of all the working committees to guide their works.^{xxv}

An incident took place at Kharda camp toward the end of 1950. Some women refugees were ordered to go to Ranaghat (Nadia) but it was arranged that they would draw their ration from Kharda till the end of the week. But the female refugees tried to reoccupy the abandoned camps on the plea that living condition of Ranaghat was unbearable. So, 100 refugees on 2 occasions occupied those huts. When they came to draw the ration, they were however forced to leave the camp. The police persuaded them to do so. The police kept the area under their watch.^{xxvi}

In this connection it may be mentioned that the refugee women said that Ranaghat had bad living condition. The inmates of Dhubulia camp of Nadia held a similar view.^{xxvii} The inmates communicated same idea to Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury.

In the meantime, a number of squatters' colonies, established in 24 Paraganas. Jadavpur had 58 camps, Behala 4, Dumdum 40, Belghoria 3, Baranagar 7, Noapara 4, Kharda 15, Naihati 3 Bichpur 4, Jagaddal 4, Titagarh 1 and Habra had 2 camps.^{xxviii}

There were other colonies as well- Bijpur (Ashokenagar), Netajinagar, Shahidnagar, and Kartzunagar colonies. There was a different kind of character of Kalyangarh colony. It was established at the initiative of the government. The land was requisitioned from Northern area of Habra. The middle class families who lived in Habra and Baigacha camp took shelter in the Kalyangarh colony.^{xxix} Other colonies were established by the government in rural areas- Habra, Baigacha, Kanchrapara, Garia and Rajpur.^{xxx} Cases of attack by police on the colonies like Jadabgarh occurred when refugees assembled in a meeting.^{xxxi}

According to Udit Sen, Bijoygarh colony had a different history. It was established primarily by occupying wireless centers and barracks built for allied soldiers during the second world war, in the Jadavpur region of 24 Paraganas. It was generally called Jadavpur refugee camp. The families who went to the abandoned military barracks, organized themselves into a committee called, Jadavpur refugee camp association. According to the census of 1951, after Calcutta (2099000), other refugees went to 24 Paraganas (527000). The history of Bijoygarh rests mainly on autobiographical sources. This colony grew up from squatting of 12 refugee families, in an abandoned military camp at Jadavpur. Their leaders were Sambhu Guha Thakurta, Kalu Sen, Ashish Deb Roy and Shanti Ranjan Sen. The colony committee invited Basanti Devi, widow of CR Das, in order to get the support of Congress. Freedom fighter Santosh Dutta presided over the meeting. In the meantime, a clash took place between *zamindars* of Layalka and refugees at Layalka. In this struggle refugees were victorious. Following this incident, the name of the colony was changed to Bijoygarh(1949) to commemorate the victory. Gradually schools, colleges, markets developed in the colony. In course of time, a maternity home was established. Later this colony got some government aid. It was because of Santosh Dutta's connection with congress. Therefore Bijoygarh cannot be treated as an ordinary *Jabar Dakhal colony*.^{xxxii} According to Indubhushan Ganguly, the colonies which received governmental assistance can be described as government sponsored colony.^{xxxiii}

In this connection, a few words may be said about the first group of refugees which came after partition. They had no place to live but had money. Their problem was finding accommodation. The second group of refugees depended on the government for livelihood and accommodation. The third group was largest in number. They had no scope for rehabilitation. This group occupied and settled in the vacant lands. It was the beginning of *Jabar Dakhal Colony*. Life was very hard for this group of the migrants.^{xxxiv}

Most of the refugees, who came in the first phase, were from the upper castes with some degree of education. Most of them came from rural background. They established the colonies. The colonies were homogeneous by caste and district origin. But in course of time a new kind of homogeneous identity as refugee gradually overshadowed the other factors in the squatters' colonies as well in camps.^{xxxv}

Struggle at Worksite Camp of Bagjola: 24 Paraganas

Bagjola was one of the worksite camps of 24 Paraganas. This camp led the agitations against the government policy of rehabilitation in that particular area. It was situated near Dumdum. It extended over Mauza Yatragachi, Ghurni and Kestopur. The government brought the refugees from the transit camps to these worksite camps. They were engaged in digging canals. The government met such arrangements so that inmates of the camp would receive dole. The refugees, who were directly engaged in construction work, would get wages according to their labor. But the government took no initiative to rehabilitate them. In this camp, a scheduled caste leader provided the leadership. In the meantime, Communist Party of India dominated refugee organization United Central Refugee Council was formed (in 1950). The scheduled caste leader Hemanta Biswas worked in this camp for a few years. He represented the interests of the worksite camps. At that point of time, when refugees were brought to the worksite camps, government made a promise that the refugees would be rehabilitated in the worksite camps. The government's promise remained unfulfilled. There was a discontent among the refugees. A number of meetings were held. On 13.1.55 one such meeting was held. It was presided over by Pran Krishna Chakraborty. Hemanta Biswas of Bagjola camp 1, gave important speeches. Naren Roy, a CPI worker of Dundum also spoke at this meeting, as did Nalini Pal of Ultodanga. Gopi Saha (UCRC of Dumdum), Abu Taher (CPI, Hatiara, p.s Rajarhat) spoke at this meeting as well.^{xxxvi}

In his speech, Hemanta Biswas demanded that the refugees of the worksite camps should be paid wages. They should be paid for their works for holidays and Sundays. Gopi Saha and Nalini Pal stated that the refugees of Bagjola should be rehabilitated within next Phalgun. Otherwise they would start a satyagraha. It would include blocking of official building and hunger strikes. As the government failed to fulfill these demands, the refugee struggle continued. The refugees were mostly peasants. But at the worksite camps, they were engaged in earth cutting. So the peasant refugees were attacked by tuberculosis. So the leaders urged them not to do such work.^{xxxvii}

Later the refugees passed some resolutions-

- 1) Rehabilitation of the worksite camp refugees within the next winter at Dhapa, Manpur Mauza.
- 2) Starting a cotton mill or any other heavy industry, in the said area. It would provide employment.
- 3) Payment of wages to the refugees of worksite camps of Bongaon.
- 4) There was a demand for voting right for the camp refugees.^{xxxviii}

The agitation of the worksite camps especially that of 24 Paraganas, reached a new phase. A conference of Sonarpur zonal camp p.s Baruipur was held on 19th and 20th April 1957. Nearly 50 delegates attended the meeting. Bankim Debnath of UCRC, Ambica Chakraborty of UCRC, Manik Dutta of CPI (Canning), Khagen Ray Chaudhury MLA and others attended this meeting. In the conference the problems of the Sonarpur worksite camps were discussed by the delegates. Further, the refugees decided to place a strong demand before the government for rehabilitation. In the meantime a new committee named

Sonarpur Zonal Bastuhara Parisad was established for agitation in the Sonarpur area. 37 members formed a new committee. Members from different camps and UCRC constituted the committee.

On 20.4.57, a conference was held. Amongst the members, Renu Chakraborty was present. She focused on the fact that despite the government's failure to keep the promise, refugees became conscious of their condition.^{xxxix}

Before going into details about the government policy of rehabilitation, a few words may be said about the growth of refugee organizations. In the year 1950, mainly under the leadership of CPI, the UCRC was established. In UCRC, there were other parties also. In the year 1953, the refugee wing of Praja Socialist Party, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sanmelaan was established.^{xl}

The Government Policy of Dispersal and Refugee Satyagraha

At the early stage of the refugee influx, the government followed the policy of denial and dispersal. The only exception was Prafulla Ghosh. In practice, the political authority, of newly established government considered the refugees as a threat to their authority. From the early stage, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy took up a policy of dispersal. In 1948, the government applied the policy of dispersal to a group of refugees and they were subsequently sent to Andaman.^{xli}

From 1956, two processes started. The government contemplated the policy of dispersal. On the other hand, the refugees began to consider opposing it.

Since 1956, thus the government started to form a full-fledged dispersal policy. According to Gyanesh Kudaisya, the genesis of this policy was in the Rehabilitation Minister's Conference, which took place in 1956. The government declared that the refugees who were ready to go outside West Bengal would only get the state help.^{xlii}

The dispersal policy was then applied on an experimental basis (1957). This policy then reached a culminating point in case of Bisnupur Satyagraha^{xliii} and Bettiah Satyagraha.^{xliv} These were followed by government's application of Dandakaranya scheme and refugee counter-action. The first such movement of the refugees was conducted during the period March to April 1958. Both UCRC and SBBS participated in the movement. SBBS joined for the first time in the *satyagraha*.^{xlv}

The movement progressed in Calcutta, other districts and sub divisional level. SBBS at this time, conducted a *satyagraha* at Bongaon. At that point of time, the local leaders of UCRC, felt that unless they took up joint movement with SBBS, it would lose control over the refugees of Bongaon area.^{xlvi} UCRC leaders did not remain detached from SBBS. On the contrary, UCRC conducted a joint movement in Bongaon from 20.3.58.^{xlvii}

The refugees of Rampur, Panchpota, Ganganandapur, transit camps of 24 Paraganas involved in the *satyagraha*. A meeting was held in Town Hall Maidan. 250 refugees attended the meeting. Speakers like Anil Sinha and others, spoke on the issue of rehabilitation of refugees. Balahari Mandal (PSP), declared that *satyagraha* would be initiated at Bongaon court from 20.3.58. Refugees with varied shades of political colors were asked to join the movement. Prior to this, a procession of refugees with festoons of SBBS, UCRC, went to Town Hall. The refugees demanded the removal of the Dandakaranya scheme. Both the organizations did not want the refugees to be sent outside West Bengal. Leaders wanted release of the *satyagraha* prisoners. Anil Sinha(CPI), Sudhir Mirdha (CPI), Shantimoy Ghosh (CPI),

Surendra Roy (Jogendranath Mandal) led a procession from Panchpota transit camp. They assembled outside Kumudini Balika Vidyalaya. From Rampur camp, 20 refugees went to participate in the *satyagraha*. The *satyagraha* of Bongaon continued till 6.4.58. During this time, Hemanta Biswas declared that if the government failed to pay heed to the refugees' demands, then he would urge the refugees to forcefully occupy lands. It is here pertinent to mention this plan was actually implemented in 1959.^{xlviii}

In the mid-1958, some developments took place within SBBS. Jogendranath Mandal was a part of SBBS till July 1958. Before going into details about his breaking away from SBBS, some words about Mandal and his rise as a refugee leader may be narrated. A conference was held in the Bagjola camp of 24 Paraganas, on 11th and 12th January of 1958. Mandal, ex-Pakistan minister, was invited to the camp conference for the first time. After a long time, a large audience saw Mandal and heard his speeches. In the anti-Dandakaranya agitations, Mandal fought in the March/ April *satyagraha* of 1958. He was a member of SBBS. He was arrested at the very early stage of the *satyagraha*. During his incarceration, he came into contact with some young members of SBBS. Gradually he became disillusioned with SBBS. In July 1958, he formed his own, non-political refugee organization.^{xlix} After this incident, three refugee organizations began to operate amongst the refugees. After the formation of these refugee organizations, in January 1959, these organizations operated in 24 Paraganas.

On 17.1.59, a convention was held at Bashirhat Town Hall, under the Assistant Teacher High English School, Satyendranath Nath. Gopi Saha of Calcutta, Manaranjan Sur of Bashirhat, Jamini Ranjan Sen of CPI, were the main speakers. 100 people gathered there and speakers criticized the government policy of rehabilitation. According to the speakers, there was no need to send the refugees outside West Bengal. UCRC in the meantime, submitted a plan before the government, showing avenues of settlements of refugees in West Bengal. The speakers urged the refugees to participate in the *satyagraha* to be staged at Bashirhat Court, on 22.1.59 as a sign of protest against the Dandakaranya scheme. The leaders placed a request before the local people to make the movement successful. A Sangram Committee with 31 members was formed to conduct the movement. Manaranjan Sur of Bashirhat, Jamini Ranjan Sen of Swarupnagar, and others were prominent leaders.ⁱ

On 13.1.59, the refugees started a *satyagraha*. On 21.1.59, the refugees went to Barrackpur Court. Chitta Nath, Gopi Saha, Kunja Basu, Niranjana Sengupta, Kamala Tanti, Anupama Ghosh and others were some of the important leaders. They denounced the Dandakaranya scheme. By the end of January 1959, 400 refugees from Titagarh camp, Kachrapara, Dumdum camp, Belghoria and Panighati Camps, under their leaders Gopi Saha, Gopal Basu, Hari Mohan Sen, Niren Gupta, led them to Barrackpur Court. The refugees entered the court of J. Biswas, N. Nath, K.C. Mallick, and U. Chatterjee in batches.ⁱⁱ

50 female refugees of Titagarh camp (women camp), ps Kharda, Palashi refugee camp, Bichpur camp, Ichapur and Noapara camp came to Barrackpur, led by Kunja Basu of Kachrapara and Sunil Nandi of Dumdum. The refugees entered the court compound. The speakers spoke against the Dandakaranya scheme and stoppage of dole of children. The women and children assembled in front of the court room and offered *satyagraha*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jogendranath Mandal and Bogjola Camp of 24 Paraganas

As I had mentioned earlier, Mandal established his non-political refugee organization, in July 1958.^{liii} Gradually his sway extended over Bagjola camp, 24 Paraganas. On 14.10.58, CM Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, declared the possibility of rehabilitation of 10,000 refugees within West Bengal. But due to opposition from the local people, that could not be done. According to the CM, 18000 families could be admitted in Sonarpur and Bagjola. Moreover, there were 26000 bighas of fallow land at Nargel lake under Habra P.s, North 24 Paraganas. There were also 1000 bighas of low land were at Bastirbil of Barrackpur. Moreover there were fallow lands at Mouza of Canning, 8500 bighas at Herobhanga, Jharkhati Mouza. In these areas of 24 Paraganas, refugees could be rehabilitated.^{liv}

Jogendranath Mandal in a letter to Dr Bidhan Roy, wrote that lands for rehabilitation of refugees could be found in 24 Paraganas. Mandal mentioned –

- 1) 100 bighas of Woodland were lying fallow at Mouza Tambulda of Tambulda Union.
- 2) Lands from Taldi (30,000 bighas) were lying which could be utilized for refugee rehabilitation.
- 3) The following areas could be utilized for refugee rehabilitation in 24 Paraganas- Singheswar (8000 bighas).
- 4) Mouzas Naskarpur and Parbatipur also had fallow lands.
- 5) Areas near Narabumia in 24 Paraganas could be similarly utilized.
- 6) There was Herobhanga and Jharkhali scheme in 24 Paraganas for rehabilitating the refugees.
- 7) Hironmoypur , Deshapara agricultural farm of the government could be utilized for refugee rehabilitation.

Land was available in other Mouzas of p.s Canning. There were 5000 bighas of land available in Sandeshkhali, 5000 bighas in Marichjhapi, for settlement of refugees. refugees could be settled in the Mouzas Gangaliya and Kamakhsyapur and lands of some other *zamindaries*. In Mouza Ranigachi, Goberilot, Sonatolalot, Ranijaigherilot and Mustigirilot No.7071, lands were available for refugee settlement in Habra P.S. lands were available in some other areas for refugee settlement in Sonarpur area- Dhapa Manpur, including Garia Beel. The area was 20,000 bighas. There was 8500 bighas of land available in Mouza Yatragachi, Ghurni. In Baruipur area, some lands could be utilized for similar purpose. In Habra area, the Nanglarbeel could be similarly utilized. Lands were available at Gaighata as well. In Tangra and Barrackpur, 1000 bighas of land could be utilized for the paddy cultivation by the refugees.^{lv}

The Bagjola camp of 24 Paraganas was very important in the life of Jogendranath Mandal. His journey as a refugee leader started from this camp.^{lvi}

Bagjola camp was Namasudra majority camp. A branch of East India Refugee Council was formed in Bagjola camp. When Mandal was detained under PD Act of 1950(Act IV of 1950), on 6.1.60, amongst the grounds of his detention, one was that he presided over a meeting held at Bagjola camp, Rajarhat, 24 Paraganas. He declared that if the demands of the refugees were not fulfilled, then a movement would be launched from January 1960. Then the refugees would start a movement by forcibly squatting on the lands of others.^{lvii} After the arrest of Mandal, some of the inmates of the Baltia camp of 14 Paraganas went into hunger strike.^{lviii} Similarly the inmates of the Bagjola camp started a hunger strike.^{lix}

From 4.2.60, 14 inmates of Bagjola camp(including 3 women) resorted to hunger strike. Amongst their demands, one was release of Jogendranath Mandal. Jagadish Mandal(his son) visited the Bagjola camp No.9 and praised hunger strikers. Dhiren Bhoumik also visited the camp on 7.2.60. He also encouraged the strikers.^{lx}

A report of the IB officer reveals that he had gone to the Bagjola camp, p.s. Rajarhat(24 Paraganas). After an enquiry, he came to know that as the Namasudra class , the local refugees held a sense of resentment following the detention of Jogendranath Mandal. The major demands of the refugees included release of J.N.Mandal, rehabilitation of refugees within West Bengal, restoration of doles that had been stopped. Trailakhsya Barui(50) of camp no.1, and other leaders of the camp joined the strike. Amulya Halder took the initiative. After a negotiation, between Maya Banerjee, Deputy Minister, and leaders of EIRC and PSP, the hunger strike was called off on 11.2.60. It was the 8th day of the hunger strike. Earlier, Haridas Mitra, MLA (PSP), Bidhyut Bose (PSP) met the hunger strikers at Bagjola camp No.9, on 11.2.60. These leaders informed the refugees that they had requested P.C Sen, the Rehabilitation Minister to pay a visit to the Bagjola camp to witness the condition of the strikers. As the minister was indisposed, the Deputy Minister agreed to visit Bagjola. Accordingly the Deputy Minister visited the camp and held discussions with the refugee leaders and camp refugees. A camp refugee handed over their demands including the release of Jogendranath Mandal, restoration of cash dole, rehabilitation of refugees within West Bengal. After a discussion with the deputy minister, ultimate decision was reached. The minister assured the refugees that their demands would be sympathetically treated by the government. The government would make final settlement. On her assurance, the hunger strikers broke the fast.^{lxi}

Hemanta Biswas and Forcible Occupation of Lands in Some Areas of 24 Paraganas

In the Bagjola area of 24 Paraganas, Hemanta Biswas of SBBS, played an important role. By mid-1959, he started a movement for acquisition of vacant lands by the camp refugees.^{lxii} A conference was held at Shalunguri. Refugees from Shalunguri, Yatragachi, and Ghurni attended the conference. These refugees suddenly occupied the Shalunguri area. This suddenness made the police perplexed. So the police were unable to take any immediate action. Later the government took strong measures. The government declared section 144. Hemanta Biswas was warned by SP 24 Paraganas.^{lxiii}

In the meantime, local landlords lodged a case against Biswas for trespassing. Case no. 62(7)/59 under the sections 145/147 Indian Penal Code, was subsequently lodged.^{lxiv} There were other allegations against Hemanta Biswas as well. According to the camp superintendents, the residents of the camp, stole government properties like tents. When the section 144 was imposed, Biswas changed his base of operations. He went to Dhapa-Manpur area.^{lxv} According to Hemanta Biswas, he had some valuable documents in his possession. Those documents would prove that the land they had occupied could be used for the rehabilitation of the refugees.^{lxvi}

During this period, the political scenario played a very crucial role in Bagjola camp area. From the beginning, both CPI and PSP were present in the area. PSP fought for the interests of the refugees while CPI was more concerned about the interests of the peasants. Quite naturally the activities of Hemanta Biswas made the peasants apprehensive. They became afraid of the refugees. A meeting was arranged, between CPI and Congress to discuss this particular problem. The peasants decided to send a deputation to the Chief Minister. Badshah Miah, Chitta Ghosh, Abu Taher, Bijoy Mandal and others attended the

meeting. PSP did not remain quiet. Haripada Bharati(MLA), and Hemanta Biswas met on 6.7.59 to discuss the question. At the same time, Biswas tried to find an advocate who would fight for the refugees in court. Biswas continued the struggle for land acquisition.^{lxvii} Thus it may be concluded that the camp refugees used the technique which was earlier used by the middle class refugees.

One IB officer along with SIPN Sannyal enquired about the situation of Bagjola area. It appears that some refugees had forcibly occupied lands in Shalunguri area. The refugees of the new site were economically hard hit. They had been working as day laborers and maintained themselves. Local police ordered them by beat of drum to vacate the lands they had occupied. The refugees were also asked to return the tents that they had taken from the Bagjola camp. The police also threatened that if they failed to do so, legal action would be taken against them on charges of theft of tents and trespassing into others' lands etc. But such announcements did not create any effect on the refugees. They remained adamant and determined to resist any attempt of eviction from that place by all means.

Hemanta Biswas , the refugee leader, tried to keep the morale of the refugees at the new site. A meeting of refugees was held at Bagjola Bazaar at his initiative. The PSP leaders such as Pabitra Roy, Dhiren Bhoumik spoke at this meeting. They asked the refugees to be united in order to realize their demands for settlement in Bagjola area. The government on their part made enquiries at Dashpara (Ultodanga) and Kashipur camps. The enquiry revealed that Hemanta Biswas earlier had tried to allure some refugees of the aforesaid camps. He wanted them to forcibly occupy lands. But he did not get any favorable response from the refugees of the said camps. Biswas had tried to maintain contact with his followers. But they were negligible in number. He had also gone to the said camp to persuade some refugees to move to the new site of Shalunguri. His pleas had gone unheeded. Only 1 refugee named Manindra Sarpan of Dashpara camp whose doles had been stopped for alleged participation in the last movement, left for Shalunguri with his family. In fact Biswas had got no hold over the Dashpara and Kashipur camps. CPI sponsored UCRC got more influence over these camps. The refugees were not eager to move to the new site of Shalunguri.^{lxviii}

Refugee Struggles in Bagjola Camp in 1961

In June 1961 another refugee struggle commenced in Bagjola camp. On 19.06.1961, in the Bagjola camp of 24 Paraganas, 5 refugees resorted to hunger strike.^{lxix} On 26.06.1961, Bagjola camp's hunger strikers were attacked by the police. The police used tear gas and *lathis* on them. The police very badly fired at the refugees killing Gyendranath Sana, Nishikanta Halder, Sarat Chandra Sikdar, Nityananda Gyen. Many other refugees were injured. On 30.06.1961, other camps observed a day of mourning. For the whole day, the refugees went on a hunger strike in order to show respect for the martyrs. Apart from the hunger strikers, refugees from different camps, went on processions and protested against the government policy and police brutality on the refugees.^{lxx} Apart from the Bagjola camp, the police were also brutal to the refugees of Baltia, Rampur, Basberia and Panchpota camps of 24 Paraganas.^{lxxi}

At this stage, the SBBS and EIRC put forward some demands such as-

- 1) The dole that had been stopped, must be resumed immediately.
- 2) Immediately all classes of refugees should be rehabilitated.
- 3) The families of the refugees who had been killed should be compensated. They also demanded a judicial enquiry for the proper punishment of the accused persons.

- 4) The refugees of the Sealdah station and surrounding areas, should be rehabilitated.
- 5) The rehabilitation policy should be changed.^{lxxii}

On 26.06.1961, the police fired at the residents of Bagjola camp. This led to a judicial enquiry. It was conducted by additional District Magistrate B.N.Sen.^{lxxiii}

A number of refugees testified before the additional DM of 24 Paraganas who was conducting the enquiry. A female refugee named Kamala testified that she was the resident of the camp no 10 of Bagjola. She mentioned that on 20.06.1961, the police had gone to remove the hunger strikers. She and her husband heard the slogan *Bande Mataram* from camp no 7. She along with her husband tried to go there but the police did not allow them to do so. Later the police also threatened them. Then the police removed some hunger strikers. She had not witnessed the police firing but heard the shots being fired. Her husband got injured. Kamala Bachar (14), Bhagawati Halder (35), Shuruchi Mistry (14), Anumali Sardar (70) also testified.^{lxxiv} In course of time, the judicial enquiry was completed. A total of 58 people testified. The question of firing was established.^{lxxv}

24 Paraganas : The Minority Question of East Pakistan 1961-1964

The 24 Paraganas is a bordering district. From 1950 to 1964, the question of atrocities on the minorities was important issue in East Pakistan. These atrocities on the minorities had started even before 1950. This got reflected in the migration. After 1961, the leaders in Indian Union became very apprehensive. Jogendranath Mandal drew attention to the disturbances in Gopalganj. The extent of losses in respect of lives, properties, brutalities, continued to perpetrate there. Mandal also mentioned *Namasudras* of Gopalganj had not died at the hands of Muslim Gundas but had refuted their attacks. But the losses were quite heavy. The *Namasudras* inflicted losses on the Gundas. But the Pakistan police and military, riffles and bullets had joined these Gundas. This created adverse situation for the minorities. Mandal criticized Prime Minister of India for failing to keep his assurances which he had given several times to the minorities of Pakistan.^{lxxvi}

Earlier, a meeting was held at the residence of N.C.Chatterjee. Here Mandal pointed out that some decision should be made regarding the Gopalganj issue. He suggested that there should be exchange of population between India and Pakistan. Moreover he also suggested that volunteers should be extended in the mixed localities in West Bengal. Hindu minorities should be allowed to leave Pakistan without any document. Mandal expected to leave Calcutta on the morning of 24.05.1961 in order to go to Bogula to attend a students' meeting. On the next day, he intended to leave for Habra in 24 Paraganas. In all the meetings, Mandal highlighted the Gopalganj issue.^{lxxvii}

On 29.2.1964, a meeting was held under the auspices of Sara Bangla Udbastu Sanmela. At that time, section 144 CRPC was promulgated. The meeting was held at Kalyangarh. It was presided over by Soumendranath Tagore (RCPI-TG). There were a number of speakers such as Haripada Bharati (JS), Kashikanta Moitra (MLA, PSP) and Shibnath Banerjee (PSP). The president and other leaders spoke in the meeting. They exhorted upon police action on the audience (29.02.1964). The government did not take any action against the police. The leaders asked the public to be united and launch a strong movement for proper rehabilitation of the Hindu migrants. The leaders also urged for arrangement for total transfer of Hindus from East Pakistan. They also demanded judicial enquiry over the police excesses during the delegates' session (29.02.1964). On 01.03.1964, the police arrested the leaders from

Kalyangarh. The whole process was condemned by other leaders. Haripada Bharati in his speech deprecated the government policy of appeasing the minorities in West Bengal. Further he added that unless the highhandedness of the police on the refugees at Kalyangarh Balika Vidyalaya was dealt by the government, serious action would be taken. The local police at Habra was guided by the administration. The Habra police trespassed into the school premises. The leaders wanted action to be taken for wholesale transfer of minorities to West Bengal.^{lxxviii}

On 13.02.1964, a meeting (50) was held by the civil liberties committee. In this meeting, the sufferings of Hindus, following the communal disturbances there and the apathetic attitude of the Indian political parties, mainly the CPI, toward the refugees from Pakistan, was highlighted. Naren Sen, councilor of the Calcutta Corporation said that the local MLA belonging to CPI, were trying to entangle him, and his followers in the cases in connection with the recent communal disturbances. That MLA was passing on false information to police in this regard. He also criticized the government for promulgating orders under section 144 CRPC in the city and its suburbs.^{lxxix}

In the meantime, the police of Bongaon and Habra meted out most barbarous behavior against the *Namasudra* refugees of Ashrafabad, Dakshin Nagla and Brotinagar; all under Habra Police Station. This was done in the name of the administration. 2 *Namasudra* refugee girls, Mamata Pal and Sumati Biswas were raped. P.N.Thakur (MLA) spoke in a meeting. He mentioned that the government was following a step-motherly attitude toward the Pakistani Hindus.^{lxxx}

Even in the early years of 1960s, 24 Paraganas occupied an important position. A group of leaders of Civil Liberties Committee went to Bogra, P.S Bagda district 24 Paraganas. They took some snaps and enquired from the local people about the strength of Indian Border Out Post and contacted few migrant families. N.C Chatterjee (EIRC) was unhappy about the inadequacy of protective arrangement for the border and made some remarks(deemed uncharitable) on the police force. After the enquiry, the leaders returned to Bagda's Satyananda Brahmachari Ashram and met about 500 people, including 30 women. Chatterjee spoke to them about the police activities there. About 10 people including Sarat Biswas of Boaldehapur, Sudhir Mandal of Purduh, Nirod Halder of Patra and Lalmati Biswas, wife of deceased Bipod Bhanjan Biswas of PS Bagda spoke to Chatterjee. They made allegations against police excesses. Apurbalal Majumder recorded the statement of Lalmati Biswas whose husband had died as a result of police firing. Chatterjee gave her Rs.10. The leaders then left the place and reached Haridevpur and enquired about the migrants and went to Petropole railway station. They enquired about the relief measures given to the refugees by the government as well as private organizations such as Bharat Sevashram Sangha.^{lxxxi} Thus it is apparent that during the years 1961-64, the question of minorities in East Pakistan and brutalities they faced, were stressed by Indian leaders. In this period under review, the leaders conducted meetings and supervised the various bordering areas of 24 Paraganas. The question of wholesale transfer of Hindu population was repeatedly taken up by them. But one thing was alarming. The police of West Bengal brutalized the migrants in the name of the administration.

By way of conclusion

From the above discussion, we can come to the conclusion that the 24 Paraganas was a bordering district. Therefore the question of migration became extremely important. When the migrants reached 24 Paraganas, gradually camps and colonies were established. The most important was the Bagjola camp. It began its existence as a worksite camp. In the early 1960s, it became a center of protest. This

camp was mainly inhabited by the *Namasudra* refugees. Other camps of 24 Paraganas are well known for their struggles during the anti-Dankaranya *Satyagrahas*. The border area of Bongaon remained an important area from the standpoint of migration. In the 1960s, the border area of 24 Paraganas became important for police activities. As a whole 24 Paraganas thus remained important for migration, settlement and protest of the refugees from East Bengal.

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