

## Agitation in Refugee camps 1948-49 to Early 1950s: Spontaneity and Early Unionism

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### Abstract

In this article a few aspects of agitation of the camp refugees have been highlighted. In this connection struggles of camps like Salboni, Salua(Midnapur), Kashipur( Burdwan), Cooper's camp( Nadia) were mentioned. Agitations of Salboni, Salua, Kashipur, took place before 1950. The Cooper's camp's agitation took place during the early 1950s years. The pre-1950 agitations were spontaneous in nature. But in case of post 1950 agitations, the growth of unionism became visible. In pre-1950 period growth of refugee *samiti* took place without any outside help. During this phase, all the leadership and resistance came from the camp level. This is only a root level struggle. In post 1950 struggle in the Cooper's camp the refugee front of Revolutionary Socialist Party of India, conducted the refugee agitation in the camp. After 1952, a branch of United Central Refugee Council dominated the scenario. Thus it is very clear, after 1950, unionism entered the camp politics. But it must be mentioned there were camp leaders also. Both in the early days of the struggles( Pre-1950 and Post 1950) , women played an important role.

**Key words-** refugees, unionism, Salboni, Salua, Kashipur, Cooper's camp, spontaneity, women.

### Introduction

The camp refugees struggled, in the pre-1950 and post-1950 days. However there was a marked difference in composition of refugees. In this article, I would like to compare the struggle of the camp refugees of pre and post 1950 days. In post 1950 days, lower caste/class people came to live in the camps. In this respect, I would like to say a few words about the earlier works done on this subject.

### Existing Historiography

In case of West Bengal, there is a limited amount of work on the camp refugees. The pioneering work was *Marginal Men* by Prafulla Chakrabarti (Chakrabarti 1990) <sup>1</sup> He allotted two chapters on camp refugees in his book. Any future scholar can start from that point. But this book lacks full-fledged description of refugee movements of 1957-1958 and 1961.

Joya Chatterji in her books and articles( Chatterji 2007)<sup>2</sup> dealt with the question of refugees. She did not cover the camp refugees. In only the articles, issues of camp refugees came up. In the

second article, she made a comparison between conditions of government sponsored camps of Jeerat and refugees own settlement at Azadgarh. In early 1990s, Nilanjana Chatterjee dealt with the question of rehabilitation of refugees in her doctoral thesis( Chatterjee 1992).<sup>3</sup> Her work contained some technical discussion regarding migration from East Pakistan. She discussed the life of camp refugees but mainly focused on self-made, self-sufficient refugees. Chatterjee in another article( Chatterjee 1990)<sup>4</sup> described the process of influx, how the government categorized the refugees into old and new, how caste and time played an important role. In this article, there is no reference to refugee agitation. Gyanesh Kudaiysa's article(Kudaiysa 2000)<sup>5</sup> focused on the idea of lower caste refugees, who migrated to West Bengal after 1950s. These people took shelter at government camps. The government followed a policy of dispersal, toward these refugees. Dandakaranya scheme and Marichjhapi massacres had been discussed in this article. The author ended with the refugees' deep sense of longing for their

motherland. Abhijit Dasgupta in his article( Dasgupta 2004)<sup>6</sup> showed the connection between caste factor and refugee agitation. He discussed the agitation at Cooper's camp. Two articles by Calcutta Research Group, were penned by Anushua Basu Roychowdhury Roychowdhury (Roychowdhury Basu 2009) and Ishita De( De 2009)<sup>7</sup>. Basu Roychowdhury in her article "Life After Partition" (Roychowdhury Basu 2009)<sup>8</sup> devoted a section on lives and times in the refugee camps. She wrote about the life and condition of Coopers' camp. Her arguments are based on the interviews with the residents. She wrote about United Central Refugee Council and Praja Socialist Party. She traced the history of Marichjhapi but no detailed discussion of the refugee movement is found in her writing. Ishita De wrote an article( De 2009)<sup>9</sup> which was mostly related to Coopers' camp. She depended on interviews with camp refugees for her article. In the third section of her article, she dealt with transit camp to ex-camp site. She referred to the refugee movement but did not touch the main issues of refugee movements. Dwaipayan Sen's thesis on Jogendranath Mandal( Sen 2012)<sup>10</sup> is important from the aspect of camp refugee's movement.

Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay in his book( Bandhyopadhyay 2009)<sup>11</sup> dealt with problems of East Bengal refugees. In the chapter 'arrival of freedom', he depicted refugees as 'bitter taste of freedom'. He gave a short description of refugee migration, nature of migration, establishment of colonies and camps. He emphasized the idea of rehabilitation policy as well as policy of repatriation. 1952 was a landmark year. The general election was held in that year. In the electoral process, refugees acted as a social group which according to Bandhyopadhyay stood at the margin but could not represent any party as a candidate. He mentioned the activities of various politicians. He spoke about UCRC, firing at Dhubulia camp. There were some references of struggle of camp refugees. There are some vernacular literature on camp refugees. Manaranjan Byapari( Byapari 2018)<sup>12</sup> wrote on Namasudra aspect of camp refugees' struggle. Hironmoy Bandhyopadhyay being a

government official began his udbastu (Bandhyopadhyay 1970)<sup>13</sup> with an incident which showed a mental separation between himself and the Muslim orderlies. He gave official view of the rehabilitation policies of the early days. He also spoke about categorization of refugees and establishment of camps, transshipment of refugees to camps. One can get an idea of government sponsored colonies. Ultimately the idea of Dandakaranya is found in this book.

Tussar Singha's book( Sinha 1999)<sup>14</sup> and Jagadish Mandal's books (Mandal 2003)<sup>15</sup> throw light on the camp refugee's struggle. From the abovementioned survey it is clear that no clear and vast work had been done on the camp refugees in pre and post 1950 period. Moreover the relation between camp refugees and scheduled castes and any such struggle was only depicted by Abhijit Dasgupta. Thus the current article try to show the spontaneity of refugee struggle in the pre-1949 years and the gradual entry of political parties and unions in refugee politics in post 1950 years. Salboni, Salua, Kashipur, represented the first group and Cooper's camp represented the second group.

### **Methodology**

For this article, I have sifted through unpublished archival sources, Intelligence department's papers( dated the years 1948-1956) as well as published secondary sources. I have also used Newspapers such as Anandabazaar Patrika for this work.

### **Struggles in the camps**

In the present article, I would like to focus on how the struggle of the camp refugees and Salboni camp Midnapur, Kashipur camp of Burdwan, developed during the years 1948-49. The pre-1950 struggle developed at Kashipur camp of Burdwan. The protest expressed itself through hunger strike(1<sup>st</sup> December 1949). At that time the situation had gone out of control. District Magistrate asked the Relief Commissioner, to visit the camp. However he did not want the team from rehabilitation department, to go to the camp, without teargas

and other necessary equipment. This team, (Sub Divisional Officer and other officers), reached Kashipur camp for an enquiry. In the meantime, the refugees collected acid-bulbs, brickbats, and became ready for direct action.<sup>16</sup>

The refugees of Kashipur camp, on the other hand, were engaged in a hunger strike for a long time. During this period the women refugees, encircled the hunger strikers. Nearly 50-60 women were engaged in this work. The hunger strikers were kept in a room. They kept a Tulsi tree near their head, signifying death.<sup>17</sup>

During the hunger strike, two members of the camp, Bireswar Dutta and Kailash Kumar Dutta, led the movement. In the first phase, Kailash Kumar Dutta played an active role. Similar role was played by Bireswar Dutta in the second phase. During the first phase, six refugees including Kailash Dutta was arrested. In the second phase, he remained behind the scene but conducted the movement. He was not placed before the police.<sup>18</sup>

In the first phase, six refugees were arrested. Some refugees, including women were injured. In the second phase, the refugees did not allow anybody to go near the hunger strikers. The DM and the refugee leaders decided to meet to reach at a point for withdrawal of hunger strike. But they could not reach to a compromise because the refugees, placed the following demands:

- They should be given pakka houses as gift.
- Till the refugees were transferred to the said houses, they should be given dole.
- Refugees demanded expenses for shelter.
- They demanded unconditional release of arrested refugees from Kashipur and Gopalpur camps.
- They demanded enquiry regarding arrest and injury of women refugees.
- They demanded police should stop arresting the refugees from the camps.

The hunger strike would continue till the fulfillment of the demands. They decided not to

let the doctors of the camp successful in breaking the hunger strike.<sup>19</sup>

During the time of the hunger strike, apart from the camp inmates, the primary teachers, the employees of the camp who had no job, were influenced by the movement. Similarly those employees who were expelled from the camp participated in the movement. Hunger strikers were divided into two groups. One group wanted to go to rehabilitation centers and the other did not. Those who opposed going to rehabilitation centers, led the hunger strike. This agitation also against closing down of the camp. With the agitation, party of Soumendranath Tagore, party of Sarat Chandra Bose, party of Ashutosh Lahiri were related.<sup>20</sup>

DM received the following directions from the rehabilitation department regarding the Kashipur camp.

- Officials of the rehabilitation department would leave the camp.
- Camp's doctors would regularly look after the hunger strikers.
- DM was instructed to shut down the camp.

Within 31<sup>st</sup> December 1949, employees of the camp were directed to be dismissed and ordered to leave the camp.

DM was asked to prepare a list of refugees, who were eager to go to another place for rehabilitation.

Those refugees who had bought land in 24 parganas were informed that Deputy Relief Commissioner had been instructed to help the DM in this respect.<sup>21</sup>

Such warnings were announced to not only this camp, but other camps as well. Apart from that there rose a need to keep watch on political parties and some of its leaders. Camps such as Nawabpur, Gopalpur, Kodalia, Dudhkundu, Digree, Salboni, Salua, were brought under close watch. Warning was announced to these camps. In case of these camps, Bhadrakali and Kachrapara camps, some precautionary measures were taken.

Just like Kashipur camp, Salboni camp of Midnapur, became a source of apprehension for the authorities.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the 'disturbance' at

this camp, Bengal Refugee Minority Samiti's president gave a statement. According to him, on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1949, 6 refugees including 2 women started a hunger strike as a protest against mismanagement, injustice, oppression, corruption, in the camp. Shri Chattayapadhyay the president informed the news to CM B C Roy, relief commissioner B K Guha, and PM Jawaharlal Nehru. Consequently Sarat Chandra Ghosh-Dastidar, a member of Bengal Refugee Minority Samiti, was sent to Salboni camp. His negotiations and DM's cooperation, helped to call off the hunger strike(24<sup>th</sup> March 1949) but under certain conditions. But unfortunately the main terms of the conditions were not fulfilled. So again, the agitation commenced.<sup>23</sup> Local authority in apprehension of 'breach of peace' declared section 144.

After the withdrawal of hunger strike, situation took a new turn at Salboni camp. Under the guidance of Ramini Mohan Sharma and others, Salboni Refugee Kalyan Samiti had already come into being. It now became more active. It tried to recruit all the local refugees. The prominent workers of the samiti, propagated that government would have fulfilled their demands had it not been for the local authorities who stood in their way. These leaders created a kind of dissatisfaction in the minds of the inmates toward the camp authorities.<sup>24</sup>

On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1949 a prominent leader of the said samiti organized an open meeting. There it was decided to raise fund for the samiti, with a view to face a worst situation in the long run and also to incur expenses for keeping contact with their Calcutta link. Thus it was decided to collect 2 anna from each member of the samiti, and Mushtibhikya from each refugee from outside the camp. The samiti also started a volunteer organization called Shanti bahini. It had about 40 members. They were trained to parade daily in the early morning in front of the camp no 3. The volunteers had no uniform. They carried no lathi during the time of parade. One Jogyeshwar Deb of Noakhali of the camp, acted as the instructor. The only object of starting this volunteer

organization was to procure some wholetimers for the samiti. They would remain prepared for an occasion of an emergent situation.<sup>25</sup>

It appeared that some of the members of the Kalyan Samiti threatened to assault the refugees, who had planned to go against the samiti, and give information about the activities of the samities to the office of the camp.

In the meantime, majority of the inmates of the camp started working according to contract system, based on circular issued by the authority. But the members of the Kalyan Samiti did not accept the new system of the work. They tried to dissuade others from doing work under the system. Just after the dusk, some outsider-agitators also visited the camp and held secret meetings and discussions with the samiti members. The following were the main agitators of the salboni refugee kalyan Samiti. They were behind the entire scenario: Camp no.1- Ranimohan Sensharma of Noakhali(president, Kalyan samiti), Nirmal Sensharma, Mahendra Roy of Barishal, Narayan Sarkar of Barishal, Nikhunja Chakraborty of Barishal, Madhusudhan Sarkhel of Barishal, Dinesh Chandra Dey of Tripura, Jogweshwar De of Noakhali, Manaranjan Pal of Dhaka, Kanailal Chakraborty of Tripura.

Camp no.2- Rajendra Bhowmick of Tripura(Assistant Secretary Kalyan samiti), Nityagopal Das, Bonpolimohan Pal, Nakuleshwar Nandi of Tripura, Balaram Kaviraj of Noakhali.

Camp no.3. Umesh Chandra Sarkar of Noakhali, Mritunjoy Chakraborty of Noakhali, Suresh Chatterjee of Barishal.<sup>26</sup>

On 15<sup>th</sup> May 1949, local authorities of the camp, announced section 144 in the camp. Moreover 7 members of Kalyan Samiti, including the president, were ordered to be transferred to Dudhkundi camp. In the meantime, another samiti, named Salboni Bastutyagi Shanti Sanmeloni grew up in the camp.<sup>27</sup>

Camp authorities decided to pay dole to the refugees in proportion to the output of their work. Refugees who were not working under the

contract system, would not be paid any dole. The date of payment of dole for the last fortnight was fixed on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1949. Thus the authority became apprehensive of 'trouble' in the camp on that day.<sup>28</sup> Superintendent of the camp informed that attitude of the members of the Kalyan Samiti, was not at all congenial to the authorities of the camp. They often 'abused' the camp authority.

In the camp something else transpired. In course of time rivalry and bitterness developed between two existing samities. Consequently there was a possibility of 'breach of peace' in the camp. This prompted the camp authorities to impose section 144. It should be mentioned here. Kalyan Samiti had already fought against oppression, corruption, maladministration, through hunger-strikes. It was numerically stronger. Because of this Samiti, the leaders were ordered to be transferred to Dudhkundi camp. A new situation was created as a result.<sup>29</sup>

On 16<sup>th</sup> May, a special police officer (Midnapur), went to the camp to execute the order of transfer effectively. In practice, the leaders on whom the order was served were not found in their houses. Then the police went to the house of the president. It was surrounded by many women. They sat on the road. When the police party and camp authorities, approached they stood up. Some other refugees including women came to join them.<sup>30</sup>

On the second day, 55 refugees were arrested. They complained about physical torture. Each refugee was allowed to be released on the payment of Rs.200. But everybody preferred to stay in jail. On 26<sup>th</sup> May 1949, Amritalal Chattapadhyay met them. 5 were found to be hospitalized. 7 were still in jail.<sup>31</sup> The news of hunger strikes at Salua camp reached him through the department of post and telegraph. He sent a member of the Brahmo samaj and member of refugee minority samiti, Sarat Chandra Ghosh-Dastidar for necessary enquiry and make a compromise. They requested the refugees to withdraw the hunger strike.

On 21<sup>st</sup> May 1949, Jogananda Babu and Sarat Babu sent the news through some other people that condition of the camp was critical. He (Amritalal Chattapadhyay) should come immediately. Thus on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1949, Chattapadhyay informed Dr B C Roy about the situation in the camp in writing. Chattapadhyay went to Salboni camp on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1949 and then to Salua camp. He then went to DM and successfully solved the problems of the camp. But Salboni still had very critical problems.<sup>32</sup>

The inmates of the Salboni camp had three grievances. 1. The terms and conditions on which inmates broke the hunger strike in the last March were not fulfilled. 2. The camp authorities were utilizing money in the name of people who were absent in the camp. They did the same thing in the name of people living in Pakistan. 3. Kerosene, cloths, blankets, allotted to the inmates were sold off in the black market.<sup>33</sup>

The Kalyan Samiti protested against these issues. According to the samiti, the authorities decided to transfer some of the leaders in order to hide such nefarious activities. So the inmates decided to oppose the authorities till an enquiry was made. Amritalal Chattopadhyay even after repeated attempts could not move the refugees from their stand. He asked them to accept the order of transfer. He insinuated that their demands would be fulfilled then. The refugees wanted Enquiry of their grievances (revoke of section 144 and release of arrested people) first and only then they would consider transfer of their leaders. Chattapadhyay wanted them to accept the transfer first, then he would enquire into the matter.<sup>34</sup> The government accepted the proposal of Chattapadhyay but 4 refugees scheduled to be transferred, did not agree to it. Therefore the problem remained unsolved.<sup>35</sup>

Amritalal Chattapadhyay placed his demands, before the government and public. He wanted eradication of corruption and injustice prevailing in the Salboni camp. The inmates of the camp had already gone to jail, as a way of protest. No state or civilized society, could ignore the responsibility toward these demands. The grievances could be dealt with only through

impartial enquiry. In this way state and nation can fulfill its responsibilities. And the states' prestige could be maintained. Otherwise animal force would dominate humanitarian demands for a long time. It would be a thorough injustice.

Next year i.e. in 1950, the stopping of monthly doles to the East Bengal refugees created an 'unrest' in the camp. On 18<sup>th</sup> April 1950, some refugees of the camp placed their grievances before the DM. They were assured of 7 days' supply of dry doles. As a result of this assurance, they came back to the camp. But the authorities remained apprehensive of 'troubles' until they could make further arrangements for the refugees.<sup>36</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1950, a month later, sub-divisional officer (north), accompanied by Mrs Renuka Roy and Dr Mrs Fulrenu Guha, visited Salboni camp. They discussed the grievances of the refugees. Further, they assured the refugees of full cooperation. However in June 1950, doles of abled bodied men of Salua camp, were stopped. Consequently dissatisfaction grew up in the camp. Some refugees resorted to hunger strike. Thus it is evident even in 1950, the inmates used the instrument of hunger strike as a mark of protest.<sup>37</sup>

Further in the same month, Ram Krishna Mukherjee, ex head master of Salboni higher education school urged a section of refugees of the camp to form a party. On early June some members of the party 'assaulted' mobile medical staff, inside the camp office. They also allegedly assaulted an old refugee on 3<sup>rd</sup> June and attempted to assault the mobile assistant for reporting that necessary medicines were in stock to Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. A case under section 448 IPC was started against Himangshu Dutta. And police picket was posted to keep 'peace and order'.<sup>38</sup>

Toward the fag end of 1950, refugees of Salua camp of Midnapur agitated against their settlement in Murshidabad. It was a demonstration of their will to choose their area of settlement. The refugees had been ordered to

be transferred to Mahananda camp in Murshidabad. The refugees believed that living condition of the said camp, for ex. dwelling houses, was worse than the Salua camp. But here it is pertinent to mention that proposal for transfer had earlier come from the inmates themselves. They earlier complained that local climate and other conditions of Salua did not suit them. So the camp authorities were unyielding. Eventually they were sent to Mahananda camp on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1950.<sup>39</sup>

According to Abhijit Dasgupta, activities of the refugees, at the initial stage of agitation, were spontaneous, non-violent and passive. In course of time, 'politicization', and 'unionization', came followed by active resistance. Later, refugees adopted new methods that included, picketing in front of government office, attacking the police and gheraoing the officials. Scheduled caste leaders got involved in political struggles in some camps, distributed all over West Bengal. Cooper's camp was one such camp( Dasgupta 2004:66-67).<sup>40</sup>

The Cooper's camp was established in 1950, in Nadia district. It is pertinent to mention that it would accommodate nearly 40000 displaced persons. The camp's population reached its peak in May 1950, when it reached 30000(inmates belonging to 6300 families)( Chatterjee Sengupta 2014).<sup>41</sup>

Consequent of corruption and misbehavior of some camp employees, some inmates of Mymensingh, came under the leadership of one Santash Pal.<sup>42</sup> Pal propagated amongst the refugees against the camp authorities and the government. They criticized the congress for their current, hopeless plight. Pal and others urged the refugees not to go beyond the borders of West Bengal. The refugees allegedly attacked the store keeper. They had a complaint that free ration was not being supplied to them. Following this incident, 20 refugees were arrested. Incidentally the supply of ration was stopped to those who had refused to leave the camp. A section of refugees objected to go outside

Bengal or even fled out of fear. But there was no provocation or incitement from outside.

On the other hand, Cooper's camp came into limelight on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1950. At about 10pm, when a female refugee inmate of the said camp was taking water from a tap, she was dashed aside by the railway employees' (menial jobs). There was a clash between railways menial staff and refugees of the Cooper's camp over the issue. Several people from both sides were injured. The refugees allegedly attacked the former's quarters. But there was no casualty. Armed pickets were posted in the area as a result. Subsequently the authorities were able to resume peace in the camp. Only one refugee died on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1950 due to injuries sustained during the skirmish.<sup>43</sup>

Three refugees of Cooper's camp Ranaghat were arrested and assaulted by camp authorities on suspicion of having committed a theft in the camp. This caused a great resentment amongst the refugees.<sup>44</sup> A meeting of refugees of Pakhikra Police Station Haanskhali was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1950. It was held under the presidentship of Bikash Roy, a congressman of the place. He decided not to leave Muslim houses occupied by the Hindu refugees. He did not want to allow any Muslims to return to their houses again.<sup>45</sup>

In the meantime ill feelings developed between a section of refugees and camp staff over the issue of dispatching some refugees to Aramdah camp (Orissa). Some refugees who were directed to leave on 10<sup>th</sup> September, disclosed to the camp authorities that they would move on a later date. It was on the plea of making preparation for the journey. The administrators refused to allow them time for that. On the contrary, he used filthy language. Camp staff threw the refugees' possessions out of their huts. Some refugees were roughly handled and assaulted by the camp employees. The police had to bring the situation under control.<sup>46</sup>

The camp refugees of the Cooper's camp had their own leaders-Jatin Saha and Ratish Mallick.

They rose from the grass-root level of the camp itself. They came under the spell of communism, while they were in East Pakistan.(Chatterjee Sengupta 2014:168)<sup>47</sup> In 1952, a branch of UCRC, was established in Cooper's camp, called Cooper's Camp Bastuhara Samiti. Jatin Saha became the secretary of the samiti.

According to Joya Chatterjee, since 1950, government rehabilitation policy was that of 'denial and dispersal'. The refugees protested against the measure. The counter – action was easy to detect from 1950-58. When Cooper's camp became a site of refugee struggle, it passed through various phases. The refugees not only put forward various demands, they struggled and changed that trajectory (Chatterji 2007:127).<sup>48</sup>

Cooper's camp came under the influence of RCPI, even before the establishment of branch of UCRC in Cooper's camp. The inmates of the camp, started the refugee wing of RCPI, styled Bastuhara Panchayat Committee, which was established in the early days of 1950. The panchayat distributed leaflets, within a short period of time. And a special meeting was convened. Some refugees attended this meeting. One voluntary organization was formed under the leadership of Kumaresh Bagchi. With this preparation, refugees decided to fight against dispersal policy of the government. The government at that time, decided to settle the refugees, in other districts. But the refugees were not ready to leave the camp. Thus the first clash came over, selection for place or site for settlement. This issue became an organized demand and in course of time, took the shape of strong agitation. In 1951, Panchayat Committee resorted to their old method of satyagraha.<sup>49</sup>

The refugees decided to stop the train services, and conduct satyagraha at various stages. The train that was fixed for transporting them to Chandpur, had to leave the station empty. This incident definitely proves success of refugee agitation at the initial stage.

On 12<sup>th</sup> June 1951, refugees of Cooper's camp under Bastuhara Panchayat Committee began to campaign. This time, they demanded increment of doles. There was a change in the path of refugee agitation. But RCPI's active participation did not cease. For example, on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1951, up and down trains, coming from Ranaghat were stopped. The female members of Rupashreepally camp assisted Cooper's camp in this respect. Movement of Revolutionary Communist Party of India organization, continued till 17<sup>th</sup> June 1951 when the refugees tried once again to stop trains.

These activities of refugees, indicate that in post 1950 period, there was an involvement of political parties in the camps. So the refugee wing of RCPI organization grew up in the Cooper's camp. In course of time, Cooper's camp Bastuhara Panchayat became a sensitive organization. Important leaders who were associated with this agitation, under the directives of SP Ranaghat, were sent to Berhampur jail. They were Manotosh Chatterjee, s/o Ashutosh Chatterjee, hut no 48, Ranaghat(Nadia), Dhirendranath Das, s/o Madhav (Barishal), hut no 43, Kumaresh Bagchi, s/o Pranballabh, hut no 32 B Block, Jagadish Chakarborty, G Block hut no 3/5, Hiralal Sinha Roy, s/o Madhusudan, H Block hut no 246, Gyanendramohan Nag, s/o Akshay, Cooper's camp D Block.

It had been already mentioned that a branch of UCRC(CPI dominated) was established in Cooper's camp in 1952. During the initial phase, the Namasudra leaders took the most important stand. Scheduled caste leaders received their first training in this camp. "Caste solidarity acted as a unifying factor" observed Gouranga Das, a camp resident( Dasgupta 2004:67-70).<sup>50</sup>

In 1953, an incident took place in Cooper's camp, when the inmates and administrators, came into conflict. A young woman named Alorani Dutta had died without proper medical attention. Consequently the camp inmates began to

demonstrate their agitation against the administration. They organized protest meetings and demanded to have the administrator removed from the camp. Jyotish Joyardar, Harbangh Singh were present in the meeting. Ratish Mallick was also involved in the protest activities. Subsequently he was arrested. In 1953, he was associated with direct altercation with the administrators. He was once again put behind the bar under section 107/117 criminal procedure code. This increased the momentum of the movement in Calcutta and adjoining districts. Meetings were held under the presidentship of Umesh Chandra Dey. Ratish Mallick repeatedly became a source of disquiet for the government. He remarked in an interview with Abhijit Dasgupta, that his dole was stopped. The camp officials wanted his case regarding the dole to be reopened. But he refused to oblige( Chatterjee Sengupta 2014).<sup>51</sup>

In 1954, second conference of UCRC was held. In November 1954, the district preparatory body of Nadia was formed. Jatin Saha became the secretary of the committee. The committee was organized at Cooper's camp. Jatin Saha urged the other democratic organizations to cooperate with them and help them.<sup>52</sup>

The events of 1954 can be split up into two phases. In the first half of 1954, Cooper's camp fought for the site of rehabilitation and release of their leaders. In the first half of 1954, Cooper's camp fought for the economic and political rights of the refugees. Jatin Saha and Ratish Mallick appeared in all these movements. It made the government apprehensive of their activities. They were eventually arrested. Sources are quiet on the events of the latter half of 1954. In 1956, a new type of agitation began in the camp. By that time, Jatin Saha and Ratish Mallick were released from the jail.

With time, Cooper's camp reached its adulthood. It must be mentioned that on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1953, the refugees held a meeting. They demanded unofficial enquiry of the death of Alorani Dutta and the removal of the



administrator and the deputy administrator. At that moment Ratish Mallick became involved in an altercation with the camp administrator and was consequently arrested under section 107/117 Criminal procedure code. Another meeting was convened on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1953. This time, the speakers demanded the release of Ratish Mallick. Therefore from the IB report, it is evident that refugees of Cooper's camp had demanded political rights. However by the end of 1953, the government policy and the reaction of the inmates of the camp, became clear. The government introduced a new policy by dint of which refugees were forced to sign a bond. The refugees protested against this system. This time police and hooligans both were used by the authorities to control and assault the camp inmates. Consequently Jatin Saha along with three women were arrested. The hooligans took over the camp. The inmates were hit hard, both physically and mentally. But the camp did not lose its revolutionary flavor. The camp secretary of Bastuhara samiti, Narayan Chandra Basu, informed the matter to Ambica Chakrabarty of UCRC. Basu requested Chakrabarty to be present at the camp. It was needed to revitalize the spirit of the movement(Chatterjee Sengupta 2019:74)<sup>53</sup>

In 1954, a new kind of struggle started. It gave a different outlook to the history of the camp. The camp was under the central government. When land was not distributed systematically, the inmates obviously targeted the central government. For the refugees the rail lines appeared to be the symbol of central government. They adopted the method of squatting on the rail lines. This agitation met with success as after this agitation, the camp was transferred to the government of West Bengal(Bandhyopadhyay 1970:177; Sengupta Chatterjee 2019: 75).<sup>54</sup>

The year 1955 marked a change in the government policy of rehabilitation. The government accepted a policy of rehabilitation, instead of a policy of relief. It therefore changed their stance on the subject. The struggle under Cooper's camp in 1955, revealed that from 1950-

55, things did not work smoothly or effectively. The refugees in 1955, had been agitating for increment in dole and supply of cloths thrice a year. All their demands reflected the condition of the camp in West Bengal. (Chatterjee Sengupta 2019:75).<sup>55</sup>

Cooper's camp's leadership could be labelled as an organizational leadership. But the struggle did not end in 1956. In the same year, agitation started mainly on the question of living space. In course of time, refugees also focused on the lack of medical care. Eventually the struggle became stronger. As a result of continual struggle, Jatin Saha and Ratish Mallick were arrested. On 15<sup>th</sup> May 1956, a meeting was held at CRE Ground under the leadership of Pran Krishna Chakravarty. The speakers such as Ambica Chakravarty, Nirod Brahma, Sushil Chatterjee attended the meeting. All of them spoke about the 'hell like' living condition of the camp. The speeches expressed a kind of fury against the camp administrator. They asked the administrator to live in such a place to get a personal experience. Further, they challenged that the movement could not be weakened by arresting the two leaders. They also mentioned if the two leaders were considered as 'anti-social hooligans', Pran Krishna Chakravarty was one too. He too ought to be arrested. Pran Krishna Chakravarty added that there was provision for keeping the TB patients in quarantine in Cooper's camp. Other speakers demanded to turn the camp into rehabilitation center. After 1956, as these two leaders(Saha and Mallick) proved to be hurdle in the path of law and order, they were repeatedly arrested and incarcerated. The refugees under UCRC, at different levels and different places organized meetings. They demanded the release of these leaders. From the details furnished above, it can be easily derived that camp level leadership at the Cooper's camp took a leading role in the refugee movement. This shows how demands for political right emphasized the issue of political leaders. The year 1956 brought new momentum in the refugee struggle conducted by the Cooper's camp. The inmates gave up

peaceful Satyagraha, in favor of violent protests. For instance, in 1956, the central finance minister visited the camp. While he was speaking to the inmates, suddenly a section of the camp members, became agitated and began to shout slogans. In the next phase they started to pelt brickbats. As a result, camp officers as well as other refugees were injured. Further the 'mob' targeted the car of the minister. The minister was not allowed to drive his car. Ultimately he had to take the help of the police to move the car. But the refugees kept it under their control and made it difficult for the police to control the situation. The refugees 'assaulted' the head constable. As a result of this skirmish a case was started under 48/49/383/342/379 of Indian Penal Code.<sup>56</sup> Cooper's camp was always under police surveillance. On 11<sup>th</sup> July 1956, police raided the camp and 44 inmates including 7 women were arrested. This police julum continued till 17<sup>th</sup> July. This incident might have been a repercussion of expression of the demands of the refugees before the central minister. Even a case was lodged against 67 refugees.(Sinha 1999:27)<sup>57</sup> This was a vicious cycle of refugee agitation and subsequent police atrocities. As a protest against this incident a meeting was organized under the initiative of UCRC where Ambica Chakarvarty, Jatish Joardar, Pran Krishna Chakravarty, Manoranjan Das and Satish Mukherjee gave a joint statement. These meetings were held regularly and attended by a large number of people. From May to August 1956 the speakers articulated for demands at these meetings for the withdrawal cases and release of people who were incarcerated in jail( Chatterjee Sengupta 2019:77).<sup>58</sup> In the history of Cooper's camp, the struggle changed after the years 1957-58.

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#### Endnotes and

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#### **Conclusion**

The camp refugees occupy an important position in the history of post-independence West Bengal. But very little work has been done on this subject. This present article, tried to throw light on the agitation of the camp refugees. The agitations had been divided into two groups. In the first group, the agitations of the camps were included. These agitations took place in the pre-1949 period. In the second group, the camp that agitated in the post-1950 was included. In the first group, agitations in Salboni, Salua, Kashipur camps were included. In the second group, this article mainly dealt with the Cooper's camp. There was a striking difference between these two groups. In case of the first group, there was no involvement of political unionism. The entire agitation took the shape of spontaneous outbursts. But in the post 1950, camp history in the Cooper's camp, refugee fronts of the political parties grew up. These unions conducted the movement. Initially at Cooper's camp RCPI established its branch and conducted refugee agitations. UCRC also entered the field. Thus throughout 1950s, unions of political parties were active in Cooper's camp. But there were some camp level scheduled caste leaders in the Cooper's camp such as Jatin Saha and Ratish Mallick. They provided a rich and sustained leadership. From 1949 the camp showed a path of struggle against the authorities. Even in some cases women took part in the agitations. We may focus on the fact that official records are quite vocal about the camp refugees. It is easy to deduce how the camp refugees fought during 1948 and early 1950s. Literature on camp refugees in this respect was inadequate. This article has attempted to fill the gap.

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