

The Anti-Government Movement of the Refugees: A Nadia Retrospective

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Abstract: *A vast number of residents of East Bengal were forced to refuge in West Bengal over a long period of time since the year 1947. Their destitute lives became even more intolerable as there was neither sufficient relief nor proper rehabilitation schemes on behalf of the government. Since 1948, this situation led to the launching of several anti-government movements by the refugees in various districts of West Bengal. One such movement was organized by the refugee camps and a large number of refugees living outside the camps in the district of Nadia. GourKundu, Subhash Bose, SuhridMallick, Pran Krishna Chakraborty and others led this movement. The movement in Nadia achieved a remarkable dimension under their leadership. The demands were mostly based on the supply of food, clothing, drinking water, medical facilities etc. and opposed the forced eviction of the refugees from the lands where they built their colonies.*

Key-words: Partition, Migration of refugees, Rehabilitation, Refugee movement, Refugee Bill, Squatters' Colony, UCRC, Cooper's Camp, Dhubulia Camp.

The most significant incident of the last century in the context of Indian politics is the 1947 partition. The Bengal Presidency was divided in two parts – East Bengal becoming a part of Pakistan and West Bengal, of India. During this process, innumerable Hindus and Buddhists living in East Bengal suddenly turned into minorities in their own land and began to fear for their security. It was since this moment in history that the minority East Bengali Hindus started feeling so scared that they decided to leave their motherland. Around 1949-50, when horrific communal riots and torments were being targeted at the minority Hindus in East Bengal, a great wave of Hindu refugees reached West Bengal. Most of them had lost everything – their land and all the movable and immovable assets that they possessed. They took refuge in various rail stations and abandoned houses and even on the roadside footpaths. The government had built refugee camps in various districts for temporarily providing them some accommodation. The condition of the refugees, living in the stations, footpaths and camps alike, was a living hell.

The situation was so terrible that the refugees soon began to resist and protest in order to survive. The Congress was in power in both Center and the State of West Bengal at that time. In West Bengal, the undivided Communist Party of India, PSP, Forward Block, RSP were among the main opposition parties of The Congress. In order to achieve their rights, the refugees were forced to channel their movement against the government and various high rank government officers. The leftist opposition parties came forward to help the refugee movement.¹ Eventually, it was these leftist leaders who began to lead the refugee organizations as well. The Nadia district played an important role in the history of the refugee movement.

Food, clothing and accommodation are essential for humans. But the rootless refugees were often denied even these, and whatever they availed was insufficient compared to their need. Thus, for the refugees living in the camps and footpaths of Nadia, who did not even have enough access to these basic resources, a decent livable environment was an unaffordable luxury. Besides, the Nadia camps lacked drinking water, toilet and bath facility, medicine etc. and there was no respite from the extreme weathers either. Such unlivable condition induced the refugee movement in West Bengal including Nadia, which was further aggravated by the step-motherly policies of the Center regarding the condition of the refugees in West Bengal. Dukha Haran Chakraborty has quoted the communist leader Samar Mukherjee in his article on this movement. Mukherjee has remembered Anil Sinha—one of the prominent leaders of the refugee struggle—in this quote:

“... Many refugees were forced to come to Punjab and West Bengal. During this time the Nehru Government on one hand arranged rehabilitation of the refugees in Punjab, and on another hand refused to accommodate the refugees in West Bengal. Naturally, an intense movement broke out against such partial policy. In 1950, UCRC was founded as a united platform of the opposition parties.”²

Leftist leaders such as GourKundu, Subhash Bose and others in Nadia were deeply involved with the refugee movement in this district from the very beginning. Later, other leftist leaders like Shanti Ranjan Das, Ashok Chakraborty and Samiran Basak joined the leadership.³ The movement spread among the refugee camps and other refugees living outside the camps as well. It should be noted that the refugee movement of Nadia was very much an integral part of that of the entire state of West Bengal, so it would not be fair to look at it in isolation. The movement in Nadia was at various points influenced by the overall movement and the Central Committees of the various refugee organizations too played an important role in the movement at the district level.

In several cases, as the government failed to rehabilitate or provide camp accommodation to the refugees, the refugees themselves took the initiative to build colonies on abandoned lands. Within 1950-51, there were a huge number of such squatters' colonies over various districts. Although the leftist parties opposed it, the West Bengal government passed the 'Eviction Bill' in the Vidhan Sabha in 1951 to evict these colonies, and furthermore, brought an 'Amendment Bill' to the Vidhan Sabha in 1957 to extend its validity. The leftist MLAs inside the Vidhan Sabha, and the refugees awaiting the verdict outside it, strongly protested against the 'Eviction Law' and demanded its withdrawal. Nadia was not an exception in this. On 10th July 1957, Samar Mukherjee in his speech in the Vidhan Sabha accused that the rich land-owners of the squatters' lands were pressurizing the government to evict the refugees, and that the government was indeed going to evict these destitute souls to appease these rich men. The day this Bill was proposed in the Vidhan Sabha, the refugees under the flag of various refugee organizations, especially UCRC that gathered close to 50 thousand refugees, rallied to the Vidhan Sabha, despite a heavy downpour.⁴ Mukherjee protested against the anti-refugee initiatives of the government and stated that the government would have to face intense protests if it attempted to evict the refugees by force without consulting the opposition.⁵ He suggested that the government put a stay order on the Amendment Bill.

When the refugees found no way-out from the precarity they were in, they began to build sporadic movements against the inadequacy of the government relief. In 1950, the largest refugee organization 'United Central Refugee Council' (UCRC) was founded. The leader of the undivided Communist Party of India tactfully found their way to the leading positions of this organization as well, and began an anti-government movement in support of the refugees. The first President of UCRC was the famous revolutionary Sri Ambika Chakraborty. Meanwhile, leader of the undivided Communist Party of India and the then Secretary of the Howrah District Committee Com. Samar Mukherjee got involved, as per Party instructions, with this refugee movement, and began to partake in various meetings, committees and conventions. Since 1957, the situation began to worsen in terms of negligence and oppression of the government towards the refugees living in various camps in different districts, including Cooper's Camp, Rupasree Camp etc. in Ranaghat, Nadia. During this time, Samar Mukherjee, Hemanta Kumar Basu, Jyoti Basu, Manoranjan Hajra and several other leaders drew public attention by their bold statements supporting the refugees in the Vidhan Sabha. On 6th June 1957, Samar Mukherjee formally accused the State Government (Congress), in the Vidhan Sabha, of failing utterly in rehabilitating the refugees.⁶

The United Central Refugee Council or UCRC organized a convention on 12th August 1950 in the University Institute Hall and a public rally on 13th August in Kolkata Maidan. In these programs, it called out for refugee unity and published the first leaflet containing the various demands and needs of the refugees. It boldly announced to the refugees:

“My brothers, eviction is at present the first and foremost issue in Bengal as well as India. [...] The extreme negligence of the government and the lack of unity among the refugees are allowing the reactionary forces to impose a dangerous situation. To resist the abominable nationwide conspiracy and to form an iron-hard united struggle that

would achieve the demands of the refugees, join the convention in large numbers. Each zone, each refugee camp and colony is requested to send the names of the selected representatives and whatever financial support they can offer to the Secretary of the Preparation Committee at 115 A, Amherst Street”⁷

After Ambika Chakraborty, Samar Mukherjee became the next Secretary of UCRC.⁸ He held this position for a long time and in the process, got involved with the refugee movements of Bengalis taking place in not only various districts of West Bengal including Nadia, but also in other Indian states, and he kept presenting the demands and needs of the refugees to the government. In November 1957, the Public Workers Department filed a case of eviction to evict the Betai Bazar under Tehatta Subdivision, Nadia. As a response to this, Samar Mukherjee and Niranjan Sen, along with Parimal Bagchi and Manoranjan Banerjee on behalf of the Betai Bazaar Committee, handed over a memorandum to the then-Minister of External Affairs Khagen Dasgupta and demanded that the eviction order be repealed – a demand that was finally met.⁹

The UCRC gradually gained a considerable amount of power in Nadia. Cooper’s Camp and Rupasree Camp became the centers of the refugee movement in this district. That is why, though the first (1950), second (1951) and third (1955) UCRC conventions took place in Kolkata and Belgharia, which too was quite close to Kolkata, the fourth convention was held in Cooper’s Camp. This made the Nadia refugee movement even more significant.¹⁰ Significantly, in 1959, a large number of refugees from Nadia district joined and enhanced the Food Movement that shaped under the direction of the leftist leaders of West Bengal. In a gathering in Krishna Nagar that was held as part of this movement, the largest number of participants came from various refugee camps in Nadia—especially Ranaghat. The leaders of the conventions in Kolkata always looked forward to receiving the large refugee rallies from Nadia.

The movement in Nadia kept intensifying. It centered around Cooper’s Camp and Rupasree Camp and gained further speed. Between 2nd and 4th June 1961, the sixth state convention of UCRC was being organized in Rupasree Pally. Gour Kundu was the Secretary of the Refugee Council in Nadia around this time. Suhrid Mallick Chaudhury—an important refugee leader from Ranaghat—was elected as its President of this convention. The Congress government took several steps to overturn it. Leaders like Suhrid Mallick Chaudhury, Gour Kundu, Samar Mukherjee, Pran Krishna Chakraborty and others were banned from entering Ranaghat and its nearby camps such as Cooper’s Camp, Rupasree Camp, Nasra Colony, Kirti Nagar Colony, Nokari and Baidyapur Union territory for 60 days, and furthermore, Section 144 was imposed in these areas. Such intense oppression stopped the refugee leaders from organizing the convention in Rupasree Pally. But their retreat was limited to changing the venue and date. It was postponed by a week and was held at ‘Tirtha Bharati’, Sodepur, 24 Parganas from 9th to 11th June.¹¹

Meanwhile, the State Government ceased to provide governmental dole many camps and several eviction orders were issued, which led to further intensification of the movement in Ranaghat. The leftist leader in Nadia cum the Secretary of the Refugee Council – Gour Kundu—came forward to help the refugees living in various camps in Ranaghat. The refugees living in Cooper’s Camp and Rupasree Camp built up a vicious movement. On 25th April 1961, Gour Kundu, along with 14 refugees, was arrested by the police as per government order. The Police forcefully entered every house in Cooper’s Camp in order to search for the leaders of the movement and to intimidate the residents. On 26th June, a police firing took the lives of five refugees including a child in Bagjola Camp, which was close to Dum Dum.¹² The refugee leader Suhrid Mallick Chaudhury from Ranaghat went to inspect the situation in person along with other leaders. He was then the State President of UCRC.¹³

In the meantime, due to the continued demand for refugee rehabilitation and the ongoing movement, the Central and State Government together built a Rehabilitation Industries Corporation (RIC) on 13th April 1959. The sections of R. R. & R. Departments, which were created by the West Bengal Government for economic rehabilitation of the refugees, were handed over to the Central Government. Despite that, in 1980, during the rule of the Indira Gandhi Ministry, the Central Government decided to close the department down. A few industry units, among which three weaving industry units from Nadia were listed, were decided to be shut for this purpose. Many refugees sat in protest against this decision, and with several other demands, in front of the RIC offices for 55 days. Finally, it was

revoked as Indira Gandhi herself intervened. Later however, on 6th Aril 1984, the same Cabinet of Ministers under Indira Gandhi decided to shut the RIC once and for all. This time too, Samar Mukherjee met Indira Gandhi and managed to get a stay order on the decision.¹⁴ But whether or not a tangible victory came out of the Nadia refugee movement, the refugees in this district can definitely be hailed as winners in their life-struggle. They came uninvited and unwelcome to this district and faced extreme financial precariat along with sarcasm, humiliation, neglect, contempt and deception from the local residents. The refugees had to constantly struggle against all this. Despite the majority of them being forced to begin a new life from the footpaths, platforms and refugee camps, they did not lose their heart. They won their 'struggle for survival'. Their relentless efforts established various refugee camps, schools, markets, cooperatives, clubs, roads and cultural surroundings. The vast empty fields of Nadia became vibrant with their voices. Later, this refugee population mingled with the local residents and built a new Nadia.

References

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