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United Central Refugee Council And Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti : Steering The Refugee Movement In West Bengal

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Abstract: History of the world is the history of migration - As a result of partition in 1947, India gained independence. India and Pakistan were born. Immigration was widespread in both countries. (According to the United Nation High Commission for Refugees, the longest mass exodus in the history)

The worst affected areas were the Indian state of Punjab and West Bengal. Although Punjab has largely solved the refugee problem, there was a steady influx of refugees in West Bengal. And the refugees who were forced to come to West Bengal from East Pakistan, (Now Bangladesh) they came to this country and suffer. The crisis of their existence arose, and by organizing them, a number of refugee organizations were formed to assert their demands to the government. Among them, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the left leaning organization UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) and the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and other socialist party controlled organization SBBS (Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti) played an important role in solving the refugee problem. Where UCRC increased its influence mainly in the city of Calcutta/ Kolkata. They were mainly active in realizing the demands of the refugees of forcibly occupied colony. In other hand, the SBBS was played a major role in realizing the demands of the refugees in the government camps. Although dissent was caused problems in the refugee movement, but the role of the UCRC and SBBS was undeniable.

Key words: Partition, Refugee Movement, West Bengal, UCRC, SBBS

Introduction: After the partition in 1947, India and Pakistan were born. As a result, there were widespread migration between the two countries. The greatest influence was felt in the Punjab and Bengal provinces of British India. The Indian state of Punjab manages refugee fairly by so called 'land – man exchange', while West Bengal manages to accommodate many Refugees.

In Joya Chatterjee' assessment, " The exodus of Hindu refugees from East to West Bengal was massive. By contrast, the number of Muslims who left West Bengal from eastern Pakistan after partition were relatively small. Most of them stayed on".¹ The 1951 census in India (4 years after the Partition of India) also recorded 2.523 million refugees coming from East Bengal. Among them 2.061 million settled in West Bengal. The rest went to Assam, Tripura and other states. Estimates of the number of refugees up to 1970 was over 5 million to West Bengal alone. Thus, the infant state of West Bengal began its journey as a crippled toddler crowned with problems.²

From 1949 to the early 1950s, large number of refugees could be seen on the streets, sidewalks, alleys of Kolkata. Howrah, Sealdah stations were also witnessing huge crowds of refugees. But in spite of that migrations continued, the government was forced to realise that those who came to West Bengal were unlikely to return. Consequently, the debates in the legislative Assembly shifted from the question of extending relief to the larger problem of rehabilitation.

Role of UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) : There was no food, no clothing or shelter for the displaced refugees who came to West Bengal in the early 1950's. The government's indifference forced them to rehabilitate themselves. As a result, the refugees began to occupy land in and around Kolkata. It was during this time that small forcible refugee colonies began to form in and around Kolkata. A number of refugee organizations were formed in Calcutta to assist these refugees. Example of forcibly occupied

colony- a) Jadavpur-58, b) Behala- 04, c) Dum Dum- 40, d) Belghoria – 03, e) Baranagar- 07, f) Noapara - 04, g) Khardha-15, h) Naihati- 03, i) Bijpur-04, j) Titagarh- 01, k) Jagaddal- 04, m) Habra- 02, n) Srirampur- 03, o) Bally- 01.³

The communal riots, the failure of the government administration were to solve the problem of refugee relief and resettlement, and the movement for establishment of the forcible colony paved the way for the establishment of a central body for refugees. So the UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) central committee was formed on August 1950 at a conference of representatives of 43 small refugee organizations and colonies. The conference was attended by leftist political parties led by the CPI (Communist Party of India). UCRC was officially born on August 1950. A new chapter in the history of West Bengal began. Since than UCRC was adopting new approaches to organizing refugee meetings, association, processions and demonstration. The best manifestation of which found in the 1950s bill against the eviction of the colony by the government.

The government was announced in the Gazette that those who have illegally occupied the land must be evicted from their land or else they will be forcibly evicted from the land. Despite the government's announcement, the refugees were still holding on to their land. Because they realized that there was no way for them to go anywhere, and that the government did not have the power to evict them. Because it was not possible for the government to evict about 1.50 lakh people from 149 forcibly occupied colonies and on the other hand the government was already in trouble by sheltering 1.50 lakh people in government camps.

The refugees, led by the UCRC, rallied against the government (the Congress Government led by Bidhan Chandra Roy). The UCRC and other refugee organizations and leaders claimed that after losing everything, millions of people came to this country, people with broken bodies and broken minds, were full of hope again. They reclaimed abandoned swamps, lands, build house, built roads, built schools, colleges, libraries and built small colonies on the outskirts of Kolkata. They were withstood the onslaught of landowners and speculators, endured the animosity of the locals, and transcended the realm of contempt and hatred. The government did nothing to them. They have rehabilitated themselves. So eviction would not have done from land.

At first, government initiative to rehabilitate refugees was the Refugee Eviction Bill. In this situation, the refugees had no choice but to declare war on the government. The refugee organization UCRC launched a campaign to prepare for the struggle against the government. The UCRC formed the struggle in two ways : 1) Giving a memorandum to the government and enlisting the help of sympathetic members of the legislature to prevent the draft law from being passed. 2) To build organized resistance to protect the new houses built by the refugees and to start a movement against the eviction law.⁴

According to plan, the UCRC created a state of emergency by bringing refugees to the streets in groups to build a lasting movement against the draft eviction law. Processions, meetings, demonstration, traffic jams, bricks, tear gas, baton charges, tram – bus fires and occasional police shootings – all put constant pressure on the government. Slogan were raised in the streets, corners and alleys of Kolkata –“ Amra Kara ? Bastuhara.”(“who are we? Refugee”). This slogan made it clear that therefugees came here, they would stay here, this is their land.

In these processions, meetings, movements not only the refugees from Kolkata but also the refugees from the surrounding area of Kolkata used to come. The UCRC's approach to the movement was such that refugees played a key role in decision - making. It did not seem to be a policy imposed by UCRC in any way. Famous writer Prafulla Chakraborty has beautifully illustrated this point in his book The Marginalized Man (Prantik Manab in Bengali) – According to him , the UCRC leaders' approach was a bit like this – each colony had a committee. The UCRC leadership would send a movement framework to each committee for consideration, with each committee meeting to examine the plan in detail and if necessary to change or amend the plan. In this way, after analyzing the judgement, each committee would send the plan with its opinion to the representatives of the regional committees

would consider their opinion and send their own statement to the UCRC executive committee. Eventually a unanimous decision was made by the executive committee at the top of the pyramid – like organizational structure. And the decision was sent back to the colony committees for approval. When the unanimous decision was returned to the committee, it seemed that they had made this decision. If Mao Ze Dong's formula "From the masses and to the masses"- is slightly changed, it will apply to refugees. – " From the refugees of the colonies and to the refugees of the colonies". These colony committees were the driving force behind the refugee movement. The task of these committees was to get information from the families of each colony, to solve their problems. To determine the policy of the relations of the refugees of the forcible colony with the government, Zamindars and common people. The UCRC- led committees met regularly in the colony to explain government programs and to direct the movement against the government.⁵

An analysis of the dynamics of the UCRC – led refugee movement reveals that some leftist demands were surprisingly mixed with the main demands for relief and rehabilitation (e.g. let American imperialism be overthrown, India leave the commonwealth, etc.)

During the massive of refugees against the government eviction law, it was seen that the breakdown in the refugee movement was noticeable. A refugee organization called RCRC (Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council), led by RSP (Revolutionary Socialist Party) and other socialist parties, began to organize their own movement against the government.

On the August, 1951, the West Bengal government decided to pass a draft law on eviction (which sought to empower the state government to evict squatter Colonies) in the Legislative Assembly. As a result, the UCRC started a movement at the bottom of the Monument and at the RCRC in Wellington Square. Where the RCRC confronted the police in a face - to- face battle but the UCRC did not participate in the face to face campaign. Gradually the RCRC began to gain acceptance among the people.

Then on March 31, the UCRC and RCRC demanded that the government make some amendments to the anti-Eviction law. They had demands-

- a) Those who came to the country between the time of Noakhali riots in Oct 1946 and Dec 1950 would be considered as legal refugees.
- b) The draft law calls for the formation of competent authorities. The competent authority shall be the Judicial officer, appointed by the government, subject to the approval of the High Court.
- c) Section 4 of the draft law states that until December 31,1950, if the refugees pay an acceptable price for the illegally occupied land, that land will be fixed by the appropriate authorities, moreover, they will not be evicted from their land unless they are given a suitable place to live near Kolkata. An order of the appropriate authority may be appealed to the tribunal.⁶

In fact, the government accepted the demand, the UCRC announces that the refugees have won a compromise with the government. So the resistance movement against the draft law ended and the new law was passed in the Assembly (1951 Act XVI) *The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of persons in Unauthorized Occupation of Land Act* (which included pledge to accommodate displaced persons who had engaged in unauthorized occupation of land)

The refugee movement that eventually developed under the leadership of the UCRC resulted in the acquisition of citizenship by refugees. Millions of voters followed the UCRC, with refugees playing a key role in laying the groundwork for left – wing politics in West Bengal. Later, the leftist movement established it's stronghold in West Bengal in support of the refugees in the food movement, tram fare hike movement etc.

Research scholar Sibaji Pratima Basu in his "Mobilizing the Migrants: Role of the UCRC in the Indian state of West Bengal" argued that, Critics generally highlights the educated upper caste Hindu Bhadrakol / gentry character of the early settlers, who became the backbone of the CPI-led UCRC. Contrary to the experiences of early *Bhadrakol*, upper_ caste settlers, the Dalit refugees had a markedly different experience of resettlement. When the first wave of mainly high caste Hindu Bhadrakol refugees had arrived

in West Bengal, they had their own resources and kin-group support. Many of them resettled themselves in squatter colonies in and around Calcutta, and the government after initial hesitation endorsed that mode of rehabilitation. But when the Dalit peasant refugees without any resources arrived by train in thousands at Sealdah station after 1950, they were first dispatched to various refugee camps in different districts like 24- Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, Medinipur or Cooch Behar. In allocating space in the camps, caste and Identity did play a part, despite persistent official denial. At Sealdah Station they were asked about their identity, given a registration card and sent by train to a refugee camp.⁷

Role of Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti (SBBS) : On the other hand, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), a centrist party, (which was formed in 1952 by merging the Socialist Party of Acharya Narendra Deva and Jayaprakash Narayan and the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party of J.B. Kripalani) also started actively organizing refugees and came to dominate the SBBS (Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti , 1953) it was noteworthy, while the UCRC had stronghold over the refugees in and around Kolkata (they were mainly upper caste, educated, middle class Bhadrakol of forcibly occupied colony) – the SBBS was powerful in the outskirts (realizing the demands of the lower castes, peasants and working class refugees in government camps)

The 40 percent of all the refugees, represented three quarters of East Bengal's Hindu. One in Four Hindu families, belonged to the Scheduled Caste or tribal people. The lower class people, migrated under different circumstances. In practice, the peasants according to Joya Chatterjee, fled from Pakistan after 1950 when they became the victims of great communal violence in rural areas of Khulna, Jessore, Barishal, Faridpur and left when the communal violence put pressure on the land.⁸

Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhary have undertaken a very extensive research on the caste identity of camp refugees. It was at these registration desks at Sealdah Station that their identity as Namasudra cultivator was permanently inscribed on their cards- no matter what their real occupation or qualification were.⁹ Refugee would prefer to go the camp to the camp where they knew they would find their relatives, villagers or community members who had migrated earlier. As a result, the refugee camps developed their own specific community demographic: in certain camps like Cooper's Camp, Dhubulia Camp in Nadia or Bagiloa Camp in the 24 Parganas, the Namasudras constituted more than 70 per cent of the residents. In the camps they lived a shared common life – sleeping in large living spaces with no privacy, sharing common toilets and standing in long queue for dole and ration.

After 1950, some Namasudra leaders such as Hemanta Biswas, Apurbalal Majumdar, P.R. Thakur, Jogen Mondal became individually important. Most of the leader did not want to work with UCRC (because UCRC would take over their individual movement) as the latter would erode their individual influence over the organisation.¹⁰

We discuss a slightly different point of view in the then refugee politics. In this case, the name of Jogen Mondal is important. He was the undisputed leader of the Dalit Movement in undivided Bengal. After partition, he sided with Pakistan and became first Law minister, but he returned to West Bengal in October 1950, after he complained that the Pakistan government had started persecuting Dalits. Returning to West Bengal, Jogen Mondal began to organize refugees individually without joining any refugee organizations, and helping them convey their demands to the government. But it was not possible for him personally to organize the refugees. As a result, he joined SBBS in 1957. He warned the camp refugees that the leftist leaders of the UCRC did not work in the true interest of the Dalits / outcastes. He sought to introduce the caste questions into the discourse of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal. A meeting of SBBS was held on 6th February 1958 at Raja Subodh Mallick Square. He changed the government with the breach of promise.

In 1958 representatives of the camp refugees of the SBBS working committee initiated an analysis of the situation in the government refugee camps and submitted a memorandum to the government to improvement the conditions of the camp refugees. And they warned the government of B.C.Roy that if their demands were not met, they would pursue a long path of Satyagraha. But B.C. Roy refused to concede their primary object – rehabilitation with in West Bengal.

At that time, the caste question the Bengali partition – refugees came to surface, as the central government tried to relocate the camp refugees from West Bengal to Dandakaryana, a hilly and forest infested area in the central India, inhabited originally by Gonds and other tribes. Most of these refugees were dalits or Namasudra, who had no access- education and not being good economic condition- like the upper caste refugees. As a result, SBBS started a movement across Bengal against this move of the government.

Various protest movement all over Bengal : From 1958, SBBS mainly concentrated on the camp refugees. This counter action manifested in a long sustained Satyagraha movement. On March 8th, a convention of SBBS was held at PSP (Praja Socialist Party) office. A number of resolution were adopted at this convention –. a) Continuance of dole which was stopped on account of refusal to go outside West Bengal. b) Distribution of waste lands in the state among the refugees. c) Employment of the refugees in the spinning mills proposed to be opened in the state. d) Rehabilitation of refugees within West Bengal. e) A committee was formed with Dhiren Bhowmick and others. f) In the same convention it was decided that a state wide Satyagraha which should also include Calcutta/ Kolkata, would be launched with effect from March 17th 1958.¹¹

Protest movement (Satyagraha strategy) : For the Satyagraha of 1958 which was an important struggle of the refugees, conducted under SBBS, refugee front of PSP, an action committee was formed by the SBBS. The members of the action committee were Shibnath Banerjee, Himanta Biswas, Jogen Mondal, Bidyut Bose, Dhiren Bhowmick, Indra Narin Ghosh, Mahadev Bhattacharya. In this meeting it was decided that the movement will start from March 17th 1958. On March 18th , a Satyagraha would be offered under the leadership of Jogen Mondal. Regarding the movement, one important decision was undertaken that within four days 10000 Satyagrahis should be arrested. It should be done to form a good opinion about the movement. After a span of four days , the movement would intensified in the districts, rather than in Calcutta.¹²

The Satyagraha movement continued as planned resulting in widespread police arrests, SBBS leaders and ordinary refugees were arrested. In this context it was noticed that Satyagrahis who were arrested by the police were not always taken to the jail. Conversely, they were dropped at places far away from Calcutta. The leaders were worried that such policy on the part of government would make the leaders difficult to collect Satyagrahis in the future. Jogen Mondal held that if the government was on a nefarious Stern, the refugees should make their movement violent. But Shibnath Banerjee was not ready to take violent at that point of time.¹³

SBBS failed to reach a consensus on a particular point regarding the tactics of the future of the movement. Shibnath Banerjee, Bidyut Bose, Jogen Mondal, and some other held that after three or four days of movement in Calcutta, similar movement would be launched all over West Bengal. But Mahadev Bhattacharya, Dhiren Bhowmick, Hemanta Biswas and others wanted that movement should be continued in both Calcutta and other parts of Bengal simultaneously. In practice, it was discovered that the movements at the district and sub-divisional level started after three or four days of the movement of Calcutta was over. From March 17th 1958, to 21st March 1958, movement under SBBS was conducted in Calcutta/ Kolkata.¹⁴

Protest movement of SBBS at Burdwan: Satyagraha movement under SBBS, had spread to Burdwan. Jogen Mondal had already been arrested in Calcutta on the first day itself. In Burdwan, a large number of Satyagrahis were arrested. The movement took a violent twist. The refugees started to Brickbat the police. Similarly they threw shoes at the police personnel. This incident was followed by use of Lathi- charge and tear gas by the police personnel.¹⁵

Protest movement of SBBS at Murshidabad: SBBS conducted Satyagraha took a distinguished mark in Murshidabad. In Murshidabad, the main leadership of the movement was provided by Sailen Adhikari (the leader of PSP). The Murshidabad Satyagraha started from Baghora (Jiyaganj), Kurmitola transit camps. Sailen Adhikari, Mohima Ranjan Goswami under the aegis of PSP, led the movement. Satyagraha movement Sailen Adhikari continued throughout March 1958. Ultimately the case number dated 188/224/164 IPC and under section 11 of West Bengal security act began over the disturbances created by S.N. Adhikari and Pratap Chandra Halder of Kurmitola camp. They were arrested.¹⁶

Protest movement at the various sub-division in West Bengal : The movement of SBBS reached the sub-divisional level 24 parganas (Bangoan), Howrah (Uluberia), Nadia (Ranaghat). SBBS and UCRC joined together at Bongaon, to reconstitute an action committee. The joined movement of SBBS and UCRC started from March 26th 1958 with a joint

meeting at Town Maidan Bongaon. During this period Jogen Mondal was in prison. So he could not participate in the struggle at sub-divisional level. A meeting was held on April 5th 1958, presided by Mahadev Bhattacharya (PSP). Anil Kumar Singh, Hemanta Biswas and Balahari Mondal were present in the meeting. One important aspect of the future policy of SBBS came up at this meeting. Biswas expressed that even if government refused to pay heed to the refugees demand SBBS would continue the movement and change the trajectory. They would urge the camp refugees to forcibly occupy the government lands.¹⁷

Forcible occupation of land under SBBS: From March 31st 1958, UCRC also started its Satyagraha movement. In the meantime, on March 29th 1958, the 12 day of the Satyagraha movement under SBBS, a meeting was held at Subodh Mallick Square at Calcutta. This meeting was important because of the change of policy of SBBS. Here it was declared that unless the government changed its policy of dispersal, then SBBS would recourse forcefully to agitated occupation of land. This policy was implemented in next year by the refugees of Bagjloa area under leadership of Hemanta Biswas.

Ultimately the movement was withdrawn on April 20th 1958. The government promised that no refugees would be forced to go outside West Bengal without their consent. SBBS was conscious and worried. It suggested that a joint committee, looking for surplus land, should be formed.¹⁸

Contextual note, Jogen Mondal recollected his experience of working with SBBS during the last Satyagraha movement. He expressed regretfully that no one could work sincerely in the organization because every step was dominated by party consideration. The interests of the refugees were never a priority and we're subordinate to all. Mondal thus took it upon himself to found the East India Refugee Council (EIRC). This organization in course of time emerged as the sole organization of the camp refugees.¹⁹

In many cases, it has been observed that the refugee movement, led by political parties was resulted worst in refugee welfare. The impact of the refugee movement is far - reaching in West Bengal politics. The refugee problem in West Bengal did not only occur during the partition of Pakistan in 1971(when Bangladesh was formed). This refugee arrival is still observing.

Conclusion: UCRC and SBBS are the two organizations that emerged as the savior of the refugees after the Partition of India in 1947, however, a number of refugee organizations opposed the government decision to resolve the refugee crisis. But the activities of the two organizations about refugees overwhelmed everything.

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