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Dandakaranya As Memory, Migration, And The Exilic Landscape In Bengali Dalit Literature: A Contextual Study

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Abstract: This article examines how Dandakaranya—the central Indian rehabilitation scheme for post-Partition refugees—functions as a recurring memory-landscape in Bengali Dalit writing. Instead of treating Dandakaranya only as an administrative site of resettlement, this study reads it as a portable topography that shapes narrative temporality, ethical judgment, and political claim in the life writings and testimonios of Bengali Dalit authors (notably Manoranjan Byapari and Jatin Bala). By juxtaposing parliamentary debates and policy documents with Dalit autobiographical texts and recent scholarship on refugee governance, conservation, and the Marichjhapi affair, I argue that Dandakaranya becomes in Dalit literature both an index of state failure and a mnemonic technology: a set of routes, queues, papers, and affinities that refugees carry into later settings (urban slums, reserve forests, courts). The article elaborates three interlinked claims: (1) Dalit writing transforms bureaucratic detail into moral evidence; (2) Dandakaranya-memory organizes nostalgia as critical evaluation rather than sentimental longing; and (3) the Dandakaranya → return → Marichjhapi sequence reveals continuities between development, conservation, and casteed governance. Close readings of texts, archival references (Rajya Sabha debates), and historiographic synthesis support the argument.

Key Terms: Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi, Bengali Dalit Literature, Refugee Politics, Namasudra, Matua, Memory Landscapes, Exile, Migration.

INTRODUCTION

When post-Partition refugee policy in India is narrated as a timeline of camps, grants, and "successful" rehabilitation, Dandakaranya often appears as a technocratic footnote: a centrally sponsored project that moved "surplus" refugees to a forest frontier for reclamation and work. Yet for many Bengali Dalit refugees—particularly Namasudra/Matua families—Dandakaranya was not only a policy destination but a lived archive of hunger, paperwork, surveillance, and forced labor. Recent Bengali Dalit life writings transform that archive into a memory-landscape: Dandakaranya recurs in narrative as routes, ration lines, ferry crossings, and camp names, becoming portable and repeatable when refugees return to Bengal or migrate to cities. This article explores how Dandakaranya appears and functions in Bengali Dalit literature, how it organizes narrative time and political judgment, and what its afterlives reveal about the intersection of caste, migration, and state power.

The analysis proceeds in four parts. First, I briefly summarize the policy history of Dandakaranya and key scholarly interpretations of refugee governance. Second, I map the Namasudra/Matua social-historical background that conditions much Bengali Dalit testimony. Third, I undertake close readings of Bengali Dalit texts (centered on Manoranjan Byapari and Jatin Bala) that foreground Dandakaranya as memory-place and analyze the formal features—enumeration, plain style, and documentary voice—that convert bureaucratic detail into moral evidence. Fourth, I read the Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi sequence as a revealing arc connecting development and conservation logics that both subordinate refugee claims; I conclude with methodological and pedagogical implications. Throughout I cite parliamentary records, archival studies, and contemporary scholarship that situate the literary evidence within wider governance logics.

1. Dandakaranya Narratives:

a. The Dandakaranya Project

The Dandakaranya Project (initiated in the late 1950s) was envisioned in parliamentary debates as a large-scale scheme to resettle refugees from East Bengal in a sparsely populated forest belt spanning parts of present-day Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Rajya Sabha proceedings from December 1959 make explicit that "camp refugees from West Bengal" were among the categories targeted for relocation to Dandakaranya; the official rhetoric framed relocation as development—land reclamation, irrigation, and nation-building—rather than as forced displacement. The Rajya Sabha record thus reveals the technocratic register that would govern rehabilitation policy: sanitary camps and budgets formed the policy vocabulary while the lived consequences of distance, dislocation, and labor discipline remained under-examined in official files.

b. Governmentality, Discipline, and "Unwanted Citizens"

Recent scholarship situates Dandakaranya in a pan-Indian governmentality of refugee governance. Uditi Sen's *Citizen Refugee* reads post-Partition rehabilitation as the state's attempt to "harness" refugees to national development: settlement schemes like Dandakaranya aimed to discipline mobility, extract labor, and neutralize political claims by spatially and administratively fixing refugees. Ross Mallick's archival study links such schemes to the later Marichjhapi eviction, arguing that policy reversals and conservation rationales were continuous with earlier developmental disciplining of refugee bodies. These historiographic frames are essential: they show how a project framed as "rehabilitation" can operate as a technique of control and how its afterlives are politically consequential.

2. Caste Matters for Namasudras in Dandakaranya:

The Namasudra community (historically labeled "Chandal") occupies a central place in Bengal's Dalit politics. Organized devotional-political movements such as Matua (originating with Harichand and Guruchand Thakur) cultivated institutional infrastructures (pathshalas, hostels, sangha networks) that later facilitated refugee mobilization, mutual aid, and identity assertion. Scholarship shows that large numbers of Namasudra families were among those offered relocation to Dandakaranya; by the early 1970s tens of thousands of such refugee families had been moved, many of whom later returned or perished. The casteed dimension of resettlement—who was sent where and with what access to resources—matters because it shapes both the lived experience of camps and the social meanings recovered in Dalit narratives. In short, Dandakaranya's operational logic intersected with longstanding caste structures, and Bengali Dalit texts insist on that intersection rather than allowing policy to be read as caste-neutral.

3. Dandakaranya in Bengali Dalit Life-Writing:

a. Dalit Life-Writing as Testimony

A characteristic formal move of Dalit life-writing is its plain, documentary register—episodic narration, precise names, dates, place-names, ration quantities, and catalogued officials. This "audit aesthetic" serves to convert subjective suffering into public evidence that can be checked and used politically. Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* is exemplary: the text repeatedly lists camp names, ration hours, distances to wells, and the details of encounters with police or contractors,

producing an evidentiary archive against the euphemisms of official files. The plain style is political: it asserts credibility in the face of social disbelief and functions pedagogically, teaching readers how camp governance reproduced caste humiliation.

b. Dandakaranya as mnemonic topography

In Bengali Dalit narratives Dandakaranya appears not as a fixed, absent place but as a portable set of topographical signs—queue formations, ration counters, paper checks, work-gang routes—that refugees carry into cities and deltaic islands. Byapari and Jatin Bala narrate return migrations that superimpose Dandakaranya's memory-map onto municipal counters and reserve forests. Thus, Dandakaranya functions "in" literature (as scene and location) and "as" memory (as judgement, comparison, and instrument). When a narrator recounts a police cordon in the Sundarbans or a humiliating question at a municipal office, the story resonates with prior Dandakaranya scenes: the same administrative techniques of measuring, disciplining, and excluding reappear. This mnemonic portability enables Dalit writers to perceive continuities across disparate state regimes—development and conservation—and to name them.

c. Nostalgia as Critique

Critical scholarship has often treated nostalgia as conservative or regressive. Dalit refugee nostalgia in Bengali texts, however, is distinctive: it is not a yearning for a mythic village past, but a moral yardstick used to evaluate promises and betrayals. When an author recalls life in Dandakaranya, the memory is instrumentally comparative: Was the Promised Land really cultivated? Were ration commitments kept? How did police or contractors behave? In this mode nostalgia becomes a form of historical accounting that exposes administrative failure and the selective application of rights. It thus performs a critical function, transforming longing into public indictment.

4. Byapari and Bala on Dandakaranya:

a. Manoranjan Byapari — *Interrogating My Chandal Life*

Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography (translated into English as *Interrogating My Chandal Life*) narrates a life claimed by movement: camp → Dandakaranya → city → union organizing. Several motifs reveal Dandakaranya's mnemonic function. First, counting:Byapari lists hours, rations, and distances in ways that make suffering transmissible and verifiable. Second, paperwork: the text shows how ration cards and certificates are both gateways and instruments of humiliation—documents that compel migrants to repeat their stigmatized caste identity at every counter. Third, return: the narrative includes episodes of leaving Dandakaranya and attempting to re-enter Bengal, where prior experiences give narrators an analytic vocabulary for interpreting municipal exclusion. The prose thereby makes Dandakaranya a heuristic for reading the present: it teaches readers how to decode the operations of state power.

b. Jatin Bala — *A Life Uprooted*

Jatin Bala's *A Life Uprooted* (English translation, 2022) foregrounds children's perceptions of displacement. Bala's Dandakaranya scenes register not only hunger but the temporal regimes of exile: days ordered by water fetches, ration waits, and school exclusions. The child's memory maps the camp physically (ferry docks, work-lines) and ethically (who is allowed inside, who is barred). As in Byapari, the Dandakaranya memory functions later as a comparative lens: when families return to or attempt to settle in Bengal, memory measures whether "rehabilitation" is real. Bala's testimony emphasizes continuity: exile persists not only as geography but as a mode of social temporality that continues to mark Dalit lives.

5. Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi:

A crucial analytic move is to read Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi as linked nodes within a longer political arc. Scholars such as Ross Mallick demonstrate that policy logics enabling export to forest frontiers (Dandakaranya) are contiguous with the logics that justified forcible eviction from reserve forests (Marichjhapi)—both invoke development or conservation to justify depopulation and both apply coercive state techniques to bodies already deemed marginal. The Dalit literary archive registers that continuity: return migrants who had earlier been sent to Dandakaranya sought to reassert claim to Bengal's land and polity; the response—blockades, police action, and violent eviction—echoed earlier techniques of

disciplining uprooted populations. Thus the literary memory of Dandakaranya primes narrators and readers to recognize Marichjhapi as the predictable outcome of long-term governmental strategies.

6. Genre, Translation, and Archives: Methodological Reflections

a. Genre: Testimonio, Autobiography, Counter-Report

Bengali Dalit Dandakaranya texts hybridize autobiography, testimonio, and counter-report. They are autobiographical in their first-person life scope, testimonial in their collective claim-making, and archival in their attention to documents and dates. This hybridity matters: it makes the works usable across disciplines—historians can extract leads and names, sociologists can map patterns, and literary critics can analyze form and rhetoric. It also makes them powerful civic instruments: they function as moral audits, petitions from the margins, and pedagogic manuals for political organizing.

b. Translation Politics: Preserving the Ledger

Translations (Sipra Mukherjee's translation of Byapari; the Sahitya Akademic edition of Bala) need to preserve the specificity of caste terms, bureaucratic idioms, and place names. Domestication risks erasing the evidentiary texture—the papers, camp codes, and regional toponyms—that make these texts archives. Translators who retain key lexical items and supply documentary paratext (maps, timelines, glossaries) enable readers outside Bengali contexts to appreciate the works' evidentiary force. This is not mere philology but an ethical demand: the ledger must be legible.

c. Archival Triangulation: Pairing Files with Lives

A methodological imperative emerges from reading Dandakaranya literature: always pair the file (parliamentary debates, administrative orders, and project budgets) with the life (autobiography, oral history, local pamphlets). Rajya Sabha debates and Dandakaranya administrative notes document intent and budget; literary testimonies document effects. Triangulation protects against two errors: romanticizing testimony as pure affect and accepting bureaucratic euphemisms as neutral description. Together, file and life create a fuller, ethically responsible historiography.

7. Thematic Takeaways: Memory, Rights, and Durable Exile

Three thematic claims emerge from the literary and archival material.

First, Dandakaranya is a mnemonic tool that enables Dalit writers to perceive and name structural continuities of exclusion that cut across regimes (developmental, conservationist, municipal). Memory as practice here is analytical as well as affective.

Second, Dalit life writing converts bureaucratic minutiae into claims-making evidence. Ration amounts, dates, camp numbers become legal-moral data; they support rights claims by rendering discrimination measurable and public.

Third, exile after Partition is not a short incident but a durable condition for many Dalit refugees—an ongoing temporality of provisionality, paper dependence, and policed mobility. Dandakaranya's afterlife shows that state projects of rehabilitation can institutionalize exile rather than end it.

Each claim has implications for policy: reconciliation requires not symbolic recognition but concrete reengineering of the administrative practices (papers, camp allocation, and environmental governance) that reproduce marginality. The literary archive provides both diagnosis and moral pressure for such change.

CONCLUSION

Reading Dandakaranya in Bengali Dalit literature reveals that places can become portable maps of injustice—mnemonic devices that survivors carry, redeploy, and teach to others. The Dandakaranya memory-landscape converts policy into personhood: it makes state failure legible in the everyday metrics of time, distance, and ration. For scholars, teachers, and policymakers the lesson is methodological and moral: reconstruct the past by reading files with lives; understand policy not only in its budgets but in its measured moments of waiting; and honor testimony by preserving the lexical and documentary texture that makes it evidentiary. Bengali Dalit literature's persistence in remembering Dandakaranya warns against facile distinctions between development and conservation, between planned rehabilitation and violent eviction.

Both can be instruments of dispossession when administered without attention to caste and dignity. Thus, Dandakaranya as a portable reminder and a political instrument remind us that the refugee experience is not merely about displacement from territory but also about displacement from dignity, belonging, and recognition.

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