PMML

Occasional Paper

Perspectives in Indian Development

New Series

69

Negotiating Integration: Rehabilitating the Rashtriya Vikas Dal in Andaman Islands

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2024

Published by

Prime Ministers Museum and Library

Teen Murti House

New Delhi- 110011

E-mail: director.nmml@gov.in

ISBN: 978-93-84793-50-0

Negotiating Integration: Rehabilitating the Rashtriya Vikas Dal in Andaman Islands[1]

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Abstract

From the colonial penal settlement to its post-colonial imagery as representative of mainland India—popularly termed 'mini-India'—the State has sought to develop the Andaman Islands by transplantation of mainland communities. The history of the post-colonial Andaman Islands is significantly shaped by the schemes for 'colonisation' of the Islands and thereafter 'rehabilitation' of a large number of lower-caste, impoverished, and overall, disenfranchised Bengali Hindu refugees of the eastern Partition between 1949 and the early 1980s. The rehabilitation scheme itself is read as a distinctly post-colonial development, as it moved away from the imperial language of 'colonisation' to the statist conception of 'integration' of territory within the body of the nascent nation-state. The current paper, drawn from the ongoing research project at Prime Ministers Museum and Library (PMML), focuses specifically on the Betapur region of Middle Andaman, settled under the rehabilitation scheme between 1965 and 1973.

Under the RVD (Rashtriya Vikas Dal, or National Development Corps) scheme young, physically fit men were selected from the Mana and Kurud camps in the erstwhile Madhya Pradesh and specifically trained for resettlement in the Islands for making the inaccessible and inhospitable land fit for living and cultivation. However, disillusioned with the nature of their engagement in the nation's development, and faced with the possibility of being transported elsewhere after the completion of their task in Middle Andaman, the RVD workers began protests demanding to be settled in the region like earlier batches of Bengali refugee-turned-settlers. The current paper, based on interviews and archival evidence, brings out the RVD workers' agential narratives and the State's perspective in implementing the rehabilitation scheme for 'special areas' in need of 'integration' with the mainland. The process of rehabilitation—often piecemeal, ad hoc, and arbitrary—needs to be understood from multiple perspectives as the research shows. Finally, the paper discusses the cultural orientation and integration achieved through the cooperation of settlers and some novel intervention by the agencies.

Keywords: Andaman Islands, Partition, refugee, national integration, islandness, rehabilitation

Rehabilitation Scheme—the Post-Colonial moment

Andaman & Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal demarcating the borderwaters of South Asia and Southeast Asia, has been predominantly projected as a geopolitically sensitive, 'strategic' location in the 'frontier zone' (Abraham & Rajadhyaksha, 2015, p. 69), both in need of 'colonising' by its territorial claimants as well as development into an 'outpost' to thwart

[1] This paper is a revised version of the public lecture delivered at PMML, New Delhi on 14 September 2023.

territorial aggressors. It has been projected as both *terra nullius* (Abraham, 2018; Sen, 2017a; Zehmisch, 2018) devoid of agential inhabitants and a 'wild' terrain in need of conquest. The three prominent phases in the history of the archipelago– British colonial period, Japanese occupation period, and post-Independence period–are bound by a desire to productively utilise the island's space and resources, and to this end, transportation of various mainland populations has been the mode of operationalising such colonial and post-colonial designs. The Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands between 1942 and 1945, had led to a serious crisis in the Island's infrastructure and resources, most notably depletion of agriculture and shortage of labour (Dhingra, 2005, pp. 69-70; Sen, 2011, p. 222). Being an island, Andaman provided the perfect opportunity to test out newer systems of agriculture which, if successful, could be implemented on a larger scale in the mainland (Saksena, n.d.). On the other hand, post-Partition Bengal was faced with inflation, lack of food, inadequate resources, diminished rate of revenues for divided Bengal, crisis in the prosperous jute industry and an ever-increasing flow of refugees which further worsened the condition of an already struggling province (Rao, 1967; Chatterji, 2007). As a result, the Andaman scheme which was initially meant to accommodate refugees of the Punjab Partition was extended to the Bengali refugees (Sen, 2017, p. 82). The refugees and migrants of Bengal Partition who had crossed over to India were dispersed across the country, where they lived out their 'refugee lives' under conditions of extreme hardship and protracted displacement, till they were resettled in locations like the Andaman Islands.The colonization scheme which was led by the relief and rehabilitation department and the government of West Bengal between 1949-60 in the South, Middle and North Andaman, was not successful in either inducting as many settler families as the administration had hoped for, or reclaiming the projected quota of lands required to settle the island as a thriving colony, and also the selected population did not meet the demand for non-agricultural occupations in the Island (Dhingra, 2005, p. 83). These concerns regarding the nature of the island colony, coupled with geopolitical concerns in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 led to serious deliberations over the existing vulnerabilities and the nature of development required to fortify the 'bordersea' (Bhattacharya & Lorea, 2020) region of Bay of Bengal. Under these circumstances, a 'bolder plan' (Dhingra, 2005, p. 90) was necessary for the integrated and accelerated development of the Andaman Islands.

At the time of reconstitution of states in 1964, the Ministry of Rehabilitation was made responsible for development of 'special areas' as earmarked in the Fourth Plan. Andaman and Nicobar Islands was the first to be declared such a suitable area for integrated resource

development. According to the Ministry of Rehabilitation Report[2]by the Inter-Departmental Team on Accelerated Development Programme for Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the goal of accelerating development in these designated areas was the utmost productive utilisation of its natural and human resources. Manpower and transport were identified as the two biggest challenges to the successful implementation of the scheme. The team identified three regions of Andaman Islands as being the most suitable for development under the scheme: Little Andamans, Neil Island (now Shaheed Dweep) and Betapur of Middle Andaman, along with Great Nicobar. The need for a diverse cultural mix of population was stressed as a national imperative of the future settlements in the earmarked locations as it would provide for a stronger base for the economy and the security of the Islands. As a result, the focus shifted from an exclusive preference for Bengali refugees from East Pakistan who continued to be seen solely as farmers, to a diverse mix of populations recognized by their specific skills and perceived competencies in contributing to the island's development in unique ways. The Bengali settlers were given first priority for resettlement on paddy lands, and those with experience in salt-water fishing were inducted into coastal fishing programmes. Special emphasis was put on the development of plantations to raise coconut, areca nut, rubber and coffee crops, which according to the report required the selection of repatriates from Ceylon who were experienced in plantation work. The report identified that the state of Kerala could provide plantation workers, while Andhra Pradesh could provide both fishermen for off-shore fisheries and plantation workers. Most significantly, the report identified the need for 'some sturdier stock of people from the mainland', particularly ex-servicemen, due to the island's 'peculiar location' away from the mainland, which posed security issues in the context of a sensitive geopolitical location. Overall, the 'rehabilitation scheme' (1965-80) settled an area of 11,465 acres—with 803 Bengali, 45 Burmese, 72 Sri Lankan, and 330 ex-servicemen families (Dhingra, 2005, p. 99).[3]

On Caste, Partition, and Dispersal

The research focuses on the rehabilitation scheme while the central point of this particular paper is the settlement of Bengali RVD workers in Betapur, Middle Andaman between 1965

[2]Report by the Inter-Departmental Team on Accelerated Development Programme for Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Ministry of Rehabilitation, Govt. of India.

[3] In combination of the colonisation and the rehabilitation scheme, a total of 3695 Bengali refugee families were settled in the Islands, with the rehabilitation scheme accounting for 803 Bengali, 45 Burmese, 72 Sri Lankan, and 330 ex-servicemen families settled across the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. (Biswas, 2009)

and 1973. Approximately 80 per cent of the Island's Bengali settler population belongs to the Namasudra caste group following the Matua sect —which began as a social movement against brahmanical hegemony, untouchability, and oppression, in the early 19th century in Faridpur, East Bengal—whose political and social unity was gravely affected by the event of Partition and their dispersal across the Indian states and also present-day Bangladesh. As a result of the Partition, the 'Namasudra habitation zone'[4] (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2022, p. 31), encompassing the districts of Barishal, Khulna, Faridpur and Jessore, that was critical for successful caste mobilisation in undivided Bengal, went almost entirely to East Pakistan. Once a powerful political force, they came to be seen as merely 'Hindu minority' (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2022, p. 74), and in West Bengal they lost their political bargaining power (Sen, 2015, p. 105) due to loss of their demographic and geographic advantage.

It is pertinent to note that most of the Namasudras did not have the capital to migrate immediately after the Partition, and had to stay back even after their wealthier upper-caste Hindu patrons had moved across the border to India. It was not until the 1950s, under increasing communal violence and economic pressures that a large-scale migration of Namasudra people took place (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2022, p. 72). The Matua Mahasangha led by PR Thakur, the grandson of Matua religious leader Guruchand Thakur, played a crucial role in encouraging Namasudra refugees to settle in places outside West Bengal where they would receive land for resettlement, including Dandakaranya and Andaman Islands, in order to build a 'new Bengal' (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2016, p. 76).

In the specific instance of the Andaman Islands, the Matua sect played a pivotal role inrecreating a 'sense of home' (Mazumdar, 2016; Lorea, 2017) for the dispersed and islanded refugees. The state was keen on a productive utilisation of this 'excess' manpower in the form of refugee population in mainland India. This particular population[5] crossed over to India in the early 60s, primarily into the state of West Bengal, from where they were dispersed to camps

[4] 'Their identities were thus firmly rooted in the spaces and ecologies they lived in. Their sense of belonging to that space was both in terms of physical possessions of land and home, as well as historical, cultural, and affective ties.'

[5] This population was termed as 'residual rehabilitation' that is those 'old-migrants' who had entered India before 1958 (Sen, 2018, p. 56). The rehabilitation of the 'old migrants', dispersed across camps in mainland India, would later be taken up as 'residual rehabilitation' (Sen, 2018, p. 56) in order to utilize this population in integrating select locations (like the Andaman Islands) in the body of the Indian nation-state. The ones who migrated between April 1958 and December 1963 were in a sense 'in-between migrants', as the government did not recognize them as refugees and they were ineligible for any rehabilitation assistance (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2017, p. 126). Finally, those who migrated between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971 were called the 'new migrants', who were eligible for rehabilitation outside of West Bengal, and the six lakh new migrants that stayed in West Bengal were deprived of all rehabilitation benefits (Chakrabarti, 1999, p. 236; Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2017,p. 126).

in central India, particularly the Dandakaranya region which spread over the present-day states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. As pointed out in the introductory section, schemes were designed to seamlessly address both issues of refugee rehabilitation and development of specific locations by training the refugees for various developmental activities (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, etc.) to be taken up in their region of settlement. In doing so, the state used 'refugee labour' (Sen 2018) to further its agenda of developing these 'special areas'. Participants of this research were part of the 350 RVD families that received rehabilitation benefits in Billyground, Middle Andaman. The eldest participant used to be a cluster leader who arrived with the very first batch, he claims to be over 90 years old, and all other participants belonging to the original RVD group are in their 70s and 80s as well. Of the surviving 25 or so RVD workers, I was able to interview one cluster leader and his wife; one cluster leader who is the eldest surviving member of the community; one RVD worker and his wife; one RVD worker, his wife and his son; two RVD workers; one dependent member who is the brother of a deceased RVD worker; the current Pradhan who is a son of a deceased RVD worker, his wife and his mother; two informants who are local schoolteachers; and one social worker who also belongs to a RVD family and runs a NGO in Billyground. This comes to around 17 respondents with varying degrees of participation in the interview process. These field interactions have been corroborated with and read along with the archival documents available in the Port Blair Secretariat Archive, which allowed me to bring these archival evidence to the settlers for elaboration and vice-versa. By putting into conversation both the state's orientation towards its refugee-turned-settler population in an islandic location, and the settlers' ways of rebuilding afresh familiar networks under conditions of insularity and remoteness, the paper highlights the mediated nature of seemingly unilinear, bureaucratic practices.

Settling the Rashtriya Vikas Dal (RVD)

Disciplining refugees into agents of national development

Betapur is located about 200 kilometres north of the capital city of Port Blair. It is part of the Mayabunder tehsil of the North and Middle Andaman district, and geographically situated in the Middle Andaman region of the Greater Andaman archipelago. Betapur is one of the few valleys in the Island with a predominantly flat terrain. While the area of implementation of the rehabilitation scheme in Middle Andaman was headquartered in Betapur, the population

brought under the scheme were settled across the valley, particularly in the Billyground[6] region a few kilometres south. The participants of this research are settled in the villages of Harinagar, Pinakinagar, and Swadeshnagar.[7] In this specific scheme of settlement, refugees were brought from Mana and Kurud Camps of Madhya Pradesh as part of the Rashtriya Vikas Dal (RVD; National Development Corps) to clear the deforested lands and reclaim these for agricultural and industrial use. Able-bodied, fit, young men were inducted from amongst the camp population to be trained for the RVD, which was tasked with creating a salaried labour force that would be employed for undertaking developmental activities in specifically 'backward' areas of the Indian territory (Rao, 1967, p. 229). In keeping with the agenda of transforming 'demoralized' refugees into 'disciplined, self-reliant workers and useful citizens' the scheme was launched in 1964, in order to, first, 'provide disciplined workers for the execution of development projects', and second, 'to provide gainful employment to migrants' (Rao, 1967, p. 229; Roy, 2012, p. 207). The idea was to 'instill the habit of manual work in the migrants and propagate among them the ideal of dignity of labour' (Roy, 2012, p. 207). In March 1965, 182 families comprising 465 persons were brought to the transit camps in Middle Andaman (Dhingra, 2005, p. 95). This was followed by a second batch of 200 families (Dhingra, 2005, p. 95). As a result, 382 families comprising 990 people were brought from the mainland to Betapur under the RVD scheme (Biswas, 2009, p. 82). These workers, or 'sahkaris' (Dhingra, 2005, p. 95) as they were called, were organised into smaller groups under a leader who would oversee their group's operations on behalf of the administration. The goal was to clear 2000-2500 acres of land in a year as the Betapur region had 3000-4000 acres of uncleared land from previous[8] settlement operations by the Forest Department due to the region's inaccessibility (Dhingra, 2005, p. 95). The newly established RRO (Rehabilitation Reclamation Organisation) was in charge of managing the RVD workers to achieve this goal through fully mechanised forest clearance techniques (Luthra, 1972,p. 26).[9] RVD workers were employed in PWD roadworks to construct roadsin order to reach the dense forests, without which it was not

[6] The place-name derives from 'Billy's ground'.

[7] According to the Census of 2011, Harinagar had a total population of 1902 (960 males, 942 females); Pinakinagar had a total population of 1011 (533 males, 478 females); and Swadeshnagar had a total population of 956 (498 males, 458 females).

[8] During the 'colonisation scheme' between 1952 and 1961, government agencies failed to accomplish the task of forest clearance due to the region's difficult terrain and inaccessible location.

[9] 'For the post-1964 refugees, a number of land settlement schemes were drawn on the basis of land offered by the various State Governments. For speedy reclamation of land, the Rehabilitation Reclamation Organisation was set up on 1st November 1964 with a fleet of 12 fully mechanised units of tractors, each unit consisting of 15 tractors. Two of these units were sent to Chanda to reclaim about 33,000 acres of land for the resettlement of 6,000 families, two to Betul to reclaim 20,000 acres for the resettlement of 3,000 families, one to Adilabad and one to Andamans while the rest were used in Dandakaranya.' (Luthra, 1972, p. 26)

possible to drag the commercial timber from the forest to the depots (Dhingra, 2005, p. 95). In addition to forest and roadworks, workers were also gainfully employed in the state farm (Roychowdhury, 2011, p. 247). The 60-acre research-and-demonstration farm was established to train settlers in modern cultivation methods (Roychowdhury, 2011, p. 249). The agriculture department provided them with tractors, power-sprayers, hand-sprayers and other necessary equipment. A 10-acre unit of soil conservation demonstration centre was also set up, but this task could not be adequately implemented (Dhingra, 2005, p. 97; Roychowdhury, 2011, p. 249). Scholars (Dhingra,2005, p. 95) claim, this scheme was implemented in great hurry and the Ministry of Rehabilitation started 'sending in people without putting the infrastructure into place'. They were brought two years in advance of the actual project and had to wait the longest to receive settlement lands as the indigenous Jarawa land was being cleared on either side of the ATR (Andaman Trunk Road) (Dhingra, 2005, p. 97). The construction of the ATR and the establishment of settlements in this region significantly circumscribed the Jarawa habitat and as a result were also the prime areas of hostility between the indigenous and settler populations (Dhingra, 2005, p. 116).[10] Eight years since its inception in 1965, the project was declared completed in 1973. Finally, between 1968-69, the RVD families were settled on 2050 acres of agricultural land in Billyground (Biswas, 2009, p. 90), and the Betapur project was deemed a success. This paper argues, this successful rehabilitation is the result of state-settler negotiation, and with examples demonstrate that initiatives by individual officers allowed for exceptions in case of certain settlers.

Negotiating bureaucracy

According to cluster leader Uttam Halder,[11] the sense of deception and scepticism had permeated the morale of RVD workers long before they arrived in Andaman. At the end of their training in Mana and Kurud camps, in January 1965, tractors bearing soil-digging tools and RVD uniforms arrived at the camp office. Halder was instructed by the camp commander 'Sarkar sir' to assemble all *sahkaris* of his cluster in order to unload the equipment and uniforms. 'When I began unloading the stuff from the tractor, I was disappointed. We were being asked to do physical labour even though we were given military training. These

[10] 'The settlements in Tirur, in Happy valley, in Betapur, and along the length of the Andaman Trunk road, were the prime areas of hostility between the two sides.' (Dhingra, 2005, p. 116)
[11] Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.; All names have been changed to maintain respondent's anonymity.

toolsrevealed the kind of manual labour being expected from us: we were sweepers, we were labour!'[12] The workers were neither apprised of the nature of work expected of them once the training was over, nor were they made aware of the unfamiliar ecology of the islands. 'We were only given a booklet that said 'Rashtriya Vikash Dal'. This primarily meant the task of "developing the nation" and in order to do so we would have to clean drains and jungles which made me sad.'[13] Needless to say, even while the workers agreed to being transported to Andaman as part of the RVD, they began devising their own plans regarding the nature of rehabilitation they truly wanted. They would worry how they would be able to 'maintain'their families, their progenies and later generations on the basis of contractual RVD work, as each family had only one salaried male head-of-the-household. In a similar vein, Nalini Howladar and his wife Geeta Howaladar complained, 'we were told that we would be given settlement within 3 years, but in reality, they started prolonging this process as they wanted to make us work for another 3 years!'[14] According to a local social worker, 'these people were given such a grand name 'Rashtriya Vikas Dal', implying they will work for the development of the nation, yet they were overworked by the administration to no end'.[15]Without any promise of land-based rehabilitation measure and an ever-looming threat of being transported elsewhere to work as RVD, the workers felt the need to confront the administration for better rehabilitation facilities.

Faced with the possibility of falling short of the required number of RVD workers necessary for the task of clearing Middle Andaman, the state was willing to make 'exceptions' on a number of issues like: the family composition and age of RVD workers for transportation to Andaman; what happens to the RVD after Middle Andaman project is completed; the number of families that could be settled in Middle Andaman; bringing separated relatives and family from the mainland; and conceding to settlers' protests and demands on issues like pardon of loans, expansion of educational and infrastructural facilities.

At the start of the scheme, the administration had strict rules for recruitment and had an age cut-off of 24 years. Moreover, the ideal family unit to be transported was supposed to be a two-member unit. The administration failed to attract enough number of eligible candidates as per this criterion, and consequently, men of all ages and different household compositions began

[12]Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[13] Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[14] Interview with Nalini Howladar and Geeta Howladar, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 14 January 2023.
[15] Interview with Tapan Das, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 14 January 2023.

enrolling for the scheme, which is how Samaresh Byapari[16] who is at least a decade older than Uttam Halder became a RVD worker. Halder was in Orissa when he learnt that four-member families were finally being allowed to go to Andaman and was ultimately deemed eligible for the scheme. Halder retorted with a victor's laugh, 'in the beginning they pointed to these rules, but later they dismissed all rules and willingness to go to Andaman was enough'.[17]

Another point of contention was that not all RVD units were family units. About 10 single men were recruited for transportation to Middle Andaman. Since, single men or 'unattached' women were not eligible to claim rehabilitation from the state, they had to be married off if they wanted to receive rehabilitation facilities. The camp commandant from Kurud who accompanied the first RVD batch to the island, one kind-natured upper-caste official whom Uttam Halder addressed as Mukherjee *saheb*, instructed all the bachelor RVD men to get married so that they could get land there. 'There were settler girls in nearby settlements. Mukherjee *saheb* trained the men to become RVD and arranged their marriages as well, so they became both RVD workers as well as the head-of-the-family! No other 'officer' did us this favour– he was a good man!'[18] While at Mana camp, Geeta Howladar's (then Adhikary) father took up rehabilitation in Chanda district of Maharashtra, while her elder brother trained as an RVD and came to Andaman. Once he reached Andaman, he realised 'this place is almost like our Bangladesh as everything grows well, so it would be wise to stay here'.[19]'We have grown up on a diet of rice and fish in Bangladesh, when we were in Madhya Pradesh we would only get roti … and maybe some rice once a week … that just doesn't suit us!'[20] As a result, her brother Samir Adhikary[21], who was single and therefore ineligible for rehabilitation, started employing various tactics to bring the rest of his family from Chanda to Andaman. Owing to his rapport with camp commandant Mukherjee, an 'exception' was made for Adhikary and the commandant wrote to New Delhi requesting that his family be transported to the island. 'Just for this one family, they sent a truck which brought them from Maharashtra to Calcutta. A staff was assigned to fetch them and help them board the ship at Khiddirpur. I received them in Port Blair.'[22] Like Halder and Adhikary, Ashok Mondal[23] too, recounted the story of camp commandant S.K. Mukherjee and a Bengali doctor named Prasanta Ray, and a 'non-Bengali' (*obangali*) officer amongst the

[16] Interview with Samaresh Byapari, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[17] Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[18] Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[19] Interview with Nalini Howladar and Geeta Howladar, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 14 January 2023.
[20] Interview with Nalini Howladar and Geeta Howladar, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 14 January 2023.
[21] Interview with Samir Adhikary, Pinakinagar, Middle Andaman, 14 January 2023.
[22] Interview with Samir Adhikary, Pinakinagar, Middle Andaman, 14 January 2023.
[23] Interview with Ashok Mondal, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 15 January 2023.

very first and immediate authority figures in the new settlement. Under the unfamiliar islandic circumstances, a language and a shared geography of origin emerged as powerful means of maintaining cohesion and by granting certain wishes the administration hoped to ensure the RVD's optimum collective performance.

Bargaining for benefits

The RVDworkers had come to realise that the land was quite fertile in Middle Andaman. On the one hand, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the administration was unwilling to allot lands for their settlement. Dhiren Sarkar[24] revealed, camp commandant S.K. Mukherjee advised the RVD cluster leaders to frame their demands very carefully as the workers stood a good chance of being rehabilitated there. They were advised to ask for settlement in Andaman as 'it would be hard to find a place like the Andamans anywhere else in India'.[25] Upon being advised by the '*babu*', the leaders relayed this information to the rest of the workers and they began a strike demanding settlement right there in Billyground as they didn't want to be taken elsewhere.According to Ashok Mondal, since the workers 'forced their hand' the government only gave them land, and no other facilities like ready houses, tools, utensils and cattle, and that they had to sit on 'strikes' on each and every issue.[26] Further, unlike the earlier colonisation scheme in which settlers received 30 bighas or around 10 acres, settlers of rehabilitation scheme only received a total of 16 bighas comprised of 15 bighas or 5 acres of cultivation land and one bigha for house-site. Since the region has a mix of plainlands and hilly terrain, the cultivation lands were allotted in plain paddy land and the location of house-sites were adjusted according to availability of land. In 1967, the administration (s*arkar*) decided to conduct a blind lottery to allot these plots to individual RVD families. Camp commandant Mukherjee left soon after their allotment by lottery was completed.

Samaresh Byapari was one of the key RVD cluster leaders who were at the forefront of the rehabilitationstruggle. As they began clearing lands for the RVD families, they realised that out of the 350 families only 300 families could be accommodated there. Moreover, at the time of lottery it was revealed that 10 families belonged to the ST (small traders) category and was therefore ineligible for rehabilitation on agricultural land. These families had been handpicked by Byapari, who is a Matua himself, as they comprised of 'two *thakurs*, one *napit*, one

[24] Interview with Dhiren Sarkar, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 15 January 2023.
[25] Interview with Dhiren Sarkar, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 15 January 2023.
[26] Interview with Ashok Mondal, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 15 January 2023.

chamar because he felt that one might require their (caste-based) services.[27] 'Wherever Bengali *samaj*(community) settled there are some "*shamajik kaj-kormo*" (social responsibilities), right? One needs them for those (ritual) tasks, right?'[28] While all settlers claimed that caste was never an 'issue' for them and that Andaman continues to be a 'casteless' society, caste identity played a very critical role in their informal selection for the scheme. Byapari assumed responsibility for their rehabilitation. From a Hindi-speaking staff at the surveyor's office, who would frequent Byapari's house for fresh milk, Byapari found out that 3 families could be accommodated in Billyground. Another 4 families had already decided to take up ST facility, that is, a house-site and a business loan to launch their business. Two RVD-turned-settler families had left their lands and repatriated to the mainland, so these plots became available for two families waiting to be settled. For the remaining family, he located a strip of land next to a small stream which had not been cleared for the task of settlement, which had nearly 20 bighas of land. Laughing with contentment, Byapari concluded, 'and thus all 10 families were settled here!'[29]

Settlement in Billyground, however, did not spell the end of their hardship, instead exposed them to newer challenges that involved adaptation to the island ecology; devising newer ways of protecting their crops from wild pigs and deer; alterations to their diet in order to decimate this animal population; and adopting cultivation work like raising plantations which most of them were unfamiliar with. The new settlers were pitted against previous Bengali settlers and neighbouring Malayali settlements to compete for infrastructural support like secondary and high schools for the settler children. Some even got arrested during the protests and spent a few months in Cellular Jail as a result of their attempts to secure benefits from the state.

New Geographies and Networks

Islanding culture

The area where the Billyground market stands today used to be rocky. Byapari put together a team to break down the rocks and level the area in order to establish a *harimandir* the night before the administration was going to hold the lottery for settlement. They held an overnight *kirtan* at the newly established temple and assembled for the lottery the next morning. The two

[27] Interview with Samaresh Byapari, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[28] Interview with Samaresh Byapari, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[29] Interview with Samaresh Byapari, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.

religious groups – Matuas, and the Vaishnavs– existed already since their days in Mana and Kurud camps. But in the Islands, many undertook the Matua initiation, particularly under the discipleship of one Matua guru Monu *gosain* (guru or preacher) of Diglipur. Lorea (2020, p. 12) finds in her research, this social as well as religious network also played an important role in bringing more people to the islands, outside of the governmental schemes for settlement. Matua festivals—particularly *Baruni Mela,* which is a celebration of the birth of Harichand Thakur—is the 'prime folk festival of the Andamans' (Roy Chowdhury, 2004, p. 152), and it draws both 'inter-island Matuas' as also devotees from the mainland (Mazumdar, 2016,p. 171; Lorea, 2020, pp. 7-8). While Matua practices helped recreate a 'sense of home' (Mazumdar, 2016; Lorea, 2017) in the Islands, it was in turn shaped by altered practices and specificities of the islandic location. For instance, settlers started using the island's valuable *pedauk* tree to carve the *danka* drum which is essential for all Matua practices and the very symbol of Matua community (Lorea, forthcoming); the drum membrane was made using deer-skin which the settlers would regularly hunt as the island's large deer population was a threat to agriculture. In addition to the intermeshing of the island's ecology with the settler's material culture and practices, Matua ritual practices and lore underwent changes as well.

The power of these faith practices in binding the local settler community in an alien 'islanded' location was not lost on the government officials in charge of their settlement. Correspondence between Sadhan Raha, Tehsildar (Middle Andamans), and S. N. Maitra, Chief Commissioner of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, reveals there was a practice[30] of providing each sailing refugee family with *khols* and *kartals*, in addition to other standard articles of necessity.[31] These are musical instruments mainly used in *kirtans* and folk performances of rural Bengal. The settlers were given one pair of *kartals* for every five families and one *khol* for every twenty families. The Chief Minister of West Bengal had not sanctioned the purchase of these instruments in 1955, but we find the then Refugee Rehabilitation Commissioner, Hiranmay Banerjee assuring Sadhan Raha of procuring the funds if the Chief Commissioner could write to him stressing on the necessity of providing these articles to the settlers. In response, the letter to the Refugee Rehabilitation Commissioner stressed the settlers' requests for these musical instruments 'so that they can keep up their social and devotional life'. In addition to the *khols* and *kartals* for all settlers, the letter requested for a 'gift of one harmonium for one Jogeshwar

[30] Scholars suggest that musical instruments were issued also to the refugee families in transitory camps in order to keep their morale high. (Sen, 2011, p. 224; Lorea, 2018, p. 53)
[31] File no. 1-56(30)/54. Subject: Settlement of refugee families from West Bengal. Home Section (Foreigners), Andaman & Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

Mistry', a settler of the 'remote island of Havelock', who he claimed had a 'good voice'. This is an important clue to the centrality of congregational singing and spiritual gatherings to the heart of community-making in the new island settlements.[32] Moreover, official correspondence also mentions that a sum of Rs. 600 was received by the Refugee Rehabilitation Commissioner for the purchase of garments for a '*Jatra Gan* party', that is, a folk-theatre troupe. It can be inferred from these archival evidence that devotional singing and gatherings were significant in sustaining the cultural and spiritual lives of the new settlers, and the island administration[33] was not only keenly aware of its importance in maintaining the morale of the community but also for the continuation of these isolated pockets of settlement villages in the 'remote' island-spaces. This, however, does not indicate changes in social acceptability of Matua settlers among the urban, educated, and often upper-caste Bengali population of the Islands. Derogatory remarks like calling the Matuas 'a band of idiots' (*"ek murkher dal*") not worthy of being considered 'bhadralok' (Lorea, 2020a, p. 237) are unfortunately common even today.

Countering insularity

Coming back to the 'Jatra Gan Party'; there was only one folk-theatre troupe in Andaman Islands, which was assembled by Samaresh Byapari[34] and others during their stay at Mana camp. He assembled a *jatra* troupe (folk theatre group) comprised of performers from Faridpur, Barishal and Khulna districts, who were known for their acting talent in East Bengal and had found their way into the mainland camp. He had handpicked the 'players' (performers) for the '*dol*' (group) and made sure that all of them were recruited by the RVD and brought to Andaman. When it turned out that many of them belonged to the small trader category of refugees and thus ineligible for rehabilitation in Middle Andaman, Byapari fought tooth and nail with the island administration to ensure that they remain in the islands. The colourful recollections of the folk-theatre stood out as a happy relic of what was otherwise an extremely challenging early settler life. The troupe was composed of 25-30 men, each with a separate responsibility: hauling trunks; painting banners and posters; actors; musicians; technicians. In Andaman, the administrative officials would make arrangements for inter-island travel, but

[32] 'The harmonium, an instrument that accompanies every performance of Matua songs, is shipped from main-land, in the lack of local manufacturers on the Andamans.' (Lorea, 2018, p. 60)
[33] As in the case of Dandakaranya, where 'Bengali teachers, doctors, social workers and administrators were especially appointed to ensure the settlers' "cultural well-being" (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2022, p. 181), in Andaman settlements, too, a similar practice was implemented to ease the process of settling Bengali settlers on the island's soil. Officials and settlers were engaged in constant negotiation to make way for special concessions and arrangements.
[34] Interview with Samaresh Byapari, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.

sometimes they had to manage it on their own. So extensive was the repertoire of their performance that they had 7-8 trunks full of costume, the arrangement for which had been made by the government. The performance would take place in the evening. This is before electricity reached the island's villages, so they would put up four flaming torches (*mashal*) lit by placing fuel-doused rags on bamboo poles on four corners of the makeshift stage. Later, they started using 'hazak light' or the petromax lamp which would be hoisted on bamboo poles in the four corners, while someone was assigned to keep pumping fuel all night. The troupe would issue tickets to their performances. People from nearby villages would start gathering in the evening, but the play would start later than the stipulated time in order to pull bigger crowds. Adhikary mentions they would even improvise to stretch their performances while they waited for more people to arrive. Moreover, if the performance ended too early the audience—all of whom arrived from nearby villages on foot—will have nowhere else to go in the dead of the night. The show would end late in the night, usually around 3 am, whereafter the audience would sleep right there under the open sky and leave around 5 am in the morning. People would bring their own sheets and pillows (*katha-balish*) to make the experience comfortable. The second-generation of RVD settlers, too, were involved in the folk-theatre, like the current *pradhan* himself, but they were not nearly as famous as people like Samaresh Byapari, who usually played female characters in these acts.

They would be invited to places like Kadamtala, Diglipur, Port Blair, and Hut Bay to hold musical performances. Some of the members could recite *padabali kirtans*, while others enacted the Ramayana. The veterans trained the novice performers over time. These gatherings took place in remote parts of the islands where the Bengalis had been settled. For instance, Halder and his group were invited to a place called Kalighat in North Andaman. Even though the settlement is part of the Great Andaman archipelago, there were no roads connecting Billyground to Kalighat. The group had to board a boat from Mayabunder which is around 35 kms northwards of Billyground. Another 80 kms northwards, they disembarked at the jetty in Diglipur and walked down to the settlement of Khudirampur a few kilometres away. After crossing the hills of Kalara, they could finally reach Kalighat. In Diglipur, they once held a folk-theatre performance where the tickets sold for Rs. 3 each and they had proper *pandal* arrangements for the group. They performed the three 'hit' *jatras* three nights in a row. On their way back to Billyground, they stopped at the Bengali settlements in Kalara and Nabagram to sing devotional songs at religious gatherings in exchange of some donations. The roads connecting the many settlement villages of Diglipur were still unpaved, so the group would

walk through fields, wading through the leech-infested stagnant water to reach the various locations. This is a region which is considered 'remote' even today, but settlers such as Halder and Byapari, never considered it a painful journey ('*koshto-foshto nai!*'[35]; it was no pain) as each of these regions had heavyweight Congress party-workers (*matobbor*; local leaders) and it was the group's primary agenda to 'canvas' for Bhakta *da* (MP Manaranjan Bhakta). The Billyground group would be joined by other locals in Diglipur and together they would carry out both the task of political canvassing during the day and Ramayana recitations wherever they halted for the night.

These networks played a major role not only in fostering greater social cohesion amongst the islanded settlers but also in providing support in more tangible ways especially in the face of material scarcity. When rice was in short supply in the RVD area, some of the settler men would walk to Mayabunder to buy rice. They would halt for the night midway at Tugapur ('*Tugapur na gele bangali pabo kothae*'[36], Tugapur used to be the closest Bengali settlement for us) in a relative's house, then walk to Mayabunder the next day. Once the rice was bought, they would stay overnight and come back the same way hauling 20-30 kgs of rice on their heads. This essentially meant the settlers spent 3 days walking and halting in order to fetch a commodity as essential as rice.

Conclusion

The paper began with a brief introduction to the context of settlement in the Andaman Islands, the population that was settled, followed by a detailed discussion on the Rashtriya Vikas Dal (RVD) scheme of settlement in Middle Andaman—which is the focus of this paper—and finally, how the active negotiation of the settlers with the state, via the island administration, shaped the very specifics of the scheme and engendered new networks both intra and inter-island as well as mainland-island. This paper puts into conversation two concepts that have emerged in the recent academic research on Andaman Islands. First, historian Uditi Sen's concept of 'refugee labour' whereby the post-colonial state utilised the labour of the refugees or citizens-in-waiting to carry out national development projects; and second, the work of Madhumita Mazumdar, Carola Lorea and others which concentrate on the role of religion, particularly the Matua sect, in creating a 'sense of home' for the uprooted Namasudra refugee-settlers in the Islands. In other words, the paper brings out the significance of cultural elements

[35] Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.
[36]Interview with Uttam Halder, Harinagar, Middle Andaman, 13 January 2023.

in retaining the new settlers in Middle Andaman, and its crucial role in engendering new networks, both intra and inter-island as well as mainland-island. Majority of the settled Bengali refugees belong to the Namasudra caste group practicing the Matua sect—which began as a social movement against brahmanical hegemony, untouchability, and oppression of Namasudras, in the early 19th century in Faridpur, East Bengal—whose political and social unity was gravely affected by the event of Partition and their dispersal across the Indian states and present-day Bangladesh. In the absence of the hegemonic upper-caste Hindu culture, the settlers were free to reorient their cultural identities, wherein religiosity played a crucial role.

These networks, which were beyond the purview of the administrative wings tasked with their rehabilitation, helped the population in negotiating their resettlement. The case of the RVD has the potential to bridge these two concepts demonstrating the state-settler interface. In spite of the multiple dislocations in their journey from East Pakistan to Andaman, the RVD-turned-settler population was held together by cultural ties that influenced a lot of their decision-making and therefore, the rehabilitation trajectory itself. Establishing these networks at a time of greater insularity and disconnection due to the lack of infrastructure makes these intangible bonds and ties the very lifeblood of the dispersed community. And a strictly bureaucratic understanding of the rehabilitation process eludes these parallels, and arguably more agential, networks that played a critical role in what appears to be routine administrative issues.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks the anonymous referees for their helpful comments that improved the quality of the research paper; and the editorial team comprising of Haimanti Dey, Dr. Nisar Kizhakkayil and others for their constructive suggestions.

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