



THE DANDAKARANYA PROJECT: A CHRONICLE OF PARTITION REFUGEES, TRIBAL DISPLACEMENT, AND CONTESTED REHABILITATION IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

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Abstract: *The rehabilitation of Bengali refugees after the Partition of India remains one of the most complex and under-examined episodes in South Asian history. This paper revisits the Dandakaranya resettlement project, conceptualised as a solution to the refugee crisis but ultimately marked by structural inadequacies, ecological incompatibility, and socio-cultural alienation. Drawing upon archival sources, government reports, and personal narratives, the study explores the lived experiences of refugees re-located from West Bengal to the inhospitable terrains of Dandakaranya. It critically evaluates the state's approach to displacement management, highlighting the tensions between developmental planning and human realities. The paper also situates Dandakaranya within the broader trajectory of refugee movements, including the Marichjhapi episode, to illustrate patterns of resistance, return migration, and contested citizenship. Foregrounding marginalised voices, the study argues that Dandakaranya was less a site of rehabilitation and more a laboratory of state-led social experimentation with profound human consequences.*

Keywords: *Partition, Dandakaranya, Rehabilitation Policy, Refugee Narratives*

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Back drop of the Dandakaranya Project

The Partition of India in 1947, rooted in the “Two Nations Theory” advanced by the Muslim League in the 1940s, divided the subcontinent into India and Pakistan on 14–15 August 1947. This

cataclysmic event triggered one of the largest forced migrations in human history. While the western frontier saw a relatively concentrated and rapid (though violent) population exchange, the

eastern border presented a more prolonged and intractable crisis. East Bengal, with its substantial Hindu population, including Namasudra Dalits and other agrarian castes, became East Pakistan. Hindu communities there faced systemic persecution, communal violence, economic marginalisation, and discriminatory policies, compelling waves of refugees to seek shelter in India. The influx of Bengali Hindu refugees into eastern India, particularly West Bengal, continued sporadically well into the 1960s and even the 1970s, exerting immense and sustained pressure on the receiving state's socio-economic infrastructure.

Initial rehabilitation efforts by the Government of West Bengal followed a two-pronged strategy of immediate relief and long-term rehabilitation. Refugees arriving at porous border points were processed through interception centres. Their claims were verified and documented via interception slips, which served as critical identifiers for eligibility to receive relief rations, admission to camps, and access to modest financial assistance (Government of West Bengal 1953). Refugees were then classified according to socio-economic vulnerability and relocated to different categories of camps: relief camps for urgent survival needs, transit camps for short-term shelter, colony camps designed as transitional spaces for eventual economic integration, and Permanent Liability Camps reserved for the most vulnerable groups—the elderly, widows, orphans, and the infirm—whose long-term care became a continuing state responsibility.

Colony camps were intended to foster self-reliance through productive work, but overcrowding, persistent food shortages (exacerbated by the lingering effects of the 1943 Bengal Famine), and severely limited employment opportunities quickly rendered these arrangements unsustainable. Camps overflowed, urban infrastructure in West Bengal buckled,

and resources strained to breaking point. The introduction of passport and visa requirements between India and Pakistan in 1952, intended to regulate cross-border movement, paradoxically intensified the refugee influx in the months leading up to its enforcement, as many hurried to cross before restrictions tightened.

By the mid-1950s, an overwhelmed West Bengal government formally declared its inability to absorb further refugees. This admission prompted the Central Government to shift from localised absorption to a dispersal policy. Refugee rehabilitation in the east unfolded in distinct phases: the first wave was absorbed primarily within West Bengal; the second extended to Assam and Tripura; when these areas reached saturation, the third phase targeted more distant, sparsely populated regions, including forested tracts in central India, parts of what are now Chhattisgarh and Odisha. The refugee influx occurred against recurrent triggers of violence, such as the 1950 Barisal riots (which displaced large numbers amid arson, killings, and looting) and the 1964 Hazratbal incident-related riots in East Pakistan, which again drove hundreds of thousands across the border (Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Ghosh, 2018).

This evolving policy framework culminated in the conceptualisation and approval of the Dandakaranya Project (DNK). Envisioned as a comprehensive development initiative, the scheme sought to achieve twin objectives: rehabilitating displaced persons (DPs) from East Pakistan while simultaneously developing under-utilised, forest-rich lands. Approved in 1957 and formally commissioned on 12 September 1958 via a Government of India Resolution, following recommendations of the AMPO Committee (comprising representatives from Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa), the project aligned with broader postcolonial planning under the Second Five-Year Plan and the Mahalanobis model of centralized economic strategy emphasizing heavy industry alongside rural

transformation (Karmakar 2012; Government of India Resolution, 12 September 1958).

The Dandakaranya region spanned roughly 77,630 square kilometres across Koraput and Kalahandi in Odisha, Bastar in Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh), and initially parts of Andhra Pradesh (which later withdrew). It was selected for its low population density, dense forests, and official perception of “underdevelopment.” The headquarters of the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) are in Koraput, Odisha. The DDA oversaw operations across four zones: Malkangiri and Umarnot in Odisha, and Paralkote and Kondagaon in Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh). The governments of Odisha and Madhya Pradesh agreed to release approximately 1,49,000 acres from Odisha and 67,000 acres from Madhya Pradesh, totaling 2,16,000 acres. A substantial bureaucracy of about 5,000 employees supported the project under a Chairman and Chief Administrator (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Ghosh, 2018; Wikipedia, Dandakaranya Project).

The project’s dual mandate was explicitly stated: (a) expeditious resettlement of displaced persons from East Pakistan, and (b) integrated development with “particular regard to the promotion of the interests of the local tribal population” (Government of India Resolution, 12 September 1958). In practice, however, the narrative of success in refugee rehabilitation has often obscured the profound human costs borne by the region’s indigenous tribal communities—the original inhabitants whose forests, lands, and traditional livelihoods were appropriated, frequently without meaningful consultation or adequate compensation. This essay traces the project’s impacts chronologically on both groups: the East Bengali refugees, who received unprecedented (though imperfect) state support, and the tribal communities (primarily Koyas, Bondas, Gonds, and other Adivasi groups), who endured involuntary displacement. It is structured around three broad phases: the

historical background and inception (1947–1958), implementation and early settlement (1958–1962 onward), and the emerging dual legacies of rehabilitation and dispossession.

Historical Background of the Dandakaranya Project (1947–1958)

The genesis of the Dandakaranya Project must be situated against the backdrop of the lingering trauma of Partition and the Indian state’s shifting refugee policy. Between 1947 and 1950, approximately 344,000 refugees crossed into West Bengal alone. Recurrent waves followed events such as the 1950 Barisal riots and later the 1964 Hazratbal-related violence. Initial efforts to rehabilitate refugees within West Bengal led to overflowing camps, food shortages, and infrastructural collapse. By the mid-1950s, dispersal became inevitable. The first phase concentrated on West Bengal; the second on Assam and Tripura; the third pushed into central India’s forested interiors (Rao, 1967).

On 11 January 1957, the National Development Council approved the AMPO Committee’s proposal for developing the Dandakaranya region. The area’s selection reflected its perceived suitability: vast tracts of sparsely populated forest land that could accommodate both refugee settlement and regional development. Preparatory work began in 1958–1959 with land identification, forest clearance, and initial surveys. The region was home to diverse tribal communities—primarily Koyas, Bondas, Gonds, and others—who practised shifting cultivation (podu), relied heavily on non-timber forest produce (NTFP), and maintained customary rights over forests without formal colonial-era land titles. State authorities often presumed minimal resistance, sometimes viewing tribals as living outside the framework of “civilisation” and lacking documented claims (etribaltribune.com, 2016).

Settlement operations commenced in 1959–60, overriding the absence of prior revenue surveys. Official correspondence, such as

Government letter No. 948-RR dated 6 February 1960 (delegating land-release powers to the Revenue Divisional Commissioner) and No. 12746 dated 24 March 1961 (promising seven acres per family to both displaced persons and tribals), revealed the administrative machinery in motion. However, assurances extended to tribals frequently remained unfulfilled, exposing a policy bias that prioritised refugee rehabilitation over protection of indigenous rights (etribaltribune.com, 2016).

This phase framed the project within the nation-building ethos of the Second Five-Year Plan. Refugees, many from agrarian backgrounds, were positioned as beneficiaries who could transform “underdeveloped” land into productive agricultural zones. However, underlying tensions were evident: for many East Bengali refugees, Dandakaranya represented exile from the familiar riverine, water-abundant delta of Bengal; for tribals, it signaled an existential threat to their ecological, cultural, and economic world. By late 1958, with the DDA operational and land releases underway, the stage was set for large-scale transformation (Ghosh, 2018; Rao, 1967).

Scholars such as Monika Mandal have documented the broader context of relief and rehabilitation measures for Bengali refugees in West Bengal, situating the experiences of Partition victims and those fleeing subsequent communal clashes within evolving government policies. Her work traces Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal from the 1905 Partition of the province onward, analysing challenges of assimilation and the long-term integration of refugees into host communities. Similarly, Pallavi Chakravarty’s exploration of the contested “refugee” identity in post-Partition Bengal (1947–71) highlights how refugees actively negotiated their status and resisted dominant narratives of passive victimhood, drawing both on primary and secondary sources such as newspapers, government reports, and personal accounts. Refugees often invoked motifs

of “supreme sacrifice,” being “uprooted,” or acting as “patriots” to assert claims to citizenship, while the state distinguished between “real” factors of violence and “psychological” or economic motives—creating tensions in how refugee identity was constructed and managed.

Rizwana Shamshad (2017) analyses Bangladeshi migrants in India, further contextualising these flows, examining historical, political, and socio-economic drivers and the legal-policy frameworks that classified migrants variably as foreigners, refugees, or infiltrators. These scholarly perspectives underline that the Dandakaranya initiative emerged not in isolation but amid complex debates over refugee legitimacy, state capacity, and national development priorities.

Dual Legacies: Rehabilitation Gains and Dispossession

The Dandakaranya Project’s legacies are inherently dual and contested. For many East Bengali refugees, particularly agricultural families from Namasudra and other castes, it eventually provided a foothold—new villages, land titles, and integration into a national developmental framework—despite initial failures, desertions, and adaptation struggles. Official narratives sometimes hail it as a model of rehabilitation, citing the scale of land reclamation, the infrastructure built, and the families settled (thousands by the mid-1960s, with further inflows later). Moreover, refugee accounts and scholarly analyses reveal ongoing difficulties: infertile soil, inadequate irrigation, health challenges, and a persistent sense of cultural dislocation. Some families later returned to West Bengal or sought other opportunities, highlighting the limits of top-down dispersal policies.

For tribal communities, the project represented another chapter in a history of dispossession. Forests that sustained podu cultivation and NTFP collection were cleared; customary rights were overridden by bureaucratic surveys and allocations favouring refugees.

The lack of consultation, unkept promises of land or support, and ecological disruption led to economic marginalisation, social upheaval, and cultural erosion. Tribals were not formally recognised as “displaced persons” in the same framework as Partition refugees, underscoring a policy hierarchy that prioritised one group’s rehabilitation over another’s rights.

Scholars like Ghosh (2018) and others have critiqued the project’s planning flaws—poor site selection, insufficient infrastructure, and failure to integrate local tribal interests meaningfully—while also noting its role in broader environmental transformation through deforestation for settlement. The initiative reflected postcolonial India’s dilemmas: balancing humanitarian obligations to Partition victims with constitutional duties toward indigenous communities, all within a centralised planning model that often treated both groups through administrative categories rather than lived realities.

In essence, the Dandakaranya Project illustrates the complex, often painful trade-offs of mass rehabilitation in a diverse society. It integrated displaced Bengalis into new landscapes at high human and ecological cost to tribal inhabitants. The question emerges: Can the redress of one displacement justify another? How should the state weigh moral responsibilities arising from Partition against protections for historically marginalised Adivasi groups? The project’s chronological unfolding, from Partition trauma and policy evolution (1947–1958), through aggressive implementation and settlement (late 1950s–1960s), to layered legacies of partial success and profound dispossession, reveals both the ambitions and the blind spots of early independent India’s refugee and development policies.

Ultimately, Dandakaranya stands as a reminder that rehabilitation narratives are never singular. They encompass agency and resistance by refugees (as highlighted by Chakravarty),

policy distinctions between “genuine” and other migrants (as analysed in various studies), and the frequently overlooked costs to host or indigenous populations. A fuller understanding requires acknowledging these intertwined histories of migration, state power, ecological change, and uneven justice.

Dandakaranya as a Development Experiment

Dandakaranya, spanning districts such as Koraput and Bastar, was characterised by undulating terrain, dense forests, and a predominantly tribal population. Despite its ecological fragility and climatic challenges, the region was selected for refugee resettlement primarily due to its low population density.

The project was administered through a centralised framework, with the central government providing financial resources and state governments contributing land. Refugees, primarily agriculturists, were allotted land parcels—approximately 6.5 acres for cultivation and additional space for homesteads. While this allocation appeared generous on paper, the ground realities were starkly different.

The soil quality, erratic rainfall, and lack of irrigation infrastructure rendered agriculture largely unviable. Refugees, accustomed to the fertile deltaic plains of East Bengal, found it difficult to adapt to the new agro-climatic conditions. Moreover, the absence of adequate tools, seeds, and technical support further exacerbated their struggles (Gupta 1999).

Beyond economic challenges, the project also entailed significant socio-cultural dislocation. The Bengali refugees were transplanted into regions inhabited by tribal communities with distinct cultural practices and livelihoods. This created tensions over land use, resource access, and cultural integration. While the project ostensibly aimed to foster co-existence between refugees and indigenous populations, in practice,

it often led to marginalisation of both groups. The state's approach reflected a technocratic vision of development; wherein human experiences were subordinated to planning objectives. Dandakaranya thus emerged as a "laboratory" for social engineering, where displaced populations were expected to adapt to unfamiliar environments without adequate support systems.

Despite these challenges, official narratives often portrayed the project as a success, emphasising infrastructural development and land distribution. However, personal accounts and independent studies reveal a contrasting picture of hardship, disillusionment, and systemic neglect (Ghosh 2000).

Narratives of Displacement, Return, and Resistance

The lived experiences of refugees in Dandakaranya were marked by a persistent sense of alienation and longing for their homeland. Oral histories and literary narratives capture the emotional and psychological toll of displacement, highlighting themes of loss, identity, and belonging (Sen 2011).

Faced with adverse living conditions, many refugees began deserting Dandakaranya and returning to West Bengal. This phenomenon of "reverse migration" gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. Reports indicate that tens of thousands of refugees abandoned their allotted lands, often selling their assets at nominal prices, to undertake the arduous journey back (The Times of India 1964).

The most significant episode of return migration culminated in the establishment of a refugee settlement at Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans in 1977. This movement represented not merely a geographical relocation but a political assertion of the refugees' right to choose their place of settlement. However, the state's response was severe. The Left Front government, despite its ideological commitment to marginalised groups, resisted the influx of returnees, citing concerns

over ecological sustainability and administrative feasibility. The subsequent eviction of refugees from Marichjhapi in 1979, reportedly involving violence and loss of life, remains a contentious chapter in India's post-independence history (Sengupta 2011).

The Dandakaranya experience, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation. It is intrinsically linked to broader patterns of displacement, resistance, and state control. Refugees were not passive recipients of state policies; they actively negotiated, resisted, and redefined their circumstances.

Scholars have increasingly emphasised the importance of memory and narrative in understanding refugee experiences. Personal testimonies, literary works, and community histories provide valuable insights into the complexities of displacement, challenging official accounts and highlighting the agency of marginalised groups (Pandey 2001).

Rehabilitation for Refugees at the Cost of Tribal Lands (1958–1970s)

Implementation of the Dandakaranya Project accelerated from 1960 onward, following preparatory land identification and forest clearance in 1958–59. The first major influx of East Bengali refugees reached Malkangiri in 1962 under the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA), which divided the project area into four zones—Malkangiri and Umarkot in Odisha (undivided Koraput district), and Paralkote and Kondagaon in Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh)—to execute a multi-pronged rehabilitation strategy (Wikipedia, Dandakaranya Project; etribaltribune.com, 2016). This strategy relied heavily on local resources, particularly dense forests traditionally used by indigenous communities.

Land reclamation was extensive and primarily targeted forest areas. In the undivided Koraput district, the Koraput zone utilised 21.48 acres of private land and 22.71 acres of government

land, for a total of 44.19 acres. The Malkangiri zone alone accounted for 1,23,831 acres of forest land, while the Umarkot zone (including Raighar) acquired 47,828 acres of forest land (20,393 acres in Umarkot and 27,435 acres in Raighar). This large-scale clearance directly resulted in the uprooting of 238 tribal revenue villages-63 in Umarkot, 49 in Raighar, and 126 in Malkangiri-displacing entire communities en masse without prior consultation or compensation (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Ghosh, 2018).

By the early 1970s, official figures indicate that 32,478 refugee families had been settled in the undivided Koraput district. Concentrations included Theruvali (220 families), Sunabeda (962 families), Padwa (296 families), and approximately 31,000 families in the broader Malkangiri area, with additional settlements in Umarkot, Raighar, and other locations (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Rao, 1967). Rehabilitation benefits provided to these families were generous and systematically documented, far surpassing any support extended to the displaced tribals. Each agricultural family received an 800 sq yard (7,200 sq ft) developed homestead plot with a 600 sq ft house, a 0.35-acre kitchen garden plot, a maintenance grant of Rs 2,850 (at 1960 price index), agricultural loans up to Rs 6,225, and 6–7 acres of agricultural land. Pesticide subsidies covered about 90 per cent of families. Non-agricultural families were allotted 2 acres of reclaimed land and a Rs 1,000 loan for small traders, along with house-building loans of Rs 1,700 (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

Communication networks, village tanks, and large-scale irrigation infrastructure formed the backbone of the agricultural transformation. Major projects included the Potteru Irrigation system from Chitrakonda dam (command area figures vary in records but contributed significantly), Gumpakonda Canal, Tamasa Canal, Satiguda Reservoir (Malkangiri dam), and Bhaskel in Umarkot. Collectively, these

and associated minor irrigation works created a cultivable command area totalling around 84,604 hectares in the Koraput region, supplemented by additional tanks and water-harvesting structures. Fisheries tanks were excavated across 1,100 acres to diversify livelihoods (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Government of Odisha records).

Infrastructure development proved equally transformative for the refugee settlements. Medical facilities expanded rapidly to 125 units, comprising 11 hospitals and primary health centres, 30 dispensaries, 21 health sub-centres, 51 primary centres, and 12 fully equipped mobile medical units. Educational institutions included 318 primary schools (with Bengali as the medium of instruction), 35 middle schools, and 8 high schools, totalling 361 institutions. Road networks covered 2,103.44 km (including 566.40 km main roads, 295.40 km rural roads, 835.50 km link roads, and 406.14 km internal roads), plus 335 km of improvements to existing Public Works Department roads. Water infrastructure featured 324 village tanks, 346 headwater tanks, 515 masonry wells, and 1,882 tube wells. Cottage industries numbered around 500 units, encompassing dhenkis, bamboo basket and mat making, carpentry centres, weaving societies, 46 multipurpose cooperatives, bullock-driven and power ghanis, a gobar gas plant, bakery units, and rice mills. Small-scale industries were set up in Sunabeda, alongside soil conservation measures, terracing, and approximately 230 community centres (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Ghosh, 2018).

Additional perquisites reinforced the refugees' integration. Free patta (heritable and transferable land titles) were issued, along with Indian citizenship certificates under the Citizenship Act, 1955, and Scheduled Caste certificates for Namasudra refugees. Employment was provided to 831 families in various work centres. The Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology established a Maize Research Centre to train settlers in improved cultivation

techniques. Government directives further sweetened the package: Letter No. 7(18)/73-DNK (9 December 1977) and its 1981–82 revisions allowed refugees to retain excess developed land without additional payment, treating homestead plots and certain agricultural lands as outright grants. Earlier correspondence, such as Letter No. 48440-ISG (23 May 1961), exempted the DDA from compensation claims to the state government, while other notifications ensured lands were settled on ordinary rayoti rights at nominal rent (etribaltribune.com, 2016).

Comparative Socio-Economic and Cultural Impacts on Tribals and Refugees

The Dandakaranya Project's impacts reveal a stark asymmetry between the two affected communities. For the East Bengali refugees, it represented a state-sponsored lifeline amid the trauma of Partition and repeated communal violence in East Pakistan, yet it simultaneously bred deep alienation and frustration. For the indigenous tribal communities, the original inhabitants of the region, it constituted an unacknowledged catastrophe that eroded their customary rights, ecological harmony, and cultural continuity. Chronologically, the immediate effects in the 1960s (land clearance, settlement, and initial infrastructure rollout) gave way to mid-term conflicts in the 1970s (refugee desertions and tribal resistance) and have produced enduring legacies that continue into the present day, marked by demographic shifts, unresolved grievances, and occasional violence in areas like Malkangiri.

Economically, the refugees experienced significant gains that enabled a measure of self-sufficiency. Each agricultural family was allotted 6–7 acres of land (with variations in irrigated zones down to 3–5 acres in some records), accompanied by generous subsidies, loans, and infrastructure support. The development of approximately 84,604 hectares of cultivable command area through major irrigation

projects, such as Potteru from Chitrakonda dam, Gumpakonda Canal, Tamasa Canal, Satiguda Reservoir, and Bhaskel, transformed previously “infertile” forested tracts into productive farmland. Cottage industries (around 500 units), cooperatives, soil conservation measures, and fisheries tanks spanning 1,100 acres diversified livelihoods. Secure patta rights (heritable and transferable), Indian citizenship under the 1955 Act, and Scheduled Caste certificates for Namasudra families further integrated them into the national framework, granting access to reserved benefits. Many refugee families, arriving pauperised, eventually prospered relative to their initial condition, contributing to local agriculture, small-scale industries, and even out-migration for better opportunities (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Ghosh, 2018).

However, refugee dissatisfaction remained acute and multifaceted. Accustomed to the fertile, riverine Gangetic delta of East Bengal, many struggled with the rocky laterite soils, erratic rainfall, and unfamiliar forested terrain of Dandakaranya. Homestead plots were often dispersed by 2–3 km, hindering social cohesion. Cultural isolation was severe: Bengali newspapers were scarce, Calcutta radio signals were weak, and local media ignored their traditions. Constant low-level conflicts with tribals over resources added to the sense of exile. By the mid-1960s, desertions began; thousands left Malkangiri and other camps for West Bengal, especially after the CPI(M)'s rise in 1967 raised hopes of sympathetic rehabilitation closer to their “natural habitat.” Their return culminated in the tragic Marichjhapi incident (1978–79) in the Sundarbans, where Left Front government forces imposed an economic blockade and opened fire on unarmed settlers, resulting in deaths, forced evictions, and a return of many survivors to Dandakaranya. Mr Pannalal Dasgupta, a veteran freedom fighter and social worker who spent time in the area, recorded those local tribals, described as “broadminded, simple

and innocent”, returned the belongings refugees had left behind and even travelled to Hasanabad in West Bengal to request their return, highlighting a rare moment of cross-community empathy. Yet Prime Minister Morarji Desai expressed no sympathy, famously stating, “I have no sympathy for them. Why did they leave their settlements?” (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Ghosh, 2018).

For the tribal communities—primarily Koyas, Bondas, Gonds, and other Adivasi groups—the impacts were overwhelmingly negative and involuntary. Dependent on dense forests for shifting cultivation (podu), non-timber forest products, hunting, and cultural practices, they faced wholesale eviction without formal land records or consultation (Tripathy, 2024a). Settlement operations initiated after 1958 ignored customary ownership, leading to the uprooting of 238 revenue villages in the undivided Koraput district alone. Families fled deeper into remote hilly tracts out of fear. No meaningful rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) package was provided, certainly nothing equivalent to even 1 per cent of the benefits given to refugees. A 1961 government letter promising seven acres per tribal family was never implemented on any significant scale. Forests that had provided shelter and livelihood were razed on a massive scale; podu systems collapsed, NTFP collection became restricted, and many tribals were reduced to wage labour or marginal farming. Economically, they became poorer while refugee settlers grew relatively stronger over decades (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Tripathy, 2025).

Socio-culturally, the influx proved disruptive. The establishment of 361 educational institutions with Bengali as the primary medium marginalised tribal languages and oral traditions. New roads, hospitals, and community centres primarily served refugee colonies, leaving tribals on the periphery. Alien institutions and administrative practices clashed with indigenous governance systems. Resource conflicts intensified, exacerbating

tensions between “original inhabitants” and “new settlers.” The Dandakaranya Development Authority’s stated dual objective—refugee rehabilitation with “particular regard to the promotion of the interests of the local tribal population”—was violated in practice. Tribals were viewed not as displaced persons deserving empathy but as expendable obstacles to a larger nation-building exercise under the Second Five-Year Plan (etribaltribune.com, 2016; Ghosh, 2018). Please mention sources other than etribaltribune to corroborate your statement and information

Long-term legacies persist into the 21st century. Among refugees, demographic and economic entrenchment is evident: Bengali-speaking communities now form a significant portion of the population in Malkangiri and surrounding areas, contributing to agriculture and the local economy. However, intergenerational trauma from Partition, forced dispersal to Dandakaranya, and the Marichjhapi massacre lingers, manifesting in narratives of betrayal by both Congress and Left Front governments. For tribals, the project accelerated land alienation, cultural disruption, and poverty traps. Human development indices in affected districts remain low, with high illiteracy (especially among women) and dominance of below-poverty-line households. Forest loss contributed to environmental degradation, biodiversity decline, and altered microclimates. Recent tensions and clashes in Malkangiri—often over land and resources between tribal groups and Bengali settlers—emphasise unresolved grievances. Environmentally, the clearance of dense forests for reclamation remains a cautionary tale of development-induced ecological harm (Tripathy, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025; etribaltribune.com, 2016).

While refugees received unprecedented state largesse that enabled a form of “rebirth” in an alien landscape, tribals bore the hidden “pain”

of that development. Their displacement was involuntary, uncompensated, and largely erased from official success narratives. This duality raises profound ethical questions about Partition-era rehabilitation policies: can the resettlement of one traumatised group justify the dispossession of another indigenous population whose homeland was appropriated without consent? The Dandakaranya experience highlights how nation-building in post-colonial India often prioritised certain displaced citizens while rendering original inhabitants invisible.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Dandakaranya Project, spanning its inception in 1958, vigorous execution in the 1960s, and contested outcomes from the 1970s onward, exemplifies the complex and often painful realities of post-Partition nation-building. It delivered relative stability and infrastructure to refugees but at the irreversible cost of tribal dispossession and ecological disruption. Challenging simplistic narratives of uniform “success,” the project demands a more honest reckoning. Acknowledging historical injustices, potentially through retrospective R&R measures, land restitution where feasible, and cultural preservation initiatives for affected tribal communities, remains essential for achieving equitable justice in India’s diverse social and ecological landscape (Tripathy, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025). Only through such recognition can the wounds of this contested development chapter begin to heal.

The Dandakaranya project stands as a poignant reminder of the limitations of state-led rehabilitation in addressing the multifaceted realities of displacement. Conceived as a developmental solution, it ultimately exposed the gaps between policy intentions and lived experiences. The project’s failure can be attributed to several factors: ecological incompatibility, inadequate infrastructure, lack of participatory

planning, and insensitivity to the cultural and social dimensions of displacement. More fundamentally, it reflects a broader tendency within postcolonial governance to prioritise territorial and economic considerations over human well-being. At the same time, refugee narratives highlight resilience and agency. Their decisions to migrate, resist, and return reveal a continuous struggle for dignity and belonging. The legacy of Dandakaranya thus lies not only in its failures but also in the enduring voices of those who lived through it.

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