

Business of smuggling refugees

By Gautam Chattopadhyay

Since partition refugees from Bangladesh have continued to infiltrate into India, causing economic constraints and socio-political disorganisation in the border States.

All government efforts to stem the infiltration have failed. To understand the root cause of refugee affair I have talked to several refugees. Vivid facts came to light. There is a well geared modus operandi of private gangs who smuggle in refugees.

A man of fifties who had undergone the torment of riots in the then East Pakistan in mid-fifties and had to cross the border narrated in vivid detail his story. He was a party to the operation for a short time and observed the gang operations closely. He wants to remain anonymous as today he leads an honest and humble life. We shall refer to him as Sunil.

During the period 1955-59 the border between Banapol (East Pakistan) and Patrapol (India: 24 Parganas W.B.) was one of the refugee routes.

Private gangs consisting of 3 to 7 members of the age group of 20-30 used to guide those refugees. Gang members were either residents of border villages or of refugee camps. Both side of the border had its own gangs. Sunil named a few prominent members — Sukshanto Mondal, Ramesh Mondol, Jaydev, Abani Bala, Amal Biswas, Syed, Ruckman, etc. These gangs knew each other and whenever they met the common question were asked "Maler Dhandayee jabches Kina?" (Are you going for the catch?). Twice or thrice in a month they used to say: "Border is sealed by the military." Rest of the time respective border police of Pakistan and India used to man the line of demarcation.

All along the border police used to camp after every two kilometers. Obviously, there was an understanding between the police and the gang. Police allowed them to pass the border freely. But when gang members were caught by the military they had to undergo severe punishment like caning. And after some time they were handed over to the border police for penal action.

On the Indian side, a tea stall of Balaram of Bashirhat used to be the nerve centre of gang operation where all transactions and police liaison used to take place.

When we go to a tourist spot we are flocked around by guides. In the same way, when a group of people approached the border, gang members used to flock around and ask "shikar jachho" (Going for hunting?). When they came to know that they were out to cross the border they offer to escort

ables. This old lady somehow slipped in the darkness and jumped into a pond and hid there for over 36 hours. At sunset next day, she came out. She said to herself: "Hindustan to poschim dike" (Hindustan is in the west) and so she followed the sunset. She was carrying 15,000 Pakistani rupees — all very wet. These people helped her to dry them and was kept in a safe place. After two days of continuous search in refugee camps, her family members could be traced.

The most significant incident in

Sunil's life was in the summer of 1957. They were half a furlong away from the check post when escorting a group. Suddenly, they could hear a lady crying in loud voice. With their torch they saw a woman was crying as she kept her two hands over her ears to save her ear rings from Ruckman, who was beating her. Sunil could see another gang member — Ramesh, who was dipping her two-year-old son in the dirty pond and threatening to drown him. His father Ram Raton was tied from behind and being tortured by

Jaydev. They were nobody else but Sunil's own cousin and his wife and their children. Then the Indian gang launched the attack on the Pakistani gang and recaptured all the loot. This was the turning point of Sunil's life. He left the lucrative business which used to fetch him Rs 100 to Rs 1,000 per day even. Agents were always there to exchange the Pakistani and Indian rupees.

This way hundreds and thousands of refugees have infiltrated in the past. And the process is still going on.

they came to know that they were out to cross the border they offer to escort them across the border.

The average charge of escorting the party varied from Rs 10 to Rs 50 per head, depending upon each party's economic condition. The distance they had to cover to reach safety place was around 3 kms.

The border in question was approachable by two main ways—one was across the meadows and fields and another was field with ponds and rivulets. If the gangs had any mischief in their mind they used to opt for the lonely route of meadows.

Generally, the gang preferred late night for crossing the border. They used to carry three or four gaggers, guptis, and lathis and powerful torch.

When they escorted the party through the lonely fields on the midway of the border, they used to snatch all their valuables. If there were any resistance even murders followed.

The party was left near the safe zone (Kalibabu Road) where the Indian Government had arranged a reception office which used to register their names and provide sharbat, milk and biscuits to children of the tired refugees before they were taken to refugee camps. Other safe place for refugees were the railway station from where they usually travelled to Calcutta.

But if the parties were left midway, mastans of bordering villages also looted them and if they could not get any booty, they used to hand them over to the police.

In a particular case, as narrated by Sunil, a Pakistani gang headed by Syed escorted a party of ten, including three young females, after the deal was struck. But soon Syed announced that the border was sealed by the military and for three days they were asked to stand back in several shelters provided by the gang. Some arranged their stay in such a way that three females were kept in separately. The girls had to pass through the ordeals of rape during the subsequent nights. After three days, they were escorted out of East Pakistan at early dawn and these refugees were deprived of all their valuable possessions. When this party was left in midway, they came across one Indian party headed by Amal Biswas. On listening to their ordeal, Amal escorted the party to a railway station free of cost. On the same day when Syed was escorting the second party of refugees, the Amal group challenged him and Syed was very severely beaten.

In another incident, when a group of Indian gang was going back to the Indian border, a broken voice of an old lady was heard. She was in her forties. Her whole body was layered with whitish substance. She said: "Baba banchao amake" (Save me boys!). When they asked what happened, she said: "I will tell you. First, cross me over the border." They took the lady through the check post and told the border police "Ae Mashi" (She is our aunt). When they crossed the border she narrated her story. One East Pakistani gang was escorting their group of 30 across the border. In the midway they made the whole group naked irrespective of their sex and searched for valu-