

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-12
Gandhidham: Refugee Rehabilitation, Inc.

c/o American Consulate
Bombay, India
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I have come to think that one of the outstanding instances of human folly and tragedy in this century, so far, has been the migration of some 12,000,000 to 16,000,000 Indians within the borders of India, across the new borders of the two nations created from it in 1947.

This migration was the greatest rapid mass movement of people in history, and the number does not include the 200,000, or 500,000, or 1,000,000 people who were killed while migrating or before they could do so. To what extent this episode was inevitable or avoidable I do not know, but across the north of India exodus became a compulsion for millions of Muslims in new India and millions of Hindus and Sikhs in new Pakistan. The final cause was fear---of persecution or death.

By now there is a forgetting, but one can still see refugee huts and refugee-crowded towns and cities and hear of the heartbreak that came with leaving home, the anxiety of the trek by bullock-cart or fitful ride by train, the relief without hope of arriving on the other side, the trial of beginning again, with little or nothing, in an unpromising land.

At great cost, the governments accepted responsibility for the relief and rehabilitation of the displaced persons, and the DP's themselves expected compensation for the property they left behind on the "old" side by inheriting the property abandoned on the "new" side. The two governments, faced with the mutual problem of assessing all sorts of property and validating a deluge of claims---from houses and land to golden earrings left in safe-deposit boxes and postal savings certificates---have been less than fully cooperative, and the job of administering the claims of DP's, which have been snarled in red tape and compartmentalized in bureaucratic pigeon-holes---"verified claimants" and "small rural claimants" and "non-claimant occupants"---is a long way from being completed.

On the other hand, many of the camps set up in 1947 and 1948 to provide relief in the form of food, clothing and medical care have long since been abandoned or converted into semi-permanent "colonies" (though camps still flourish in West Bengal to accommodate the migrants still coming in, for economic more than political reasons, from East Pakistan). In general, efforts on both sides have long since turned to rehabilitation, the re-settling of refugees with permanent homes and means of living---a place to live, and work to do.

In big-picture terms, there was a considerable problem of dislocation. Both nations claim to have received 8,000,000 refugees. Those

entering India came in about-equal numbers from the east and west, but four-fifths of those entering Pakistan converged on the west wing. Three-fourths of those who moved to Pakistan were farm-villagers, but only half of those who migrated to India were in the same category.

The many farmers and farm-laborers who tried to escape from the land and settle in the city---"There is always room for a few more in the city"---have intensified urban crowding. More than 500,000 have sought out Calcutta, about 500,000 each have gone to Delhi and Karachi, and 400,000 have congregated in Bombay. Now many of them live in squalor and vie with one another for the limited number of jobs.

Moreover, there has been a tendency for refugees to cross the border and stay put. Efforts to settle them in undeveloped parts of the interior have been largely rebuffed. Bengalis in particular have been loathe to leave their familiar cultural, economic and linguistic environment. Of 499,195 acres of land in states other than West Bengal which have been offered for the settlement of displaced persons from East Pakistan, only 196,972 acres have been accepted so far. DP's have accepted 85,000 acres of the 110,000 offered in neighboring Tripura, but only 60,000 of 198,545 offered in distant Madhya Pradesh.

Without being able to pin down the book-keepers, I can pass on the amounts of money the two governments claim to have spent for DP's, chiefly through ministries of relief and rehabilitation. India: Rs 2813 million (\$ 590.7 million). Pakistan: Rs 290 million (\$60.9 million). Provisions for refugees have included relief camps, allocation of evacuee land, housing and business houses, cash payments, loans and grants, employment assistance, cooperative production centers, and "colonies" and whole new towns.

I have visited one of the new towns in India: Gandhidham, in Kutch, where India borders West Pakistan and touches the Arabian Sea. Gandhidham is providing refugees with a place to live and work to do, and helping develop a hitherto undeveloped area as well. Even at that Gandhidham differs from the two dozen other refugee towns in India, for it is not only for refugees but by them too. It is a large-scale cooperative effort by DP's from Sind, in the lower Indus Valley, to rehabilitate themselves. There has been generous Government assistance, but the initiative has come from the Sindhis there, and, among them, one man.

In late 1947, when the first Sindhis crossed the border and thought of resettling in adjacent Kutch, there was little more than cactus, scorpions and poverty on the land. Today, 40,000 ex-Sindhis live in comfort in their oasis in the desert, and the corporation they founded is the biggest shareholder in a combine that is building, for the Government, what is expected to become India's sixth biggest port, Kandla, just seven miles away.

You take the train southward through the Rajasthan desert, through miles of dry, sandy soil covered with scraggly, weedy growth. You get the feeling that if there is a town up ahead, and a port, it's a mistake. Then you finally come upon the town and the port, with low-lying concrete houses and rows of oil-storage tanks, huge warehouses and a busy railroad shunting yard, and you get the idea of optimism and enterprise.

I was shown around town by an indefatigable young official of the Sindhu Resettlement Corporation, the organization founded to build the community. Now seven years old, Gandhidham consists of three sub-towns now two-to-five miles apart, but "someday" to be connected by future expansion. The streets are broad, and some are paved and fluorescent-lighted. The houses range from one-story flats to comfortable bungalows, and all have a substantial look. There are trees and shrubs in abundance, but they still need growing. There are six primary schools and two high schools and 3000 boys and girls in them. Neat communities, and then the desert begins again.

In the morning and in the evening, when the sun is not so insistent, neighborhood squares and shopping centers are busy, and the men and women who stroll and chat and stop for a sweetmeat seem comfortable. Their names---Advani, Nihalani, Changulani---give them away as Sindhis. Those I talked to spoke of their present reduced means. The man who manages the cinema house used to own a chain of theaters, a former landowner now works as an office clerk. But they seem content, and proud. "Yes, we lost much property," said a shop-keeper, "but we came out safely. We have come along. We have built new homes. We do not become beggars, we Sindhis."

I visited also the port of Kandla, the project, now 60 per cent completed, which has grown along with Gandhidham and promises it a prosperous future.

After Partition, the need for a west coast port to replace Karachi and relieve the burden on Bombay prompted a port commission to select Kandla Creek as the site for a major port. At a cost of Rs 144 million (\$ 30.24 million), the Government expects to have a modern port serving a hinterland of 275,000 square miles (north Bombay, Rajasthan, Punjab, Kashmir, Delhi and west Uttar Pradesh) and a population of 45,000,000. The Sindhu Resettlement Corporation (SRC) and a German firm are doing the job, and expect to be finished in another four years.

One cargo dock, 2700 feet long and big enough for four 600-foot ships, is nearly completed, and work has begun on a 2025-foot extension that will increase the capacity to seven ships, all of 22,000-32,000 ton size. Two miles upstream an oil berth provides space for tankers.

While construction goes on, a little shipping goes on too. A ship comes "every few days" to off-load steel bars and machinery (five huge cranes had just come from Britain) for use at the port, and to on-load iron ore and raw cotton, or a little salt or raw wool. The four huge pairs of transit sheds and warehouses, 500-feet long, are so empty they look lonely, however.

The future, one hears, is a different matter. That railroad through Rajasthan was completed only two years ago, 174 miles of it, and gives Kandla its first link with the main line from the Punjab to Bombay. Two other lines will be extended into the interior. The airport will be completed by mid-1958. "Within a few years," an engineer predicted, "the irrigation projects in the Punjab and Rajasthan will make bigger five times agricultural production. Grains will be exported, and manufactured goods will flow in." He began to talk about the possibility of extending the dock a few more ship-lengths.

One night I was a dinner guest of Bhai Pratap Dialdas, the refugee businessman who founded Gandhidham and is managing director of the SRC. Bhai Pratap has the biggest, tallest house in town. He is fiftyish, plump, friendly, dignified. His hands are soft and puffy but his eyes are shrewd. Before dinner he sat on the lawn, his eight or nine guests (leading citizens, I presumed) sitting around him in a U-shaped row. He discoursed with ease on astronomy, Buddhist sculpture and Sindhi literature, inviting questions, solving them, arbitrarily. He appeared to be the Rajah of Gandhidham.

From Sindhi literature it was no trouble to steer the conversation over to the Sindhi Resettlement Corporation. With Partition, Bhai Pratap began, the West Punjabis came to East Punjab, the East Bengalis came to West Bengal, but the Sindhis, a million and a quarter of them, came to a land with a strange language and customs. Being mostly businessmen, they scattered themselves among the cities of India.

"This dispersion, some of us thought, would cause Sindhis to lose our identity. We thought of collecting them, settling them in an organized manner. Gandhiji gave us his blessing, the Maharao of Kutch gave 15,000 acres of land, and we began our plans."

The sub-towns were laid out with the aid of Point Four planners and named: Gandhidham, literally a "place of Gandhian pilgrimage," Sardarganj and Gopalpuri, for two Indian Ministers for States, and Adipur, "old town."

Why settle here particularly? Bhai Pratap smiled at the welcomed question. "We Sindhis are businessmen, not unclever, many with worldwide interests, as my own family. We had some foresight. We had some intimation that somewhere there would be located a port to replace Karachi. Our coming here to Gandhidham anticipated, you might say, the coming of the port to Kandla. A well planned town is a necessary adjunct for a port, and the port will ensure the growth and development of the town."

Where the Government helped, as governments can, was to subscribe to one-fourth of the SRC's capital of ₹ 20,000,000 (\$ 4.2 million) and lend the corporation an additional ₹ 12,000,000 for building 4000 homes. The Ministry of Rehabilitation was good enough to allow DP's to take over the new houses in full or partial compensation for property left behind in Pakistan. Those without property claims are buying homes on a rent-purchase scheme.

"We are not interested only in providing houses here," Bhai Pratap went on. "This has been done in a hundred relief camps throughout the country. The important thing was to encourage the displaced persons to gain a livelihood." Consequently, the SRC built modest factories to produce cement building-blocks for dwellings and shops, reinforced-concrete light-poles and water and sewer mains, and doors and window-frames, all of which provided employment for hundreds of refugees and kept SRC money at home. Some of the "graduates" of the factories have taken jobs at the port project. A Vocation Training School has 85 or 90 boys, all high school graduates, who are being trained to become mechanics and carpenters. A Narishalla for girls teaches them domestic arts.

Bhai Pratap lit another cigarette and made another point. "We

planned Gandhidham also as a social and cultural center for Sindhis." He pointed to the recent "victory" in the National Academy of Letters, which recognized Sindhi as one of the literary languages of India even though the Indian Constitution omits it from its list of 14 official languages. "We speak Gujarati now (the regional language) but in the schools we are teaching Sindhi, though in the Davanagari (Sanskrit) script rather than the Persian as before.

"But language is only part of it," he said. "The important thing is the sense of being with other Sindhis. After all, that is what impelled us to begin all this. It was the duty of the fortunate to help the destitute. Our aim is not to make money. I take no salary, and the corporation profits are limited to six per cent, and we have refrained from declaring any dividends." He explained that profits from the port project, the bus company and the cinema go toward meeting the expenses of schools, dispensaries and sanitation. Residents pay no local taxes.

"What we are doing now," my host continued, "is allocating building plots along the Adipur-Sardarganj road to shareholders who live elsewhere, in an effort to induce them to come live here. When the port becomes prosperous they will come, certainly, but we would like to have them come now."

I had doubts as to how many more Sindhis will come to Gandhidham ---the number has levelled off---but I have no doubt the port will bring prosperity and prosperity will bring people. The present plan for a full-grown Gandhidham calls for 150,000 people.

"This may not happen in my lifetime," Bhai Pratap said as he put his hands on the arms of the chair and leaned forward. "But there is still a lifetime of work for me here." (I remembered what I had been told: "He sees to everything. He selected the flowers for the town park and designed the Siva temple---and the bronze god in it.") "There will always be something to do. The old life in Sind is gone, but we are keeping a little of it here. Ten years ago I never dreamed I'd be here. It's a wonder what you can do if you have to. Come. Let's eat."

Walter Friedenberg

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