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Rereading and Restructuring the Marichjhapi Massacre in Post-Partition Historiography: Dispossession and Refugeeism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

In 1979, several untouchable *nimnoborgo* refugees were forcefully uprooted from their self-made home in Marichjhapi, one of the islands of the Sundarban forest area in West Bengal, by state sponsored goons and the police. The proposed paper intends to reread the atrocities committed by the Left Front government of West Bengal in Marichjhapi to showcase how, in the decades following the killings, the upper caste *bhadralok* Bengali society offered little space to these minority refugees in their narration of post-partition historiography. Incidentally, very little has been written about Marichjhapi in Indian writing in English, and this is precisely where Amitav Ghosh counts heavily; for Ghosh builds the entire narrative of his novel *The Hungry Tide* against the backdrop of the Marichjhapi massacre. After revisiting the history of Marichjhapi, this paper restructures the incidents through Ghosh's narration of Marichjhapi in *The Hungry Tide* with the belief that it is imperative to generate critical discussions among the reading public regarding Marichjhapi, especially after the Supreme Court of India passed a historic verdict in favour of the farmers in Singur. If justice is served to those in Singur, it cannot be denied to the refugees of Marichjhapi, merely because they are untouchables.

Keywords: Dispossession, Migration, Marichjhapi, Refugee, Rehabilitation, Untouchable.

One of the most foremost writers of the partition of India, Bhisam Sahni voices in *Tamas* the point of view of a coolie, who replies to a Babu's enthusiastic call for *Azadi* (1), saying, "Babuji, what is that to me? I am carrying loads now and shall continue carrying them" (127). Indeed, a close reading of the historiography of Indian nationalism reveals that the privileged class/caste (2) and the so called *Babus* of our society, while articulating their memory and their history of the years after the formation of the nation-state called India, have persistently tried to ignore and erase the trauma and tribulation faced by those at the margins of the societal structure; thereby cementing in collective memory their history as worth preserving. It is a given fact that in years following the Independence and the partition, the narrative of history as constructed by the bourgeois-nationalist elite has had little to offer to those who belong to the lower class/caste of the society. Read in the light of these

observations, one subscribes to Jhuma Sen's argument that "Bengal's romance with the upper caste *bhadralok's* 'traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal' has dominated the imagination of partition historiography so much that very little or no attention has ever been paid to the bulk of refugees who settled outside Bengal and who had to directly face a lopsided discriminatory rehabilitation policy practised by the government" (102). Throughout the decades of 1950s, 1960s and 1970s people migrated to India from East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh) in search of hospitable places to stay. The first wave of migration mainly comprised the upper caste and elite Hindus against whom communal attacks were being strategically carried out in East Pakistan. Around 1.1 million Hindus migrated to India by 1st June, 1948, out of which 350,000 were urban *bhadralok*, 550,000 were the rural Hindu gentry, 100,000 were Hindu artisans and the rest were agriculturalists and businessmen (Chakrabarti 1). With enough resources at their disposal, the upper caste *bhadralok* refugees integrated easily into the mainland of West Bengal. The West Bengal government favourably received the upper caste gentry, placing them in Calcutta (present day, Kolkata) and its vicinity. Needless to say, the later batches of population, migrating from East Pakistan, were mainly the lower caste or *nimnoborgo* (3) refugees. In the absence of the upper caste Hindus, the communal violence in East Pakistan was directed towards those who are socially stratified as *nimnoborgo*. While the government readily provided land to the upper caste *bhadralok* to rebuild their safe abode, the *nimnoborgo* immigrants were rendered homeless as they were forced to embrace "refugeeism" (4) as a lifestyle by settling in camps outside West Bengal. In a way, Calcutta in particular and West Bengal in general was cleansed of the presence of the *nimnoborgo* refugees by a state policy meticulously drawn to subjugate the lower caste.

Who were these *nimnoborgo* refugees?

Before initiating a discussion on the Marichjhapi massacre, it is important to define who these *nimnoborgo* refugees actually were. These lower caste people, who were known as the Chandals of Bengal, popularly called the *Namasudras*, resided in Dacca, Bakargani, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Jessore and Kulna in East Bengal (Sen 105). It must be taken into account that many among them were also converted Muslims. They embraced Islam because of its more liberal beliefs devoid of any caste consideration; at the same time, these Muslims retained their traditional Bengali culture. During the colonial period, these lower caste Chandals and Muslims forged a unity which took the shape of the *Namasudra* movement. The *Namasudra* movement matured into a political front that was able to keep the Hindu-landlord dominated Congress party of Bengal in opposition. In movements against the colonial masters, such as Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement, this *Namasudra* community refrained from joining the political power-play between the Congress and the Raj. The Congress party's pressing demand for the partition of Bengal in 1947 weakened the movement so much so that the *Namasudras* eventually got divided as a swing-vote bank between the upper class Hindus and Muslims, thereby getting politically marginalized in India as well as in East Pakistan.

The Namasudras, who once kept the Congress in opposition, migrated to West Bengal where the Congress had established itself to power after the partition of India. To tackle the problems posed by the alarming influx of refugees in West Bengal, the Congress government resorted to building refugee colonies. The government had set up 389 colonies, all of which were stationed outside Calcutta (Sen 106). Since these colonies were constructed in areas vacated by the local population due to uninhabitable environment, families from the refugee colonies, who were forcefully placed there, soon travelled to Calcutta to settle down in more habitable places. Confronted with a complex situation, the Congress government issued an incoherent statement that the state of West Bengal lacked sufficient lands to resettle the refugees; hence the refugees were to be relocated outside West Bengal and moved to various places in the Indian union. Though the islands of Andaman were chosen to resettle the refugees, the plan failed miserably. Thereafter, the refugees were shifted to Dandakaranya.

Rereading Marichjhapi: Dandakaranya Project Area (DPA) and the Left Front Policy

Dandakaranya or Dandakaranya Project Area (DPA) was established in 1958 and it covered the district of Koraput and Kalahandi of Orissa and the district of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. This hilly region was extremely unsuitable for the relocated families. Their agrarian background and their ability to create a living by the rivers were of practically no use in Dandakaranya. Moreover, there existed no provision for health care and education. The relocation further aggravated their status as homeless and soon the indigenous tribals of Dandakaranya turned against the refugees, often attacking them with bows and arrows. Ross Mallick quotes S.N. Khanna who argued that these indigenous tribals also got “protection from the police, which [was] anti-refugee” (105). The refugees were emotionally, physically and culturally quite distant from Dandakaranya. Since the resettlement policy failed them, the refugees unanimously started agitating against the government in the form of hunger-strike. Their right to protest was substantiated by a declaration of the Dandakaranya Development Authority Chairperson Saibal Gupta:

“Most of the plots did not produce enough food to keep the families who farmed them alive. In this bleak and barren terrain, there was no other work by which the refugees could earn a few rupees. Such industries as the authorities tried to run, in a hopelessly amateur fashion, were disorganized, unprofitable, mismanaged and usually closed down soon after they were set up” (Sen 106).

The Left Front, which was the main Opposition Party in West Bengal Assembly, took up the cause of the refugees and voiced their grievances under the leadership of Jyoti Basu. In a letter to the State Rehabilitation Minister on 13th July, 1961, Jyoti Basu pointed out the discrepancies of the Congress government in handling the crisis and highlighted the problems faced by the refugees:

“Prolonged hunger-strike by the refugees...has proved beyond doubt the strong reluctance on the part of the refugees to accept the proposal of the Government regarding their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. As a matter of fact there has been no movement of refugees to Dandakaranya though they have been put to serious hardships and untold

sufferings due to stoppage of doles...We do not think that the rehabilitation of camp refugees in a manner acceptable to them is very difficult as is often being suggested by the Government” (Sen 107-108).

With the Left Front fighting for the refugees, Jyoti Basu declared that if the Leftists were voted to power the refugees of Dandakaranya would be resettled in West Bengal. In the meantime, the refugees of Dandakaranya started migrating to West Bengal in groups, and time and again they were arrested or forced back to their former location. Things changed completely after the Congress was ousted from power and the popular mandate established the Left Front government. One understands why Nilanjana Chatterjee in ‘Midnight’s Unwanted Children: East Bengal Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation’ opines that “the exploitative Congress government had fallen and a new popular government has come to power” (377). With the promises made by the Left Front ringing in their ears, the unquenchable thirst of the refugees for a homeland was, at last, satiated as they were assured of a place in the Sundarbans. (5) Soon they started rehabilitating and resettling in Marichjhapi.

But once the number crossed a few thousands, the Left Front leaders decided to send the refugees back to where they came from. (6) Police were deployed to impede the movement of the refugees and often they were arrested and returned to the resettlement camps. Many had sold their belongings to gather funds to facilitate their journey to Marichjhapi. Soon these refugees managed to slip through the police cordons, ultimately reaching Marichjhapi. The refugees insisted that they needed no government aid to resettle themselves; instead they hoped that the government would provide them necessary provision to stay in Marichjhapi. On arriving at Marichjhapi, some 30,000 settlers immediately identified the problems which they needed to tackle and started addressing them accordingly. They built shanties, and roads were constructed. They built embankments to counter the tidal waves. A school was constructed, decent medical facilities were provided for and proper drinking water was made available. In fine, Marichjhapi emerged as an ideal model which could have been followed by the government to address the refugee crises.

While the refugees self-sustained themselves in ways feasible to them, the Left Front government alleged that these migrants were running a parallel government, smuggling in arms and assisting the illegal refugee transfer into West Bengal. Soon the government claimed that Marichjhapi, being a part of the Sundarban Reserve Forest, was under the Forest Act and public encroachment is not permissible by law. There is ample evidence to oppose both these ridiculous claims upheld by the Left Front ministry. The point to reckon with is that successful establishment of Marichjhapi, without any government aid, meant that more refugees would desire to relocate themselves in West Bengal, adhering to the Marichjhapi model. The Left Front government apprehended such a move and hence, initiated their oppressive measures which initially took the shape of an economic blockade. On 20th August, 1978, around thirty police launches were deployed to restrict the movement of the refugees. These refugees were not unaware of their innate drawback of being untouchables. Despite bearing the badge of untouchability, the refugees called out to the civil society; some help

was provided for, but that did not prove enough. Within a few months, most of the boats used by the refugees were destroyed. In January, 1979, government forces attacked a boat carrying few women from Marichjhapi (Sen 120). The boat capsized and the resultant death infuriated the settlers and a veritable war broke out between the refugees and the state forces. With practically no weapon to fight a long sustained battle, the settlers knew they were fighting a lost cause. Moreover, the economic blockade resulted in dearth of food supplies which meant that many had to face death because of starvation. In spite of the inhumane torture and the barbaric treatment of the state machinery, the refugees uncompromisingly stood their ground, forcing the government to push for more stringent measures. When the police failed to persuade the refugees to leave, the government colluded with goons to forcibly evacuate Marichjhapi of its residents. Between 14th and 16th May, 1979, the refugees were attacked by police forces and hired goons. Young men were arrested and women were mercilessly raped. Several hundred men, women and children were killed and their bodies were thrown in the water. In about a little over eighty hours, the Left Front government successfully uprooted the untouchable refugees of their self-made home to throw them back in the abyss of dispossession.

It is interesting to note that during 1980s and 1990s very little had been written about Marichjhapi. In fact, the collective memory of the upper caste *bhadralok* offered no space to the untouchables to record their sufferings. The Left Front government's unprecedented atrocities in Marichjhapi which led to innumerable deaths were brought to public assessment more prominently during the Singur-Nandigram movement in West Bengal. Sen argues that the secular politics of *bhadralok* Bengali appropriated the politics played out against the untouchables in Marichjhapi in 1979 to dislodge the Left Front from power in 2011. Such generalized statement, however, does not do justice to the contemporary history. For one thing, in the post-partition memory-building project, the massacre in Marichjhapi has been addressed by a Bengali *bhadralok* who interrogates the caste question in his literature. Written two years before the Singur-Nandigram movement in West Bengal, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) explores the critical frameworks by which we can understand an event of such magnitude and trauma as the one in Marichjhapi from multifarious perspectives by combining the urgent and often cathartic narratives of those who were affected by the event directly or indirectly. Ghosh's depiction of Marichjhapi is not linear in nature; instead the narrative is multi-layered where the characters are configured around the metaphors of home and homelessness. Such a reading helps one restructure the narrative of Marichjhapi, and this restructuring becomes important especially after the recent historical verdict of the Supreme Court of India which allowed the deprived farmers in Singur to get their land back. (7) If justice is served to those in Singur, it cannot be denied to the settlers of Marichjhapi, merely because they belong to the lower caste of our societal structure.

Restructuring Marichjhapi in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

In one of her essays written against the backdrop of the Narmada dam protest, Arundhati Roy observes that "the millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in unacknowledged war" (65). In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh acknowledges one of the wars fought

on the eastern coast of Bengal to construe a narrative of Marichjhapi which has so far been little recorded in Indian writing in English. By doing so, Ghosh not only sheds light on a fascinating new territory but also demystifies its myth and history in a whirlwind work of imagination. A detailed study of the setting of the novel shows that the narrative is inseparable from the form, structure and history of the land of Sundarbans. In attempting to do so, it is assumed that the readers are already acquainted with the text and characters of the novel.

While most of the critical discussions of *The Hungry Tide* are focused primarily on three sets of characters—Nirmal and Nilima, Kanai and Piyali, Fokir and Moyna—this paper concentrates more on Nirmal and Kusum; the latter was one of the settlers in Marichjhapi, and it is through the presentation of her character that Ghosh offers a humanist critique of refugeeism and dispossession in India. Postcolonial states like India, in their efforts to set definite standards of modernisation, construct industrial belts, dams and other economic plans, and in this process often shift large number of people, leaving them forever displaced. In a sense, these refugees are *created*, and they are so desperate to find a proper habitation that “they are willing to sell themselves for a *bigha* or two” (51). In fact, what Ramachandra Guha states about the refugees camped in Kurukshetra immediately after the partition of India and Pakistan, might well be extended to the untouchable refugees of Marichjhapi. It seems that “their passion for land”, to quote Guha, “appeared to be elemental” (85). At the same time, it must be noted that untouchable refugees were “tide country people, from the Sundarbans edge...the rivers ran in [their] heads, the tides were in [their] blood” (164-165).

In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum, at quite a young age becomes fatherless. She watches her father die, falling prey to a tiger. On accepting a job offer, her mother is taken to Dhanbad where she is forced to take up prostitution. Determined to see her mother again, Kusum leaves Lusibari and “vanished as if into the eye of a storm. No one knew where she went; no trace of her remained” in the village (143). Years later, as a storm impedes Nirmal's journey back to Lusibari, he takes shelter in Marichjhapi where he discovers Kusum. Soon Kusum informs Nirmal how she as well as her husband, during their stay in Dhanbad, longed to get back to the islands in Sundarbans:

“[T]hat place was not home; there was nothing for us there. Walking on iron, we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood. We dreamed of storm-tossed islands, straining at anchors and of the rivers that bound them in golden fetters. We thought of high tide, and the *mohonas* mounting, of islands submerged, like underwater clouds” (164).

Meanwhile, after her husband's accidental death, Kusum heard “of a great march to the east.” They went pass her hut “like ghost covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling beside the railtracks”, carrying “children on their shoulders, bundles on their back” (164). One of the women informed Kusum that they lived in Bangladesh where they were forced to leave the country as the war broke out in the eastern theatre along the borders of East Pakistan and India. (8) After crossing the border, they were “met by the police and taken away”:

“[I]n buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We’d never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red that it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold, they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn’t settle there” (165).

One appreciates how eidetic ally Ghosh’s narrative presents the circumstances which compelled the refugees to cross the border to India. Thereafter, their forced transportation to Dandakaranya, their refusal to stay at the camp and eventually their self-sustaining relocation to Marichjhapi is rendered accurately in the narrative design of *The Hungry Tide*. In the ensuing chapters, Ghosh narrates how Marichjhapi emerged as a perfect rehabilitation centre for the refugees:

“[T]here were some thirty thousand people on the island already and there was space for many more. The island had been divided into five zones and each family of settlers had been given five acres of land. Yet, they had also recognized, shrewdly enough, that their enterprise could not succeed if they didn’t have the support of their neighbours on the surrounding islands. With this in mind they had reserved one quarter of the islands for people from other parts of the tide country. Hundreds of families had come flocking in” (172).

Despite these pragmatic steps, the leader of the ward admits to Nirmal that their endeavour will be futile if they fail to “mobilize public opinion to bring pressure on the government to get them to leave [them] alone” (172). Hence, a feast is organized to garner necessary support, and renowned writers, journalists and intellectuals from Kolkata are invited. For the refugees “want to tell them about the island and all they have achieved” (189). Indeed a feast of this sort was organized, as observes Mallick in her article on Marichjhapi, but the support gathered was not enough to save the civilization that had “sprouted suddenly in the mud” (191).

The miserable condition of the refugees is further highlighted when Kusum approaches Nilima for help. Knowing well that the dwellers cannot sustain themselves on their own, perhaps Nilima, who had single-handedly built the entire Lusibari, could have helped the untouchable refugees to strategise their stay in Marichjhapi. Ironically instead, her refusal to help Kusum, and in turn the settlers, signifies the utter rejection of the responsible members of the civil society, the so called *bhadralok* community, to stand by the Marichjhapi cause. Since they were incapable of acquiring any political support, the refugees were intuitively aware of the impending attack. After a meeting with the settlers, Kusum confirms that “the gangsters who have massed on the far shore will be brought to drive settlers out” (225). The reference of the gangsters is unmistakable in Mallick’s article where she writes:

“Muslims gangs were hired to assist the police, as it was thought Muslims would be less sympathetic to refugees from Muslim-ruled Bangladesh” (110).

In a dramatic turn of events, the High Court issued an order directing the Left Front government to lift the economic blockade. Notwithstanding the directive, the government went ahead with its plan and persisted with “the blockade in defiance of the High Court”

(Mallick110). Nirmal, on the other hand, thought that the settlers had tasted their deserved victory at last. On reaching Marichjhapi, he saw that “the police were not gone; they continued to patrol the island, urging the settlers to abandon their homes” (260). Kusum, who in the narrative represents the dwellers of Marichjhapi, is starving to death in her hut. As Ghosh describes, “It was terrible to see Kusum: her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat” (260). In one of the moving passages of the novel, Kusum tells Nirmal:

“[T]he worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless and listen to the policemen making their announcements...This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals...Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?...our crime was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings, always have, from the water and the soil” (261-262).

Ghosh brings out the situational despondency through the character of Kusum. Though uneducated and inexperienced in the ways of the world, Kusum negotiated various situations of her life with exceptional courage. It is only in the face of institutional exploitation that she completely breaks down. Her crumbling spirit symbolizes the emotional and psychological collapse of the whole community in Marichjhapi; the determined sloganeering of the settlers—“*Amra kara? Bastuhara*. Who are we? We are the dispossessed. ...*Morichjhapi chharbona*. We'll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may”(254)—is inevitably silenced by the waves after waves of amphibious attacks mindlessly carried out by the hired goons and the police.

It is of a piece with the general irony that shrouds the massacre in Marichjhapi that Kanai loses the diary where Nirmal wrote about Kusum and her fellow settlers of the island. Perhaps this is Ghosh's own way of flashing out at the *bhadralok* society which has failed to empathize with the untouchable refugees. Nonetheless, *The Hungry Tide* provides a ray of hope as Kanai promises to bring to public consciousness the incidents that happened in Marichjhapi. The responsibility lies on our generation who, in Nirmal's words, is “richer in ideals, less cynical, less selfish” and has “greater claim to the world's ear” (278) than our former generations. In our society, hierarchy of caste works in insidious ways to take hold of people's consciousness. By rereading and restructuring the atrocities, it is possible to negate this casteist hierarchy, and foreground the marginalized history of the minority untouchables of Marichjhapi in critical discussion; thereafter one can demand social justice for those who suffered from refugeeism and dispossession in post-partition Bengal.

Notes:

1. Exact English translation of *Azadi* is *freedom* or *independence*.
2. A common critical consensus among those who probe into the caste-class dynamics of the Indian society is that upper caste people are economically well placed compared to those hailing from the lower caste. In this essay, the term class is interchangeable with the word caste.

3. *Nimnoborgo* essentially means inferior caste or 'varna'. It is directed towards those who were classified as 'Untouchables' or 'depressed classes' in British Bengal and, at present, are placed at the fringes of the societal structure. Though Jhuma Sen in her article "Reconstructing Marichjhapi" and Joya Chatterji in her book *Bengal Divided*, 1994, Cambridge University Press refer to the *Nimnoborgo* as 'chotolok', I refrain from using that term because of its derogatory nature. *Nimnoborgo* can also be written as *Nimnobarano*.
4. I borrow the word "refugeeism" from Urvashi Butalia who uses this term (pp.6) in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, 1998, Penguin Books.
5. A team of Left Front leaders, including Ram Chatterjee, Rabi Sankar Pandey and Kiranmay Nanda visited Dandakaranya on 28th November, 1977. They encouraged the refugees to migrate to the Sunderbans and promised that the government would not restrict their movement (Bhattacharjee 2010).
6. Despite promises from a leader like Ram Chatterjee, the Left Front did not make the promise good. It must be understood that Ram Chatterjee was a member of the Forward Bloc, one of the smaller parties in the great umbrella of the Left Front. In fact, the Left Front itself is a coalition of small leftist parties and the dominant CPM. All the government policies are effectively planned and implemented by the CPM. In a way, the CPM with Jyoti Basu as the party's spokesperson, practically betrayed the refugees of Marichjhapi within a few years after coming to power.
7. The Singur Movement refers to the land acquisition controversy of the Left Front government in which the government occupied 997 acres of multi-crop land from unwilling farmers in 2006. The collected land was handed over to the Tata Motors to construct a Nano car manufacturing factory. The opposition and other parties initiated a protest which eventually took the shape of a civil society movement. Due to the ongoing agitation, Tata Motors decided to drop their project in West Bengal.
8. The war referred to here is the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War fought in South Asia which led to the formation of the new independent nation-state of Bangladesh.

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