

The Forgotten History of Dalit Refugees in West Bengal: A Study on the Oral Narratives of Marichjhapi Victimhood

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Abstract:

This paper reveals the Dalit massacre of Marichjhapi Island (one of the many islands of Sundarbans) of West Bengal where East Bengal Dalits migrants faced the horrible situation in 1979. Thousands of people were shot dead, murder, rape and dead body were dumped in river and house were burned and hut were destroyed by state Government sponsors Police force assist by Muslim Gang. Through a study of Marichjhapi Massacre, the essay reflects on communist great betrayal with Dalits migrants of Marichjahpi Island. This paper will go beyond recollecting ghastly incidents at Marichjhapi and highlight the relationship between Refugees politics of Bengal and victimhood's of Marichjhapi Island. In this Present study, researcher tried to analyze the incidents of 1979s in an island Marichjhapi of Sundarbans where state sponsored violence has changed destiny of East Bengali migrants.

Keywords: Migration, Refugees, Dalits, Rehabilitation, Marichjhapi.

Introduction:

The East Bengali Hindu Dalits massacre of Marichjhapi island (one of the many islands of Sundarbans) of West Bengal where East Bengal Dalits refugees faced the horrible violence in 1979. Thousands of people were shot dead, murder, rape and dead body were dumped in river and house were burned and hut were destroyed by state Government sponsors Police force assist by Muslim Gang. Actually after division of Bengal during independence in 1947 along communal lines many Hindu Bengalees migrant fled from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to West Bengal. Partition led West Bengal experience burning refugee's crisis across the state. The first influx of migrants immediate after partition who was mostly the upper and middle class rich family they were got easily settled in West Bengal. But the latter huge flow of poor Hindus mostly lower caste Namasudra people couldn't be accommodated in west Bengal and they were forcibly sent to rocky inhospitable land of Dandakaryana (in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh). At that point of time the opposition the Leftist parties took the issues and demanded that the Dandakaryana refugees be settled in uninhabited islands of Sundarban. However, when the Left Front coalition Party came to power in 1977 state minister Ram Chatterjee (of Marxist Forward Bloc) visited the camps in Dhandakaryana and widely promised them to return to their homeland in West Bengal. Thereafter, in 1978 the refugees started to arrive in Bengal in huge numbers. But the Left Front led government changed its policy (after forming government) on refugee settling and considered the refugees as a burden to the state, as the refugees were not the citizen of West Bengal but India. In the meanwhile approximately 40,000 refugees went south and camping for few months in Hasnabad settled

and in Marichjhapi, a protected place under Reserve Forest Act. The government considered that an illegal occupation in reserved forest land. The government tried to abandon them from island to their respective place, but it has little effect. After the failure of economic blockade on Marichjhapi the West Bengal government started to forcible evacuation the East Bengali Refugees in May. The media were banned by government from entering the area on that day. It has been alleged that the police launches dumped the dead bodies ties with bolder in the River, while many others drowned while they were trying to flee. Some of them were then sent back to Dandakaranya. Some of Refugees were settled in Marichjhapi Colony near Barasat while some others rehabilitated themselves near railway tracks in Sealdah. Other were resettled themselves in Hingaljanj, Canning and nearby areas. The official deaths due to firing were two but, according to Hindustan Times, there exists different sources which put the total deaths between 50 and 1000. Through the study of Marichjhapi incident author attempt to explore the Socio-Political condition of East Bengali Dalits in Post Partition Bengal and Present the state sponsored terrible violence on East Bengali dalits refugees on Marichjhapi Island of West Bengal.

The partition of Bengal and Hindu Dalits Migration in West Bengal

In the first half of the 20th century, the Namasudra movement was one of the strongest, most well-organized Dalit movements of undivided Bengal of India. The Population of the Muslim community there were largely from converts Dalit and other lower caste communities. This was because of many Hindu Dalits people sought to emancipation from the slavery of the Hindu rigid caste system through conversion to Islam. Such parallel lower caste born and common exploitation at the hand of Hindu landlords created a sense of solidarity between Dalits and Muslims at that time who functioned as socio-political allies in colonial Bengal.

Marichjhapi massacre exposed a pathway of communal and class conflict in Bengal which had roots many centuries earlier in undivided Bengal. In colonial Bengal Muslims were mostly Untouchables and peasantry as Hindu Dalits lower castes who had converted to the more emancipatory beliefs of Islam while retaining their Bengali culture. The gap between the Muslim and Untouchable lower Caste was therefore arguably not as great as that between the Untouchables and upper-caste landlords, and in the colonial period Hindu Untouchables and Muslims peasantry were political allies in opposition to the Caste Hindu dominated Bengal Congress Party. In East Bengal Namasudra movement had been one of the most powerful and politically mobilized Scheduled Caste movements in colonial Bengal and in alliance with the Muslims had kept the Bengal Congress Party in opposition from the 1920s. The exclusion of caste Hindus from Political power led to the Hindu elite and eventually the Congress Party pressing for partition of Bengal province at the time of independence, so that at least the western half would return to their hands. Partition, however, meant that the Untouchables lost their bargaining power as a swing-vote bloc between high-caste Hindus and Muslims, and then became politically marginalized minorities in both countries (Bandyopadhyay, 2009).

But unlike Punjab, the Dalits in East Bengal did not migrate immediately after the Partition. The East Bengali migrants in West Bengal came in phase over a long period. The first influx of East Bengali Hindu migrants who came to West Bengal in 1947–48 mostly were upper caste bhadralok, mainly government employees who opted for posting in West Bengal, and landowners who could arrange exchanges of properties. This group may include some educated SC middle classes as well. But the

Dalits peasants of East Bengal did not migrate at this stage, as they lacked social and financial capital to move and poor peasants have attachment with their land. On the other hand simple violence in 1947 in Bengal was not intense enough to force their migration to west Bengal. Moreover, the AISC in East Bengal believed in the Dalits Hindu Muslim alliance and advised its followers not to migrate to India, where they would not get justice from caste Hindu-dominated Congress government. Their leader Jogendranath Mandal became the Chairman of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly and later joined the Pakistan central cabinet. But this alliance broke down after the riots of 1950, after which came the second wave of refugees, who were mostly peasants belonging to Dalit castes like Namasudra, Paundra, and Rajbansi, and some adivasis like Santhals. Prime Minister Nehru thought that this migration could be stopped and reversed if communal relations could be improved in the two Bengals. For this purpose, he signed the Delhi Pact in April 1950 with his Pakistani counterpart, Liaquat Ali Khan. But on the other hand, in the East Bengal countryside, the Hindu Dalits- Muslim alliance had broken down in such a way that it could not be easily repaired. Therefore, this Dalits peasant migration continued until the border was sealed in 1957 (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Choudhury, 2022).

The Dalits population preferred to stay in East Pakistan where they already had organizations, protection, and influence. Partition resulted the marginalization of the lower Caste population in both the countries. Now divided along religious lines, an alliance that once owed to common caste and social locations had to be now forcibly redefined in Hindu-Muslim terms. Deep Halder the author of Blood Island, says, “To the upper-caste Hindus, both Muslims and lower-caste Hindus were equally untouchable”. With the common antagonist now out of the picture, there was a shift in how things unfolded for everybody back home. The socio-political scenario was push up and the identities were turned in to now religious and previous solidarities faded away (Halder, 2019). Eventually, the oppressed caste Hindu Dalits population also began leaving for India owing to economic turmoil but also a breakdown of Dalit Hindu-Muslim solidarity and rise in atrocities against them.

Left front great betrayal and Marichjhapi Massacre:

The Partition and Independence came to India at the same. After Partition two nations were born India and Pakistan, similarly Bengal was divided simultaneously. Millions of people were displaced and lost of their land, home, property and migrate to India. Those people were in wrong side of the boarder they started to migrated. Million of East Bengali Hindu migrated to West Bengal versus Muslim to East Bengal. There were different phase of exodus were related to caste, class character of refugees. First flux of refugees that came in Bengal was mostly upper caste landlord People. The upper and middle class refugees they were basically arrived after 1947. On the other hand lower caste Dalits refugees basically they are mostly attached to land because they farmer, sharecroppers fisherman so they think we don't need to move with upper caste Hindu this is our land we stay here. In East Pakistan when the near-total departure of the Hindu upper-caste landlord elite and urban middle classes meant that communal agitation had to be started against the Hindu Dalits peasant who remained in Pakistan. After the riots of East Pakistan in 1950, nature of refugee influx changed. After 1950 there were mostly Namasudra lower caste and class of people came to West Bengal (Halder, 2019).

After 1950 the huge number of lower caste displaced people migrated to west Bengal. Now it was very difficult for west Bengal at the time to absorb all of them in West Bengal. however according

to eminent sociologist Radha Kamal Mukharjee also powerfully argued in favor of rehabilitation of east Bengali refugees in contiguous Bengali speaking areas. In His Calculation 'West Bengal had 1.1 million hectares of uncultivated land' 'Assam had 6.9 million hectares' and 'Bihar 2.6 million hectares' and this would be enough for rehabilitation of Refugees. But government chose not to pay any attention to this Plan. (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Choudhury, 2022). However with the intervention of central government Dandakarayana development project was set up on 12 September 1958 temporary refugees' camps consisting 78000 square miles of inhospitable un-irrigated land in central India. But government media report Dandakaryana is a conceived the area was full of untapped resource like timber, forest product and mineral resources. So it was deemed to be a national project. It was consider it would be good for future generation of India. Mr. A.L Fletcher the chief administrator of the Dandakaryana colony scheme, argued that this area in rich mineral and forest wealth, therefore this area was selected after deep consideration. Overall it was present to the East Bengal refugees as 'New bengal', Therefore government promised to refugees all-round opportunity would be provide like employment, construction of irrigation facilities and reclamation of land. Finall Dandakarayana project were inaguraged on 5th sept 1958 and but in the end all this pledges were forgotten, the project failed to deliver the promised new Bengal and it had to be thrust down the throat of reluctant refugees (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Choudhury, 2022). At that point of time it was opposition party CPIM took this issue and most prominently they said that this is wrong thing happing they are our brother and sisters they have come from Bangladesh and they should absorbed in west Bengal and promises the migrants when we came to power we will make sure brought back to west Bengal and rehabilitate in west Bengal. Even Joyti Basu who later became CM of West Bengal he was reportedly addressed refugee gathering said looked I promise will be brought back you all to west Bengal. And Ram chateerji and other left leader persuasion and promises to refugees and reconstructed their political based among the refugees in Bengal and exile refugees. However, foregoing resettlement refugees generally spent many years in prison camp conditions under capricious and Mal-administration. Now time pass this refugee sent to Dandakarayana they were faced hostile from local population it was very difficult most of them new language, climate condition is not favorable and there trend to go back to Bengal and settled somewhere in west Bengal.

Finally left come to power in Bengal 1977 and they sent the memorandum to the government and said you promised to brought back to Bengal. So this is the time we all waiting and save money to come back in Bengal. They located an Island in Sundarban which have no habitation and decided this place we can go and settle down and make home. So wave of refugees came to all over Dandakarayana they came to west Bengal and they were stop in railway station and forced back in to train most of them and said you all go back where from come but some of them slip through they reach in island Marichjhapi and over a period of 6 to 8 month they imaging they transform this Island they are sought of made road, they build hat, they had school, they had medical centre, they have boat manufacturing unit, they stared farming, they started fishing and they stared board (Halder, 2019). The west Bengal government was alarm this not suppose to be they said look this is can't be and you all go back they sent few delegation to talk to them for sent back them to Dandakarayana. When the persuasion were failed and make the refugees abandon from their settlement, the government started on January 26, 1979, an economic blockade of the Settlement Island with thirty police launches. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed, in an attempt to deprive refugees

of food and water. This economic blockade of Island around 15 days they were stay without water and food where Island boat could not allow to take anything from other side (Halder, 2019). On the other hand state government was not disposed to tolerate such settlement, stating that the refugees were "in unauthorized occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts". They resorted eating grass, drinking saline water kid died on dysentery this was 1979 with court ordered and said it was illegal blockade we can't do this people. So blockade were remove but during that time lots of people were died specially children this was 1979 may what happen was unimaginable massacre police were let on island women were rape, kid were thrown in to river hire the Muslim gangster for assist the police to abandon Dalits migrants from the Island pressure put on them to left the Island to go back Dandakaryana. So some of them slip of police hit and hide from Island and settled in different part of Bengal during that point of time. Bengali press reporting were stop because they have pressure from left government without civil society no academic deliverance were took place on this massacre. All the media house were stop reporting on Marichjhapi Island because of left government pressure on them (Bhuyan, 2022).

Dalits identity and Dalits Refugees in India

When the Hindu upper caste Bengali migrated from East Pakistan immediate after partition, they were resettled within West Bengal itself naturally owing to the Bengali roots. They were basically rich, landed and having family connection with West Bengal caste Hindu. Those who did not have family connections were rehabilitated in refugee camps within West Bengal. Even people those who illegally mass occupied empty lands across the west Bengal in the same areas that were later turned legally into full-fledged residential colonies in West Bengal. The Bijoy garh Colony in West Bengal is one such example. But, when the lower caste people largely Namasudras migrants came in to India particularly left for west Bengal, they were forcibly migrated to different parts of India, including Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Jharkhand, and in Andaman Islands. These places had no familiarity for these Namasudras migrants to live there. They could not speak and understand the local languages, climates were not favorable for their cultivation and they were completely foreigner in their resettlement in new locations. So in this regards it would be seem that accommodations for a Bengali identity were only made for the caste Hindu Bhadrakok and the 'lower' castes were not to be accommodated with a Bengali identity particularly in west Bengal. As a result, the Namasudra identity, unity and political influence was successfully broken down and scattered them outside of Bengal, ensuring uninterrupted hegemony of the Bengali bhadrakok's dominant in West Bengal Politics (Amal, 2022).

A Large number of Dalit refugees and majority of Dalits refugees of them were sent to camps in Dandakaranya (A Refugees rehabilitation Camps) that comprised today's states of central-east India. It was the rocky terrain with uneven rainfall. For a group of people for whom farming and fish breeding was the mainstay, the camps were an unfavorable climate for farming. The camp was poorly maintained by corrupt officials with regard to infrastructure and living conditions and insufficient ration. They often had to wait in line all night with the hope of getting a single bucket of water. Harassment and mistreatment of the Dalits refugees by 'upper' caste camp authorities became an inevitable and norm. In the process of setting up of these camps and resettling Bengali refugees there raised another trouble many Adivasis of the region were also displaced from their indigenous lands. Therefore, Refugees often faced hostility from tribal people started to be a problem as they held the loss of their native land against

the refugees (Amal, 2022). There were so many instances of violence and rape, recount survivors, that there was even a need for there was even a segregated enclosure with barricades for widowed mothers, to ward off the unwanted male gaze. In fact these Namasudras migrants were segregated in various state and break down their identity and political unity and made them refugees not native to any of those states, they were discriminate in those state where they weren't recognized as belonging to one of the 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) in these states. Newly settled state schedule caste refugees where they denied from the various governments facilitate, affirmative action or reservation in various field for which they would have been eligible in West Bengal.

By now, it was increasingly becoming clear that the West Bengal government the Indian National Congress at the time would not take them back to Bengal (Amal, 2022). When the East Bengal Namasudra migrants felt insufferable condition did not able to continue living there, the Namasudra refugees had started organizing to explore alternative place. Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti (Refugee Welfare Committee) was one of such effort founded by Dalit refugee leaders Satish Mondal, Rangalal Goldar, and Raiharan Baroi. They were focused on two fronts; one was trying to improve living conditions at their camps and the second was to determine a new area for their final resettlement. Of the things they organized was a twenty-eight days long hunger strike to protest the poor quality of rice given to them. Under their leadership and effort were made by other refugees also who were went on searches for an alternative habitable place, where they were familiar with in terms of language and culture. "During these expeditions to the province of West Bengal, they find out the alluvial land the island of Marichjhapi in Sunderbans. The island climate would make us miss home in East Pakistan. Some of us had made trips in between and discovered Marichjhapi, a place that could sustain us. The island a part of the Sundarbans is on the other side of the border, now Bangladesh, so we knew this island quite well," says Mana Goldar, daughter of Rangalal Goldar (Amal, 2022).

The Namasudra Refugees and Refugees politics in West Bengal

When the left front led by communist party (CPIM) were in Opposition and congress party in power west Bengal the leaders of left front like Ram Chatterjee made visits to Dandakaranya and promise to the refugees that they would be brought back to West Bengal when they will came to power. In the mid 1970s Chief Minister visited the camp where he appealed " You are the People of Bengal and we will give you homes in Bengal". On January 25, 1975, Joyti Basu also appealed Dandakaranya Dalits refugee leaders to have a meeting with him where he also give assured government assistance to resettle them in West Bengal if they comes to power. Two years later, the Left Front did come into power. Jyoti Basu became the Chief Minister of West Bengal and Ram Chatterjee was appointed the Minister of State, Home (Civil Defense) Department.

However, after come to power the Left Front refugee's policy was changed and No government representatives or party leader visited Dandakarayna anymore forgotten all the promises. They decided that resettlement of such a large Dalits refugees to West Bengal would not be an option. Unaware of this shift in the resettlement policy and trusting Ram Chatterjee who had stated that "the 5 crore Bengalis by raising their 10 crore hands are welcoming you back", they were determined to get to Marichjhapi. In March 1978, around 150,000 refugees started leaving across Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi in various groups one after the other over some days. Now government denied them to rehabilitee in west Bengal

itself. Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure were imposed on Dandakaranya, which are legally prohibited to assemble 5 people and arrest warrants were issued against refugee's leader including Satish Mondal and Rangalal Goldar. The police did patrolling the roads leading into West Bengal. Those who had already left for Marichjhapi were picked up at Hasnabad railway station where caught the people by police who left for Marichjhapi, sent back to Dandakaranya or forced away. However many refugees managed to reach destiny. Some other took different routes to reach on the island, even getting off before Hasnabad. Those who did not make it to Marichjhapi either went back to the camps or spread out in different directions in Bengal over the next few months (Amal, 2022).

Conclusion

In this short piece, Researcher tried to analyze the scope of caste politics in colonial Bengal and West Bengal in the aftermath of partition. On one hand, by focusing on Partition politics, the present study tried to understand the scope of Dalit mobilization in partitioned Bengal; on the other, by briefly discussing various policies researcher attempted to show the eagerness of the government to break down the Dalits solidarity and dispersed them outside of state. Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury have argued that partition disintegrated the Namasudra community and weakened their capacity to mobilize politically (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Choudhury, 2022). Indeed, partition had deep impact on the Namasudras some of them stayed put in East Pakistan rest migrated to West Bengal and then were resettled in various parts of the province, and also in areas like Andaman, Bihar, Orissa and Dandakaranya. On the other hand the caste Hindu who migrated to west Bengal immediate after partition and they legalized their colony. However mass mobilization could be identified where Hindu-Muslim, Bengali- Non-Bengali (in East Pakistan), and mobilization along class lines became important. However, caste remained important to the governments: either for the 'developmental' needs of Nehruvian India or to keep the primarily Non-Muslim opposition in East Pakistan divided in times of troubles over state language. Consequently, caste as an identity remained crucial to the Dalits in shaping their experiences of decolonization, even when it did not manage to surface as a major factor in the high politics of Bengal. (Byapari, 2019)

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