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The Politics of Refugee Settlement and Morichjapi Massacre in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Hungry Tide'

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Abstract: History is replete with the incidents of the unnecessary and indiscriminate killing of a large number of human beings by those wielding power. Even in the modern age of democracy, state-sponsored massacres do happen, and politics plays a crucial role in such unfortunate happenings. Morichjapi 'massacre,' which is reported to have been perpetrated by the Left Front Government of West Bengal between 14 and 16 May 1979, is one of the worst human rights violations in post-independent India. As the victims were Bengali Dalit Hindus, who came to India during the second wave of refugees from East Bengal/Bangladesh, sociologists, historians, and Dalit activists have put out theories on what happened and why? Amitav Ghosh has fictionalized the incident in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) to expose the Marxist Government's capitalist objective of profit maximization through international conservationist agencies funding the Tiger Reserve Project. Besides, the novel reveals how political expediency overrides the party's ideology.

Keywords: massacre, refugee, settlement, politics, Dalits, resistance, violence, reserves

Introduction: When the Pakistan government unleashed a genocide of Bengalis, particularly Bengali Hindus, in East Pakistan in 1970-71, it resulted in an estimated 3 million killed and 10 million crossing over to India as refugees. When Bangladesh was formed after the Indo-Pak War of 1971, a large number of Hindu refugees refused to return. They were rehabilitated by the central government and relocated to places such as Dandakaranya in central India, comprising the forests of Eastern Ghats and the Chhotanagpur Plateau and including the parts of Odisha, Chhatisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. The Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was set up by the central government to develop this mostly arid region by gainfully employing refugees in road construction work and for developing farmlands. But the

refugees felt to be out of place in Dandakaranya and longed to be in their familiar surroundings of their homeland, Bengal. This quest made them travel to settle in Morichjhapi island in West Bengal on invitation and assurance from the then Left Front Government but for political reasons, they had to face betrayal and eviction and travel back to Dandakaranya, suffering a huge cost of human lives and human labour and resources. According to D. Halder, “The refugees “travelled from Bangladesh to Calcutta, Calcutta to Dandakaranya, and Dandakaranya to the Sundarbans and back to Dandakaranya again in search of hearth and home” (Halder, 2023:8). In *Gun Island* (2019), Amitav Ghosh’s sequel to *The Hungry Tide*, there are the climate refugees of the Sundarbans, who take great risks and endure pain to escape the harsh life there. But the settlers of Morichjhapi had no such option for eviction.

Literature Review

The Morichjhapi incident, often referred to as ‘massacre’, ‘genocide’, which occurred in 1969, was a politically sensitive matter and, so, attempts were made to cover up this incident to escape embarrassment. However, it was widely discussed in the local press of Calcutta. Its records are available in a few research papers like Ross Malliick’s “Refugee Resettlement in First Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* (1999) and Annu Jalais’s, “Dwelling on Morichjhapi; When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger Food'”. *The Economical and Political Weekly* (2005) and in a few books like Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Deep Halder’s *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre* (2019) and Sanjeev Sanyal’s *Revolutionaries: The Other Story of How India Won Its Freedom* (2023).

The current state of knowledge available on this subject points to the existing gap, particularly the empirical gap and the evidence gap, because of the attempts made by the government to cover up that politically sensitive incident. The causes, impressions and impacts of this historical incident need to be studied, elucidated, clarified and reported. This research paper is a humble effort to fill the existing gap.

Political Background: the redrawing of borders and creation of new nation states led to unprecedented upheavals, massive shifts of population and refugee’s crisis. The same happened with the partition of India and then the creation of Bangladesh. The refugees who settled in Dandakaranya faced the hostility of camp officers and natives as well as the unfavorable living conditions in the camps. As these places were unfamiliar for the Bengali refugees, most of them yearned to be rehabilitated in West Bengal. They reached out to Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), an offshoot of the Revolutionary Movement to free India. The Left leaders spoke in favour of the refugees and visited them in Dandakaranya to assure them that they would be

back in Bengal, when the Left comes to power. They even showed them Morichjhapi Island for their settlement. As RSP was a coalition partner in the Left Front, which fought and won West Bengal Assembly Elections in 1977, it joined the Left Front government. As the RSP was a partner in the coalition government in West Bengal headed by Jyoti Basu of CPI (M), the government agreed to resettle Bengali refugees from Dandakaranya to West Bengal. Even some Left Front leaders went to Dandakaranya in 1978-79 and invited the refugees from East Bengal to settle in West Bengal. Thousands of refugees sold off their belongings and reached West Bengal. But the government took a U-turn and asked the settlers to go back. Many of them were arrested on the way and sent back. However, many escaped police and reached Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans. State government ordered them to leave but they did not. The police tear-gassed settlers, razed huts and destroyed fisheries and tube-wells to deprive them of food and water. Several hundred men, women, children were killed and their bodies were dumped in the river. On 17 May, Budhdeb Bhattacharya, the then Minister of Information, declared at Writers' Building that Marichjhapi had been cleared of refugees.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: Amitav Ghosh travelled in the tide country with Annu Jalais and had a very good impression of her research into the history and culture of the region-the tide country before writing *The Hungry Tide*. The story of his novel is woven round a "Note Book" written by Nirmal Bose for his nephew, Kanai, and the central point in the "Note Book" is the Morichjhaipi incident

Morichjhapi is a large island, one of the biggest in the tide country; its coastline is probably almost 20 km in length. Nirmal's letters to Kanai begins with Morichjhapi (Pepper Island) and 'Morichjhapi incident' is first referred to in the novel by Nilima on page-26 in its Chapter titled "Canning" in the Part-1 titled "The Ebb Bhata". She relates the incident to Kanai; "Some refugees had occupied one of the islands in the forest.... There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence. The government wanted to force the refugees to return to their resettlement camp in Central India. They were being put into trucks and buses and taken away." (26). In some other works of writers and researchers the name of this island is spelt as 'Marichjhapi' and 'Mirichjhapi.'

Research Method:

The study is primarily based on critical, analytical and interpretive reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The primary data collected is mostly collected from the texts of the novels and secondary data from books, research journals and websites. The study, analysis and interpretation of the incident from political point of view have been carried out to obtain insights into unfortunate happenings in a surcharged political atmosphere. The study relies

upon both basic and applied research methodologies as it is focused on gaining knowledge about an important event in India after independence. Political and ideological roots of the issue have been explored based on available resources and data collected and classified considering the relevant aspects of the study and analyzed and interpreted to draw inferences in respect of the problems and issues at hand. As there is not enough criticism available on the subject at hand, this paper depends largely on direct evidence from the texts of the novel, which substantially deal with Morichjhapi incident. As regards the sampling strategy, it is a multi-pronged approach looking all around for fresh perspectives on the issues under consideration. The documentation of this research paper has been done as per the guidelines in the latest available MLA Handbook.

Result and Discussion:

First Hand Account of the Incident: Nirmal started writing his “Notes” on the morning of 15th May, 1979 at Morichjhapi, a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation, but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. So, it was taken over by the refugee-settlers. Ranit Ray and Samrat Sengupta (2023) observes in this context: “The novel moves between the Marichjhapi event as recorded in the dairy of Nirmal which happened more than two decades before the time frame of the novel and the real time of the novel when it is read by Nirmal’s nephew Kanai”.

The novelist elaborates that the refugees were fleeing from a government resettlement camps at Dandakaranya in central India. The resettlement camp was more like a concentration/detention camp under the watch of the security forces. The local people treated these Bengali speaking people as intruders and attacked them with bows, arrows, and other weapons. Nilima adds: “For many years they put up with these conditions. Then in 1978 some of them organized themselves and broke out of the camp. By train or on foot they moved eastwards in the hope of settling in the Sundarbans. Morichjhapi was the place they decided on” (118). Explaining the floating status of the second wave of refugees, Antara Datta (2015) says that “the Indian state generously kept its borders open to the refugees but made it clear that these refugees were different from those generated by partition, and would not be allowed to settle permanently”. Udit Sen (2018) calls them “citizen refugees” a term of paradoxical nature, because citizenship was conferred without alternate resources of livelihood and resettlement. The quest for a permanent settlement was their lot, and they hoped that the incumbent Left Front government in West Bengal would bestow favour to them and help them settle in their familiar surroundings.

Ideological Issues: The resettlement of the Bengali refugees in the familiar surroundings of West Bengal had been an ideological issue for the Left parties in the opposition. Nirmal being a Left intellectual developed some kind of obsession with Morichjhapi's settlers. His revolutionary ideas lying dormant for years came alive and Morichjhapi cause appealed to him. When Nilima tried to pacify him, he said, "You've joined the rulers, you've begun to think like them. That's what comes from doing the sort of 'social work' you've been doing all these years. You have lost sight of the important things" (120).

Nirmal's visit to Morichjhapi brought him face to face with one of his old comrades, Khoken, who expressed the possibility that the state government would not allow the settlers to stay put there and evict them by force. And, in the same breath, Khoken justified the use of state power against the settlers, saying, "You can't make omelettes without breaking eggs" (192). Nirmal was appalled at the cynicism of his comrade and wondered how a comrade could be so hypocrite? He wrote in his 'Note': "He laughed in the cynical ways of those who, having never believed in the ideals they once professed, imagine that no one else had done so either" (192). To Nirmal, the politics of the Left parties appeared to be a riddle. How could the poor people be evicted from the island to save the forests?

Vote-Bank Politics: Mridulika Jha (2023) points out that "the Left Front leaders sought votes promising to settle the refugees back in Bengal, but after coming to power, their intention changed' because they feared that 'a lot of votes could go against them in the next polls'. The novelist gives examples of vote bank politics of the Left politicians in dealing with the settlers. The embankments, which were put in place for protection from floods and storm, served the politicians' purpose. The man-made breaches were caused in the embankments even without flood and storm to settle personal and political scores. The political parties used the embankments to favour or punish their rivals. Nirmal writes, "It happened once that people of that '*para*' had voted for the wrong party. So, when the other party came to power, they decided to settle scores. Their way of doing it was to make a hole in the '*badh*'. Of such things, my friend, are politicians made..." (202-203).

The novel offers a glimpse of how the political considerations overrode humanitarian concerns in the tide country. When Kusum, an activist from Morichjhapi, approached Nilima with a request that her trust- Badabon Trust-should set up some medical facilities for the inhabitants of Morichjhapi, Nilima told her straightway that it was not politically expedient: "... I simply cannot allow the trust to get involved in this...we 've had to work to stay on the right side of the government. If the politicians turn against us, we're finished. I can't take that chance" (214). She also asks Nirmal to stay away from Morichjhapi, "I know the government will not allow

settlers to stay and I know also that they will be vengeful towards everyone who gets mixed up in this business” (214).

Human Concerns: Sabyasachi Ghosh Dastidar (2008) expresses human concerns for the refugees, saying that they “were not only starting a new life, but also being reborn as a completely new person with ties permanently cut off from their ancestral land of thousands of years”. Nirmal’s human sympathy for the poor settlers was above political considerations, and he was drawn to Kusum, who was doing her bit for the settlers. The government was using threats and inducement to evict the settlers. The police cordoned Morichjhapi and barricaded supply to force the eviction of the settlers. The task was also indirectly outsourced to the criminals to save the face of the Left Front government. Nirmal writes in his “Notes”: “The gangsters who had amassed on the far shore will be brought in to drive the settlers out” (225). But the settlers were determined to hold their ground. Their slogan against the police was; “Amra kara? Bastu hara” (‘Who are we? We are the dispossessed’ (254). It was a cry on behalf of bewildered humankind: Who indeed are we? Where do we belong? They also shouted “Morichjhapi chharbona” (‘We will not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may’ (254). The inhuman attitude of the Left Front government is reflected in the observation of Kusum: “This Island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserved forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world....Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?” (261-262).

Political Hypocrisy: Biswajit Ray (2014) states that Marichjhapi incident which erupted in 1979, was the first big controversy in Jyoti Basu’s 23-and-half-a-year tenure as Chief Minister of West Bengal and it fully exposed the political hypocrisy of the Left parties. Nirmal’s Left ideology rested on his expectations from the Left Front government in West Bengal that it would not take inhuman action against the settlers. Nilima expresses his expectations to the doctor of her hospital: ‘He [Nirmal] does not believe that a government such as the one we have now would act against them [settlers]. He is an old Leftist, you see, and unlike many such, he truly believed in those ideals; many of the men who are now in power were his friends and comrades. My husband is not a practical man; his experience of the world is very limited. He does not understand that when a party comes to power, it must govern; it is subject to certain compulsions” (275-276).

Plight of the Victims: As the politics played in Morichjhapi, the situation there remained grim and tense pointing to a looming tragedy. Thousands of outsiders, such as had never been seen in the tide country, hardened men from the cities, criminals, gangsters were assembling in the

villages around Morichjhapi. It was totally under siege. All the settlers' boats had been sunk, their huts were burnt, and their fields laid waste by the gangsters hired by the government. Rapes and inhuman atrocities were committed. Mridulika Jha (2023) mentions some horrific details of the plights of the people at the cordoned island: (1) having no option, they consumed contaminated water and died, (2) those who tried to breach the cordon in small boat were shot dead, (3) some of them were lured to a location with the promise of food and shot dead, and (4) Some people running away from police firing dived into crocodile-infested waters and died.

Basic Questions of Humanity: The novel raises a basic human question: Why did all these happen to the settlers of Morichjhapi? For 18 months, the Hindu refugees, mostly belonging to the lower castes, had transformed this no-man's land into a bustling village using money pulled from their savings and help from social activists and sympathisers. They did not squat on others' property, and did not ask the government for money. So, why forced eviction and massacre? The official or external reason was that Morichjhapi was a protected island and the refugees were destroying the ecology by felling trees, etc. But the unofficial or internal reason was political expediency. According to Deep Halder who is himself one of the survivors of the Morichjhapi massacre, "The problem was that when they were in opposition, left leaders told the Bangladeshi Hindu refugees, who were being packed in hordes to squatter camps in Dandakaranya that if they came to power, they would bring them back to West Bengal. But once in power, they backtracked" (Halder, 2019: 8-9).

Political Rivalry: However, Sanjeev Sanyal looks at this issue as a vote bank politics between the CPI(M) and CPI(M) and its ally, the RSP, which imbibed Marxist ideas but resisted foreign influences. So, the RSP was not considered as 'equal' among the Left parties. According to Sanjeev Sanyal, "The Left Front Government, partly at the urging of the RSP, promised to resettle Bengali refugees from Dandakaranya to West Bengal...Jyoti Basu, the CPI(M) Chief Minister of West Bengal, suddenly realized that this would change the demographics of the area in favour of the RSP. Even if the party was an ally, it could not be allowed to create a power base in what was a CPI (M) bastion. Thus, the government issued orders to evict the refugees from Marichjhapi" (Sanyal, 2023:305). As the refugees would pose a threat to the hegemony of the CPI (M), the orders were issued to evict the refugees from the island.

Dalit Perspective: Jalais, Annu, in her paper titled "Dwelling on Morichjhapi: When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger Food'", offers a Dalit perspective. Refugees were mostly Dalits and Bengal's Bhadrakol Marxists who talked about a casteless classless society in seminar halls and political speeches, had caste bias/prejudices against the low caste's settlers. They were given inhuman treatment by the Left Front government, which was predominantly

upper caste, even though it espoused a classless, casteless society. Camilla Biswas and Sharda Channarayapatna (2022) however take a broader view of the issue when they state that “the management of environment resources/landscapes has always been in the hands of the rich entwined with Brahmanical hegemony, who try to impose political geography over ecological systems to suppress the dispossessed” (2022:169).

Deliberate Cover-Up: But the worst aspect of the massacre was its planned cover-up by the government and other agencies. Sanjeev Sanyal highlights the cover-up of this massacre in the following words: “To have done this to desperate, brutalised refugees is unforgivable. Yet the Marichjhapi massacre was systematically covered up for decades both in media and academia” (Sanyal, 2023:306). The incident was hardly reported in the media, and even RSP chose to remain quiet for political expediency. Several thousand settlers were killed, but the media reported only 10 deaths. The truth is yet to emerge after 45 years. According to Mridulika Jha (2023), only a commemorative blank marble stone is placed on the neighbouring island of Kumirmari in the sacred memories of the survivors and the Bhartiya Janata Party, the main opposition party in West Bengal, has started observing ‘Marichjhapi Day’ on 31st January, the day police had opened fire at Marichjhapi in 1979. Durbadal Bhattacharya rightly complements Amitav Ghosh for exhuming “the horrifying history of Morichjhapi from its grave to prevent it from getting lost in the abyss of oblivion” (2023:515).

Conclusion:

Morichjhapi was one of the worst pogroms in post-independent India, bigger than the 1984 Communal riots in Delhi or the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat. It was akin to the Bosnian massacres. But at least in cases of massacres of Delhi, Gujarat and Bosnia the politicians responsible got indicted and had to go into hiding, but in the case of the Morichjhapi massacre, no investigation was carried out and no one was held responsible and prosecuted. Still, the issue of the victims of Morichjhapi is raised in West Bengal, and the government promises justice to the victims of Morichjhapi. Samata Biswas (2018) appreciates Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* for fusing the past and present, different kinds of disappointments and migrations to bring out an emotionally charged history of the massacre.

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