

When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food'

By Annu Jalais

In 1978, several hundred Bengali refugees in Marichjhapi, one of the northern-most islands of the Sundarbans forest, were brutally evicted by the authorities for violating the Forest Act. This research looks at how the memory of Marichjhapi was evoked by the islanders to reveal their resentment about the unequal distribution of resources between them and the Royal Bengal tigers of the Sundarbans reserve forest. The government's primacy on ecology and its use of force in Marichjhapi was seen by the Sundarbans islanders as a betrayal not only of refugees and of the poor in general, but also of Bengali *nimnobar* or 'lower' caste identity. At the same time,

the reasons leading to the Marichjhapi massacre have to be understood in relation to the long history which led to the partition of Bengal and the intricacies of caste, class and communal differences.

I. The Sundarbans, Refugees and Bengali Identity

It was 1999 and I had come for two years to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral thesis in Anthropology. Soon after my arrival in one of the southern-most islands of South 24-Parganas, I was told that one of the important reasons why tigers had become man-eaters was because of the violence unleashed by the West Bengal Government on the island of Marichjhapi. I was surprised to learn from many islanders that they had supposedly lived in relative peace with tigers prior to the events of Marichjhapi. After Marichjhapi, they had said, tigers had started preying on humans. I pointed out how François Bernier had written, as early as the mid-seventeenth century, about Sundarbans tigers' propensity for human flesh, especially stout ones'. 'Oh but those people were killed because they must have entered

the forest without respecting Ma Bonbibi's rules, nothing to do with the man-eating predilection tigers developed after the genocide of Marichjhapi', quickly clarified Ratan. 'No, no, tigers were empathetic creatures in the early days; they changed with Marichjhapi when they unexpectedly realised they were "first class citizens" and we islanders "second class" ones; that's the real reason' offered Mohon trying to dissipate my confusion. The brutality and rhetoric with which the refugees felt they had been chased away by the Govt, coupled with measures for safeguarding tigers which the government initiated soon after the events of Marichjhapi, had changed everything explained the islanders living adjoining the now 'dead' Marichjhapi island. In other words I was being told that 'with Marichjhapi, tigers had become "self-important" and this increased smugness about their self-worth, had provoked them into thinking poor people were just "tiger-food".' This was a lot to take in.

The anthropomorphisation of tigers in relation to the events of Marichjhapi baffled me. Over the coming months I started to learn how the islanders viewed the 'older' Sundarbans tigers as 'cantankerous' yet somehow also 'compassionate'. Explaining how an animal seemingly 'transformed' its nature in the light of state violence, I found, was a way, for the villagers, of reclaiming the forgotten

pages of a history which had relegated them to oblivion. They felt this had happened because the urbanised elite believed tigers were more precious than them, the *nimnobar* or *nimnobarger lok* (lower caste people often also referred to as 'Untouchable'). This is about the memory of Marichjhapi for people who have been seen as *nimnobar*. The islanders argued that the government's primacy on ecology and its use of force in Marichjhapi which resulted in hundreds being killed was a betrayal not only of refugees and of the poor and marginalised in general, but also, of the Bengali *nimnobar* identity. The Marichjhapi massacre was felt to be a double betrayal. Islanders argued that it was

because they were considered lesser mortals situated at the periphery and marginalised due to their social inferiority by

the 'bhadralok' – the anglicised, well-connected, educated, moneyed, essentially Hindu upper caste, and mainly urban, Bengalis – that tigers, taking the cue, had started feeding on them.

Let me start with some background history. As developed by Ross Mallick, the reasons leading to the Marichjhapi massacre have to be understood in relation to the long history which led to the partition of Bengal and the intricacies of caste, class and communal differences. Briefly, in the colonial period, the East Bengal Namasudra movement had been one of the most powerful and politically mobilised Dalit (literally meaning 'broken'; it is the now preferred term for those previously belonging to what was referred as the 'Untouchable' or 'Backward' castes) movements in India. In alliance with the Krishak Praja Party which was constituted of Muslim peasants, they had kept the Bengal Congress Party in opposition from the 1920s. As argued by Joya Chatterji, Ross Mallick, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in their important work, the exclusion of the bhadralok from power led to this Hindu elite and eventually the Congress pressing for the partition of Bengal at independence, so that at least the western half would return to their control. Partition, however, meant that Dalits lost their bargaining power when divided along the religious lines of Hindus and Muslims and became politically marginalised minorities in either countries.

With the partition of India, threatened by their Muslim and lower-caste tenants, the upper-caste landed elite formed the first wave of migrants from East Pakistan into West Bengal in the 1930s and 40s. Subsequent migrants were rural middle class cultivators and artisans. If the richest amongst them found a niche amongst relatives and friends in Kolkata and its outskirts, the poorer squatted on public and private land and tried to resist eviction. In the 1960s and 1970s (especially after the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971, Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975 and Zia-ur-Rahman's coming to power) communal agitations started to be directed against the poor and low caste Hindus who had remained in East Bengal. They now sought refuge in West Bengal.

All through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s Bengali Hindus from what had become East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh entered West Bengal in the hope of settling down. Unlike their richer counterparts, who were backed by family and caste connections, many of the underprivileged migrants did not find a way of living in Kolkata and were sent to camps in Dandakaranya (literally 'the jungle of punishment'). It refers to a mythological region in the Ramayana believed to be the semi-arid and rocky place in east-central India which includes parts of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana) and the Andamans islands, both areas entirely removed, both culturally and physically, from the refugees' known world. The Opposition (comprising then of the rising Communist Party of India Marxist [CPIM] leader Jyoti Basu) denounced the Congress' attempts to evict the refugees and promised that if and when they came to power they would resettle the refugees in West Bengal; and that this would, in all probability, be on one of the islands of the Sundarbans.

Many refugees, especially those from Khulna and Satkhira, had preferred settling in the inhabited islands of the Sundarbans – where they had erstwhile neighbours and relatives who had come from eastern Bengal to clear the forests in the West Bengal part of the Sundarbans during the early part of the century – rather than go to the totally alien regions of Dandakaranya or the Andamans. The growing polarisation of West Bengal and East Bengal as separate 'homelands' for Hindus and Muslims respectively, affected most the lower caste, poor, rural population, especially of southern Bengal who were not divided so much along religious lines as along the cultural and economic divide of bhadralok/nimnoborno lok. The contending elements in being both 'Bengali' and 'Muslim' has often been addressed, however, the tension that exists when one is 'Bengali' but not a bhadralok has been less studied and needs to be recognised to comprehend why the islanders believed that they had become 'just tiger-food' for the bhadralok.

II. Brutal Evacuation of Refugees from Marichjhapi

In December 1977, when the CPIM and other similar left-leaning parties came to power and formed the Left Front Government, their refugee supporters started leaving their various camps to return to West Bengal in the hope that they would honour their pre-election promise of housing Bengali refugees within West Bengal. In all, 1,50,000 refugees arrived from Dandakaranya. Fearing that an influx of refugees might jeopardise the prospects of the state's already faltering economy, the government started to forcibly send them back. Many refugees however managed to escape to various places inside West Bengal, one of these being the Sundarbans where they had family and where they thought they would be able to survive by working as fishers. Amongst them about 30,000 sailed to Marichjhapi.

Marichjhapi, an island in the northern part of the West Bengal Sundarbans, had been cleared just two years prior to 1977 and its mangrove vegetation had been replaced by a governmental plantation of coconut and tamarisk to increase state revenue. So contrary to what many people believed, this was not a 'forested' island; however, it wasn't, prior to the coming of the refugees, an 'inhabited' island either. The refugees from Dandakaranya were joined by people from the villages of the adjoining Sundarbans islands of Satjelia, Kumirmari, Pujjali and Jharkhali. Many islanders, being the descendants of immigrants from Khulna in East Bengal brought by the British even as late as the 1930s and 1940s to reclaim the forest, identified with the refugees. A lot of them also shared close blood ties with the refugees. Young landless couples were urged to settle with the Marichjhapi dwellers; their intimate knowledge of that part of the forest and generous lending of boats and dinghies were further recompensed by the refugees' eagerness that they too settle in Marichjhapi to strengthen their case. When narrating their memories, if some of the islanders evoked their dismay at finding their ponds emptied of water overnight due to the refugees' initial dependence on the adjoining islands' pond water for their survival, most islanders also drew on remembrances of fraternal bonding. Marichjhapi island, being 125 square miles, was so big that the refugees were keen that the islanders join them so as to have 'hands raise bunds and voices carry our pleas to Kolkata'; to help improve the dire economic situation of the Sundarbans region as a whole rather than squabble over land which, being neither fertile nor theirs to distribute, was not worth fighting over.

Stories abounded about the spirit of bonhomie and solidarity between refugees and islanders whose similar experiences of marginalisation brought them together over a common cause which was to fight for a niche for themselves within West Bengal. The villagers explained the refugees' bid to stay on in Marichjhapi as a dignified attempt to forge a new respectable identity for themselves as well as a bid to reclaim a portion of the West Bengali political rostrum by the most deprived and marginalised. They had also hoped that this would be taken up by the government as an opportunity to absolve itself of the wrong it had done to the mainly nimnbarno or low-caste refugees by sending them away from West Bengal. Unrepentant, and despite this display of self-help and cooperative spirit, the government persisted in its effort to clear Marichjhapi of the settlers. It first tried to impose an economic blockade where the refugees were disallowed from fetching drinking water from the neighbouring islands. Then on January 31st, 1979 the police opened fire killing 36 persons. In May, the government started forcible evacuation. Thirty police motorboats encircled the island thereby depriving the settlers of food and water; they were also tear-gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunk, their fisheries and tube-wells destroyed, and those who tried to cross the river were shot at. To fetch water, the settlers had now to venture after dark and deep into the forested portion of the island and forced to eat wild grass. Several hundred men, women and children were believed to have died during that time and their bodies thrown in the river.

The Calcutta High Court ordered a two-week lifting of the ban but this was not properly implemented. The media started to underscore the plight of the refugees of Marichjhapi and wrote in positive terms about the progress they were making in their rehabilitation efforts. Photographs were published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika of the February 8, 1979 and the opposition members in the state assembly staged a walkout in protest of the government's methods of treating them. Fearing more backlash, and seeing the public

growing warm towards the refugees' cause, Jyoti Basu, the then chief minister, declared Marichjhapi out of bounds for journalists and condemned their reports saying that these contributed to the refugees' militancy and sense of self-importance; he instead suggested that the press support their eviction on the grounds of 'national interest'.

Based on the accounts of erstwhile inhabitants of Marichjhapi Ranjit Kumar Sikdar and Atharobaki Biswas, as well as his own relatives, Ross Mallick estimates that in all 4,128 families who had come from Dandakaranya to find a place in West Bengal perished of cholera, starvation, disease, exhaustion, in transit while being sent back to their camps, by drowning when their boats were scuttled by the police or shot to death in Kashipur, Kumirmari, and Marichjhapi by police firings (1993:100-101). How many of these deaths actually occurred in Marichjhapi we shall never know. However, what we do know, is that no criminal charges were laid against any of the officials or politicians involved. The refugees saw the brutality of the government as one that had been possible because it was backed by the Kolkata bhadralok who perceived the refugees and the Sundarbans islanders as 'lesser beings' who came behind tigers in their classificatory scheme of importance. With the betrayal of Marichjhapi, the islanders voiced how they felt that the distinction between the urban as central and the rural as peripheral was reinforced.

III. Marichjhapi: A Double Betrayal

In the villagers' memories, Marichjhapi stood for a 'war' between two groups of people, one backed by state power and modern paraphernalia, the other dispossessed apart for their courage, hard work and spirit of companionship. Jayanta, an islander who had gone there as a young man with his wife and baby child reminisced how when the refugees saw their children dying of cholera and starvation they tried to break the cordon formed by the police and the military motorboats. They had sent arrows made with wood, aimed pieces

of brick and dried mud from their slings and verbally abused the government officials. The officials urged the police to retaliate by throwing tear-gas bombs and use firearms. A 'war' was on, one group fighting with wooden arrows and stones, the other with tear-gas, guns, and loudspeakers. For greater protection, the 30 motorboats were covered with a wire netting and police camps were established in the surrounding villages. As one islander put it, the motorboats started looking like 'stinging swarms of floating bee-hives'.

The ease and brutality with which the government wiped off all signs of the bustling life which had been built there in the last 18 months were proof for the villagers that they were considered completely irrelevant to the more influential urban Bengali community, especially when weighed against tigers. In two weeks' time all the plots had been destroyed and the refugees 'packed' off. 'Were we vermin that our shacks had to be burned down?' rhetorically asked one of the villagers. The refugees were then forcefully put in motorboats and sent to Hasnabad where lorries carried them back to Dandakaranya. Many of the islanders who had been rounded up along with the refugees, now fled from the lorries, usually with some of their newfound refugee companions. They returned to their former islands and settled their refugee friends and relatives along the embankments which were 'public' land. Many others built shacks along railway lines or in places like Barasat, Gobordanga, or Bongaon – in West Bengal.

To understand the identification of the islanders to the refugees, the social context of life on these islands has to be underlined. The Sundarbans – a cluster of about 300 islands, of which half were reclaimed and inhabited under the British, is situated in the delta of the Ganges, and stretches between West Bengal and Bangladesh.

It is crisscrossed by numerous rivers making access to the islands difficult. The forested Sundarbans islands of both West Bengal and Bangladesh put together (about 10,000 sq. km) provide the largest remaining natural habitat of Bengal tigers and are home to some 500 of them. With the success of Project Tiger, launched a few years before the events of Marichjhapi (in 1973), the Sundarbans' fame grew phenomenally and has since 1985 been included in the UNESCO's list of world heritage sites.

The usual portrayal of the Sundarbans is that of an exotic mangrove forest full of Royal Bengal tigers rather than that of a region which is often referred to as 'mager mulluk' for the lawlessness and violence which characterises it; moreover, the lack of basic infrastructure such as schools, colleges and health centres make it one of the poorest regions of West Bengal. Despite Amitav Ghosh's poignant novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) which elicited greater interest in the region, an important rise in the numbers of tourists, better connection generated by the building of two new bridges and the installation of mobile telephone towers, the islanders have remain dismally removed from the opportunities available to city-dwellers. They see this as something they share with their kin living in the remote camps in Dandakaranya or the Andamans. Their relatives in Dandakaranya, whom I had the chance to visit a couple of years after writing my initial article, are much more vocal about the casteist reasons why they never got an opportunity of calling West Bengal 'home'. The more recent Bengali Dalit awakening as witnessed via the growing importance of the Matua movement is proof of this sense of shared nimnobarno community.

For many islanders, especially those who own no land, working in the forest was and is the only way of making a living. Jayanta, reflecting on the hope the arrival of the Dandakaranya settlers had brought them, had longed to start a new life in Marichjhapi where for once, the aspirations and rights of the landless nimnobarno would be established. He wondered why the government had been hell-bent on reclaiming the Marichjhapi island for tigers when it wasn't even part of the tiger reserve. The other sore point was that the refugees believed they had been promised land in West Bengal. He saw the betrayal by the government as the proof that for the Kolkata bhadralok they were just nimnobarno 'tiger-food' – disposable people who could be shot and killed because they wanted the homestead they had been promised. Stressing his affinity with the refugees, Jayanta asked 'Why have our dead remained unaccounted for and un-mourned by the babus of Kolkata, forced to hover as spirits in the forest, while a tiger who enters our village and then gets killed puts us all behind bars?'

IV. New Repository of Bhadrakok Violence: Royal Bengal Tigers

Now half-broken embankments and the few fruit trees planted by the settlers during their stay remain as the only vestiges of previous human habitation on Marichjhapi. We shall never know exactly how many people lost their lives. The islanders explained that tigers, annoyed at the disturbances caused by the governmental violence unleashed on the settlers had started attacking people and that this was how they ended up getting a taste for human flesh. Others argued that it was the corpses of killed refugees that had floated through the forest canals that had given them the taste for human flesh. Marichjhapi was a turning point after which man-eating became part of the tiger's 'nature' or 'behaviour' they argued. 'After Marichjhapi, tigers had become "arrogant"; I was often told. As an old woman explained, initially tigers were fine animals that were afraid of people. They were compassionate and were agreeable to the fact that the products of the forest and rivers were to be shared with humans. Now tigers were no longer the neighbours with whom the forest had to be shared but 'state- property', and backed by the ruling elite they had begun to treat the islanders as mere food. In a final show of desperate anger, the refugees cut down the government plantation of coconut and tamarisk before leaving the island of Marichjhapi; just as now, every time the islanders were angry with the representatives of the state they destroyed public property – cut down trees, broke solar lights and looted greedily from the various schemes launched by the government. 'As we are treated as lesser beings, we act as is expected of them' said one of the islanders.

Faced with people getting killed by tigers, the only remedial procedures the West Bengal government came up with, were geared towards changing the tiger's 'nature' – a 'nature' understood by the bhadralok as one that could be 'sweetened' with the digging of fresh water ponds inside the forest and the strategic placing of sweet jaggery along the tiger's path. There was absolutely no engagement with the local ways of understanding the reasons for tigers having supposedly become 'man-eaters'. Such a privileging of one understanding of tigers' 'nature' over another continues to establish hierarchical divisions between peoples. In other words, a discourse on tigers' man-eating nature's 'naturalness' was (and still is) a way, as the islanders explained, of legitimising, by the bhadralok leftist government, the relative unimportance of the

nimnobarner lok, especially when measured against Bengal tigers. The decline of the namasudra movement, which started with the bhadralok's call for the partition of Bengal, and which led to the death of thousands of refugees, not only marked a growing unequal access to West Bengal in general, and Kolkata in particular, and the associated disparate resource distribution, but also revealed a dilemma of a greater order – that of being a Bengali, yet not a bhadralok.

Notes

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Badal, 2006, Bimal Biswas, Kolkata. This piece is dedicated to the victims of the Marichjhapi massacre. It was first presented as part of the American Anthropological Association Conference panel: 'Forgetting Bengal' which was held in Chicago in November 2003. I warmly thank Nazes Afroz, Partha Chatterjee, Mita Datta, Amitav Ghosh, Anjan Ghosh, Ross Mallick, Amites Mukhopadhyay, Ralph Nicholas, P K Sarkar, Murali Shanmugavelan, Bimal Biswas for helpful comments or encouragements. Inaccuracies though, remain my own.

This piece draws heavily from work by: a) Nilanjana Chatterjee's *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*. 1992, Unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University, Providence; b) Joya Chatterjee and her various books and articles – especially *Bengal Divided*, 1994, Cambridge University Press; c) Ross Mallick's *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal Since 1977*, 1993, Cambridge University Press and his seminal article 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58: 1 (February 1999): 104-125; d) Sugata Bose's *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*, 1993, Cambridge University Press; e) Sekhar Bandyopadhyay *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, 1997, Curzon Press; f) Gautam Bhadra and Partha Chatterjee's edited volume *Nimnabarger Itihas (The History of the Subaltern Classes)*, 1997, Ananda Publishers; and journalists Atharobaki Biswas' 'Why Dandakaranya a failure, why mass exodus, where solution?' *The Oppressed Indian*, July 1982 and Ranjit Kumar Sikdar's 'Marichjhapi Massacre', 1982.

Annu Jalais was born and raised in Salkia, near Calcutta (now Kolkata). Her fascination for the very different stories about the Sundarbans, which were shared by neighbours who were fishers as well as by those who had read the classics, eventually led her to study social anthropology. She lived in a village opposite the forest for two years (between 1999 and 2001) in the West Bengal Sundarbans and was awarded a PhD in Anthropology from the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2004. She has since continued to visit the Sundarbans each year and has also conducted research in Bangladesh for two years. Jalais is an academic based at the South Asian Studies Department, National University of Singapore; the author of *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (2010) and the co-author, with Joya Chatterji and Claire Alexander, of *The Bengal diaspora: Rethinking Muslim migration* (2016) – both books published by Routledge. Her book *The Bengal Diaspora* is about India's partition (1947), the creation of Bangladesh (1971), and the profound repercussions these two transformative events had across the region especially in relation to the displacement and resettling of millions of Hindus and Muslims on either sides of the Bengal border.