

Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister of West Bengal delivered a speech on 9th February, 1979 in State Legislative Assembly of West Bengal on the difficulties that arrived since the refugees came to Marichjhapi from Dandakaranya, Madhya Pradesh.

Jyoti Basu: In the early phase of last year a few self-centred people and organisations lured lakhs of refugees residing at Dandakaranya and some other parts to West Bengal providing several false assurances and misinformation. Before these people left their homes from the rehabilitation centres, their so-called leaders and people and organisations interested in this act, did not consult with the State or Central Government. It is already well known that there is no possibility of accommodating refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal anymore. Despite knowing this fact, providing false assurances of suitable rehabilitation, more than lakhs of people were lured to West Bengal and were pushed to immense distress. The West Bengal Government, despite several problems, tried to arrange temporary accommodation and reliefs for them as soon as possible. The government had to spend Rs. four crores regarding this issue.

At the same time, the government also patiently tried to make them understand that coming to West Bengal like this, is highly hostile for their own selves. In Dandakaranya and other rehabilitation centres rehabilitation arrangement is insufficient and has flaws, and therefore, the refugees residing there have reasons to get agitated. The West Bengal government strongly believes that the problem of the refugees can truly be resolved if the facilities of these rehabilitation centres are improved. The State government, giving maximum importance to this issue, on behalf of the refugees had a discussion with the Central government. The refugees were brought to West Bengal with false assurances and the promise were taken that if they would go back to their rehabilitation centres they would again be provided with all the amenities. At the same time, the Central government had been requested to improve the conditions of the rehabilitation centres.

Regarding this context, When the West Bengal Government appealed the refugees to leave the state and the government took all the associated responsibilities, they responded to the appeal. Majority of them returned to Dandakaranya and other centres peacefully with the help of the government, But one portion of these people - that is not more than a few thousand – started to non-cooperate with the government and declared one-sidedly to reside in West Bengal under any circumstances. They were victimised by the instigation of an organisation called Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti and other government-opposing bodies. They were taken to Marichjhapi of Sundarban with the help of several false promises and tall talk. Marichjhapi is a Protected Forest area of West Bengal Government and is important for protecting forest resources and environment. The leaders gradually instigated the residing group of the refugees in several illegal activities. But the opportunist people and organisations took the advantage of this situation and started boosting the so-called refugee leaders at their illegal activities. Cutting down trees and destroying the environmental resources had become a regular habit in Marichjhapi. They even initiated creating artificial fisheries illegally. Such activities affected both the ecosystem and the economy of the area. The so-called refugee leaders illegally gave away government land in return of money without caring the least about the law. One has to sign with Rs. 100 or Rs. 150 to get the land. They formed a few conditions on their own regarding acquiring land by the refugees or permanent natives. One of the many conditions was that one has to be a member of the Unnayanshil Samiti - and he or she is not allowed to be a part of any other political party or organisation. That means, they are trying to run things parallelly. They have also created volunteers. No one can enter the area without their permission. Not even the police or anyone from outside can land there, this is their rule. The administration was not allowed to work in this area. Nobody were allowed to enter there without their permission, even the administrative authorities were prohibited to enter into the place. Despite not being oppressed by the government in any way, the so-called refugee leaders tried to incite violence and the collection of illegal arms remained in progress. They also started collecting illegal arms. Many corrupt businessmen invested a lot of money there in sake of their own interest.

In a sentence, one can say that there was an attempt to establish autocracy in Marichjhapi ignoring the rule of law. In such a situation it is not possible for any government to remain indifferent. Thus West Bengal Government decided to prevent these illegal activities. Whatever has been happening for the past few months in Marichjhapi was not the right way of resolving refugee problem. On behalf of West Bengal Government, it has always been tried to appeal to the prudence and good thought of the refugees to leave the path of illegal activities. But few political groups engaged themselves in the game of political opportunities, turning the vulnerability of the refugees, they tried to take up the refugee problems as the opportunity against the government. The government wants to firmly state that those who are participating in the illegal activities in Marichjhapi, they are not friends of the refugees and they are not interested in resolving the refugee problem.

West Bengal Government has taken a few administrative measures in Marichjhapi two weeks ago to put an end to the illegal activities and disorder, and to save government property and the forests. I want to state clearly that West Bengal Government has not imposed any economic blockade on the refugees, nor has taken any decision to do so. The measures that have to be taken by the government to prevent the illegal actions and the actions of the instigators in Marichjhapi, are supported by the well-minded, rational, democratic people of West Bengal. Recently, a huge public meeting at Kumirmari near Marichjhapi conducted by three State Ministers proves this.

Due to the instigation against these administrative measures, unfortunate incidents like the attack on police camp and the firing by police, also occurred. Further investigation is going on regarding this issue. But meanwhile, we have decided that the two casualties that took place in the turmoil, no matter whether they were guilty or not, their family will be given Rs. 5000/- each from the government.

Various platforms have raised questions on humanity regarding Marichjhapi. West Bengal Government is aware and empathetic towards the humane problems of the refugees. That is why the government have arranged relief and shelter for the refugees for their return to the rehabilitation centres. The refugees returned from Marichjhapi can take the full opportunity of this help. The people with selfish interests who have involved the refugees into undertaking illegal activities by misleading them and bringing them here, are the ones who are committing crimes against humanity, they are the reason why the refugees of Marichjhapi are facing an immense crisis.

To fight the current adverse situation, the measures that West Bengal Government have taken are supported by the Prime Minister and the Central Government. Regarding resolving the issues related to the refugees arrived from Dandakaranya, consensus has been established between the State and the Central Government through discussion. The Central Government has declared that if the refugees do not return to their respective rehabilitation centres by 31st March they will lose all the benefits.

The State Government wants to refrain the refugees from all illegal activities, but does not want to enforce them. They have to be sent back by patiently making them understand the entire scenario. I have sent a written request to the Central Government that if somehow some people are late for the return they should be given all the facilities. Almost one lakh and a few thousand people stayed back. When most of the refugees have returned already, there is no point of creating any obstacle for those who stayed back.

The only reason is as they are not being able to make any accusation against the government a few political leaders are behaving like this. And we have seen that land is being distributed in the documents we have collected. Thousands of landless people came here before also, an organisation has been formed for them and their leaders are distributing the land taking Rs. 100 or Rs. 300 for 3 acres, 6 acres or 7 acres of land, I have never heard of anything like this before. Not only the refugees of Dandakaranya, they have given a definition of the landless people and lands will be given to them also.

They have given the definition of these landless. But who are they called as landless people? Among them, there are people from West Bengal, there are people who have arrived here 30 years ago, there are people

who have arrived from East Bengal and Dandakaranya, that means there are many terms and conditions. Who are distributing the land? They expect us to support this. There is Bangladesh, which is ruled by a different government, here, in West Bengal, there is a government, and in the middle of the two there is another government. This cannot be done - no one will support this - except some Congress leaders. The only good news is that we managed to persuade and send about a lakh of these people back to their centres. We have discussed this topic with the Janata Party of Central Government. We have also discussed how many bull will be given to whom, who will be given how much land or whether water supply will be there or not and they have agreed with all these arrangements. What follows after this, has to be observed by us together. I guess, here the Janata party is different, that is why you are arranging for something else. We can see here that, the condition is that the benefitting refugees cannot align with any other political party or organisation, and those who were previously involved with such organisations or political parties must sever all such ties by their own. I cannot seem to understand what kind of a condition this is. The afore-mentioned Unnayan Samiti has also declared that no one can enter the area without the permission of the volunteers. I have all those documents. They are giving permit there. They have said that no officers will be allowed there. Our lands which are mostly forest region will be distributed by them, government will not be able to distribute this and they will collect money in return of distributing this land. They are not only talking about people who have arrived from Dandakaranya but even talking about those who are residing on the footpaths also. They are extremely empathetic to people. They are being misled like this. All of this is planned and coordinated by the leaders of the Unnayan Samiti. Some of our leaders of West Bengal have made them come here like this. They neither informed us nor the Central Government about their arrival. For 30 years the Congress government did nothing. A new government has come to power - they should be given some opportunities. But what we are seeing there that nothing has happened - accept human rights. But what is being done? They have food facilities, medical facilities, they will be given cattles - whatever they have sold will be taken care of. But they are saying that they will stay in the forest and use its resources. They won't allow any police personnel inside. They won't allow anyone to protect forests. They will not let Police or executives be sent to the reserved areas. They are also telling us that it is stated in the Constitution that anyone can go and stay anywhere. No, these rubbish is not written in the Constitution. We are reading this in newspaper and speeches are being delivered saying that there are so many people on footpaths; you are not sending them anywhere else. What a wonderful logic! They will not be able to stay there. I suggest, if we find out a way unitedly there will not be any chaos. I had conversations with some leaders of a few more political parties. Fazlur Rahman Saheb came - he waited for Kashikanta Maitra - probably he had some work for which he could not participate. Even representatives from Congress came. But I could not anticipate that this would happened, they will do this. New camps are being built for the people who are residing there - they have said that we have stopped their food supplies, but that is not true. Food is nearby, they will get it if they go there. But I won't allow them to put up furniture shops there, I won't allow anyone to invest in the fisheries that they are setting up there. Therefore I am requesting that please do not ruin the lives of the refugees. We are constantly discussing with the Central Government and making arrangements so that we can safely transfer the 10 to 12 thousand people who are there.

[A debate took place after the above speech. The following speech is by Jyoti Basu as a reply to the debate.]

Jyoti Basu: Respected speaker, as for my reply, as I am understanding from this discussion, I would like to say a few things. Firstly, a few coarse comments have been made, which I am mentioning. We have not restricted any actions of the organisations like Bharat Shevasram. Why will we? Firstly, We have already invested more than Rs. 4 crores for those refugees who came from Dandakaranya. Secondly, Kashikanta Maitra said that he wasn't called. Due to lack of time, I could not investigate by whom he was telephoned. Since I was in hurry, I tried connecting with two Congress leaders, the Janata Party and CPI for the discussion. They came and Fazlur Rahman, the president of the Janata Party also came. He waited for a while if Kashi Babu would come. I said, "You did not get the news?" Or did not understand what happened. Now I understand what actually happened. Whatever, I had a discussion with him, and agreeing upon the

idea he said that it is better if we deport them to their centres, but it would be better if we convince them before sending there. I told him to go to Delhi and buy some time for us. He went to Delhi, I saw in the newspaper that he met the Prime Minister, but I don't know what exactly happened there. Thirdly, Dilip Chakraborty said that 77 people died there. I don't know why it was not 77, 107 or 180 people who died, but according to our report, only 2 people died. Dilip Babu came to my room I asked him, "You said that 77 people died, is it your statement? What are their names? Where did these people live? Were those people local residents or came from somewhere else? Please let us know these." He replied, "A police officer told me this. I told the police officer that the names had to be given to the Chief Minister, but you won't lose job because of this. I'll catch that officer up over the telephone tonight again." Saying this he left my room. I asked him to tell me the names, but he said that he would inform later. He does not know anything by himself, he has been informed. Another point is, I have been accused that in some year in Vilai I promised Satish Mondol that I would take all of them to West Bengal when our party gains power and position. Kashi Babu has come up with these irresponsible statements. Once I went to a Steel Conference, at that time some people came to meet me. I said to them, "Samar Mukherjee is our M.P., he knows everything about you, you are being served unjustly, we will try to pressurise Delhi so that measures can be taken." Samar Babu has raised this issue 2-3 times in the Parliament. He has gone to Dandakaranya today to get the scenario, so I can never say anything like this to anyone. Now what I want to state that there is no clear reply of the actual topic. The Central and we, the State Government together, are trying to say that these refugees must go back to Dandakaranya. Facilities are already being provided there – more will be provided for the second time. But here the Janata Party is something different, they are not stating anything clearly, instead, they are challenging that they will go to Marichjhapi, they are concerned about them. Why are you challenging us? Are we fighting with you? Then you clearly state against the Prime Minister, against Sikandar Bhagat, against the Central Government that they will not go, they will cut off the trees, distribute lands, contact with several dishonest merchants, will destroy government forest. If you have the courage, say this. You don't have that courage. Hence I want to say that state the real thing clearly. Humanity is being questioned – we have humanity, that is why we are waiting, otherwise we could have vacated the place within 48 hours. Why will we get into that? They have cut off hundred and hundred kilos of wood. We have decided to dispose of it, taking them under the control of the government. They have made boats with the woods from the forests that fall under government territory and you have validated this activity by saying that they are self-sustaining. They will distribute government land and you will consider them as self-sustaining. They won't allow our police to land or even our administration to interfere, Haripada Bharati has said that he does not know anything. He went there to create an incitement among them. He thinks no one supports us, if we can save our back with the help of you. Even here are some Janata Party leaders who are trying to spread the poison of communalism stating that the refugees came from Marowar, or from this place or that place. Why don't you raise your concerns to your government in Delhi? Everyone loves India a lot. Who came from Marowar or Bihar is completely irrelevant to this. These people are saying that the refugees did not ask for government assistance - whose forest are they destroying – they did not ask for government assistance. Whose land are they distributing - they did not ask for government assistance. If we would have intervened – which every government should do, I am saying, I am acknowledging that I am unable. Someone's son, someone's daughter went. We have sent back about a lakh of people, the Janata Party of Bengal could not stop that. So, we are trying. And I stating here that, it is also sad that death also occurred at Bardhaman as well. I am saying that those who have been repeatedly saying to help these refugees, they are the ones who are responsible, they are ones who are liable for this and they will have to take the responsibility. How dare they kill the police? This type of people who are here delivering speech, have stood by them. This is how the political ball game is being played with these innocent people - we have witnessed the similar incident here, at Bardhaman and now at Marichjhapi. If we could agree on this issue, we would definitely go with you, if you would say the same that you take a 6 months time, if we would convince them – but you can at least say that you have to go. And whether we can say that no illegal activities will be allowed, but I did not hear anything like this clearly from them. This is why I think that there might be some conspiracy going underneath. They are thinking as every ground is losing, if they can do something with the help of this. This does not help, why are you doing this? There are so many things for doing politics. And that is why I'm saying that it is true that Police personnel are admitted to the hospital

being injured by their arrows. O.K., both the sides will be judged to know who has done what. Who killed first and then who followed - why death occurred are still being investigated. We have investigated once, if needed we can do it twice. Meanwhile, we have to allot exgratia for the family of the dead ones. The way Haripada Babu placed his speech here is really disheartening. He thought he could keep one lakh people on his side but then they returned to Dandakaranya. He said that we have forced them to leave, wonderful - this is his politics. I ask, when he had left politics at some point, why did he bother to come back? Whatever, what I want to say is, what the Prime Minister has communicated to us. Initially when they came in groups, I went and met the P.M. I told him, "Madhya Pradesh Government is yours, Orissa Government is yours - and most people came from Orissa. They came from the place where they have the best facilities of rehabilitation." And then he told me, "We sent them but if you want my help, I will help you." I replied, "What help can you give me?" He said, "I shall send them back. You must not open any relief camp."

The Prime Minister told me not to open any relief Camp. But as far as I know, he follows Gandhian Ideology. So I asked him, "One lakh people have come over with their children, is there any other way by which I can send them back? I cannot. I have to send them back by spending money and later it will be decided who will give the money." So by then, we had already spent about one lakh rupees. Why aren't you saying anything to our P.M.? You do not have the courage, if you do you would face consequences. I have said that the refugees are facing trouble. Who is a greater friend of the refugees than us? I have seen for the past 30 years that they do not have a dearer friend than us. There is an association called Unnayan Samiti, they have ties with Congress and a section of Janata Party. Congress does not care about any principle. In 1974 when these people were driven off from their place, we have not witnessed any hunger strike back then. At that time P.C. Sen was here, or was he somewhere in abroad? Then, in 1975, when they were again driven back, none of you said anything then also. We have said that we won't allow any sort of illegal activities in Marichjhapi. We told them to get back - we will arrange food, camps are ready, medical facilities are there, we are sending doctors. I have also said that in this intermediary period you can stay here. I will ask for a bit more time from the Central Government. Many of them even want to go back but they are not being allowed to. They are making bows and arrows and other kinds of weapons, they are not allowing Police to step in. Can they do all these? They have been saying that the landless refugees have resided here and there. When they have built colonies by possessing the lands illegally, who were there with them? Nobody, but we were with them. Then they had come in numbers from East Bengal. Who were there to back them up? When they possessed the land by force, we helped them. In this case, the Central Government is more responsible and our good fortune is that they have agreed. We have convinced the Prime Minister and he has agreed to give us time. There are so many things to do politics with us, or have we become so big that nothing can be said against us? Haripada Babu has said, "Let the budget come, will tell then." I will circulate something because confuse may arise from some words and one might have to look up into the dictionary.

No. 30 CM dated 24th January, 1979

My Dear Prime Minister,

As you are aware, in February and March, 1978, about 1 lakh 20 thousands refugees from former East Pakistan and now in rehabilitation and work site camps in Dandakaranya and other areas, deserted these camps and came to West Bengal. After good deal of efforts we repatriated all but about eight thousand of them who had taken shelter in Marichjhapi Reserve Forest area in Sunderbans. These deserters have felled forest trees extensively and started fisheries and are distributing lands. They have created a sort of free zone for themselves in Marichjhapi and have expressed their determination to resist by force any attempt to repatriate them.

Recently, it has come to our notice that new deserters are trickling to Marichjhapi by circuitous routes to evade police vigilance. It has also been reported that some of the leaders of these refugees are trying to allure the families who had gone back to Dandakaranya by offering of land in the reserve forest area. Shri Satish Mondal, one of their leaders, has reportedly disclosed in a meeting recently that about 5,000 P.L.

refugee family of Mana Camp (Madhya Pradesh) will be coming over to Marichjhapi. The Madhya Pradesh Police has been requested to keep watch over these P.L. refugees and to inform us of the developments from time to time.

We have now decided to take action for containing the situation at Marichjhapi and to make every effort to repatriate the deserters. However, a number of organisations like Unnayan (OXFAM), Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha, etc., are actively helping and instigating the deserters. We also have reports that some leaders of Janata Party, such as, Shri Shakti Sarkar, M.P., Shri Haripada Bharati, M.L.A. and Shri Kashi Kanta Maitra, M.L.A, and encouraging these deserters and collecting outside help for them.

I should be grateful for your assistance at the political level to tackle this serious problem developing in the Sunderbans.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely

I wrote this on the 24th to the Prime Minister, shooting took place after this. Write, you will get the answer.

No. 392 P.M.O/79 dated 30th January, 1979, New Delhi

My Dear Jyoti Basu

Please refer to letter No. 30 C.M of 24th January, 1979

regarding infiltration of refugees from Marichjhapi and other camps. I agree with you in regard to the action that you have taken or prepared to take. None of the organisations nor any M.P. or M.L.A. has approached me and if they do I shall give them appropriate answer.

With kind Regards.

Yours Sincerely **Morarji Desai**

And I am reading out a letter of the same time period. He is one of your Ministers.

My Dear Basuji,

Thank you for your letter No. 13 C.M. dated 9th January, 1979 regarding the deserters returnee families.

2. Your observations about the complaints of D. P. families concerning the nature of work being provided to them are being brought to notice of the Chairman and Chief Administrator of DNK Project for suitable action.

I wrote why would you make them do farming only? The second generation that were born here, must be allowed to do any other kind of work or jobs if they want. To that, he has replied that he will think over it.

I note that you have reiterated the firm resolve of the State Government of return the remaining deserters families to their respective rehabilitation sites and Karmishibir soon. However, it is getting to be one year since these families deserted DNK and other rehabilitation sites. Next Khariff season is fast approaching. It is felt that these families should return at least 3 months in advance if they are to be in a position to take up Khariff cultivation by June, 1979. However, of keeping watch over the vacant land and homestead plots to which the deserters families have not yet returned.

[What does humanity mean? Going back to your home or they consider it as to create turmoil, destroy the forest, do whatever you wish.]

If these lands are not allotted to others before June, 1979 the land will also go uncultivated leading to avoidable loss of production or alternatively will be encroached upon leading to other difficulties. Any temporary allotment of land to others as you would appreciate has its own problems.

[What if these lands are given to someone else, think about the trouble it would create.]

3. Taking all these factors into consideration we feel it will be appropriate to fix a cut off date for return of the remaining deserters families having returned to this point those to fail to return by that date will stand finally debarred from getting back their lands and houses and from getting renewed relief and rehabilitation assistance sanctioned for the returnees. Return by 31st March, 1979 will help settler families and such Karmishibirs families as are on the basis of their priority entitled to settlement during the next season, do undertake Khariff cultivation in time by June, 1979.

I hope you would appreciate the very relevant consideration set out in para 3 and agree with this approach. On hearing from you we shall take decision and have it announced and you may like to publicise this in the areas in which the deserters are now staying in West Bengal.

I shall appreciate a line in reply.

In reply I wrote, I do not have enough time to say everything, I told it would be better to give a bit more time. We have even sent the news, let us see what we can do. This is what I wanted to clarify. That is why I think it is pointless to throw these challenges at me. He is challenging me? We have already invested Rs. 4 crores, couldn't we spend a bit more to feed them? We have said that we cannot let them stay here anymore. Why? We have discussed that. If one lakh people could return then the rest thousands of people can also return. But here, what is unfortunate is that the leaders of the refugees did not return along with the one lakh people, who called them here. They are staying nearby and they are doing well with their family. They need 8-10 thousand people so that they can start their business.

What wrong the people of our West Bengal have done? One told us that they are cutting down trees somewhere else. Don't let them so this, what right do they have to carry on such activity? If the government thinks it will cut down trees, shouldn't we? One should consider these things from scientific perspectives. I am not going into all these. That is why I am saying, when one lakh people have returned, please do not make a mess for 8-10 thousands of people.

Otherwise it will lead to such a condition that the Government of India will say, "We will not be able to do anything, you did not sent, they will face difficulties here as well, it is problematic for us as well, it will be troublesome even for the people of West Bengal, there are so many complicacies." Let us all be together and find out a solution, if we work unitedly, it will not take more than 15 days, we will send them by taking time. I cannot predict if these people will start thinking rationally or will be challenging us.

I want to end my speech here.