

**UNPUBLISHED MARICHJHAPI: TRANSLATED
FROM THE ORIGINAL “Aprakashito
Marichjhapi” BY
TUSHAR BHATTACHARYA**

Translated from the original by
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A few words on Aprakashito Marichjhapi

Marichjhapi has been the focal point for many creations by poets, litterateurs, intellectuals, journalists, publishers and authors. Countless facts and theories have been published on the subject over the years. However, almost none of those have found a place in ‘Aprakashito Marichjhapi’. Only two among them have been included – the first being an interview of the Panchayat head of Kumirmari, Prafulla Mondal, while the other one is a piece by Jhinuk Chakraborty. It was essential that these compositions find a place in the book for their importance.

We were able to save many essential legal papers and facts in writing, but they have not been used in this volume as they have already found their place in the writings of Jagadishchandra Mondal, published in 2002, and that of Shibnath Chowdhury, published in 2004.

The researcher is primarily concerned with getting hold of the facts and figures, corroborating his content and crafting a flawless story on the basis of facts. It must be borne in mind that all such stories would certainly lack a specific amount of veracity. It’s almost like using the truth to tell tales to the readers who consume it with a pinch of salt! This is mainly because the person who constructs it influences the stories. The main motive behind this work is to bring to the fore the stark narrative of the helpless survivors of the massacre.

This volume comprises the writings and interviews of 30 survivors who had been severely injured or affected by the incident. It also contains essays written by 22 different people. The total number of maps and legal papers represented comes to 59. We have also been able to include pictures of 37 interviewees; the rest were not found despite our best efforts.

Shakya Sen had traveled to Marichjhapi for investigation under the order of Kolkata High Court. The reader is sure to come across certain incidents in his investigation that are too ghastly to believe. Soumen Guha has analyzed the legal progression of the Marichjhapi case. This is the first time that an analysis of this case has been attempted in the open.

Shailen Mukherjee wrote a criticism of the book on Marichjhapi by Jagadishchandra Mondal. He did so under the pseudonym of Jhinuk Mukherjee. The Publishers and Booksellers Guild banned the criticism in the *Pustak Mela* of 2002. Shailen has taken the next step and thrown light on the banned composition in ‘Item Marichjhapi’.

Alpana Biswas was present at Donduk to know more about the education and cultural practices prevalent in the area. She has penned down ‘Netajinagar Vidyapith, Marichjhapi’, based on the interviews of the Head of Netajinagar Vidyapith, Nirmalendu Dhali, who is a teacher, and his wife Tarubala Mondal.

Upendranath Biswas was the first person to proclaim that Marichjhapi is not a reserve forest. Moreover, he had used facts to prove that Marichjhapi belonged to its settlers – at least that’s what history really pointed out. His invaluable interview has been included in this volume.

The police had hired Dinabandhu Mondal and Bhabasindhu Mondal to do their dirty work. Their confessions expose the true nature of brutality unleashed upon the refugees of Marichjhapi.

The locals of Kumirmari who mingled with the refugees had been interviewed and so were the politicians who were directly associated with the incidents. All such interviews are included in this volume.

Nearly all the refugees described the same patterns of torture inflicted upon them. Naturally, we have not included all of them and gone ahead with only a selected few descriptions.

We have used Niranjan Halder's interview – he is a journalist, human rights activist and a tireless worker for the betterment of the oppressed.

Right after Ashok Ghosh and Ram Chatterjee, two leaders in the Left Front government, returned from Donduk, the President of the Udbastu Unnayan Shil Samiti, Satish Mondal, implored them to visit the Sundarbans in a letter dated 22nd January, 1978. We have published this letter along with another one dated 25th May, 1979, which was written right after the refugees had been forcefully evicted from Marichjhapi.

We have also included two pages from the diary of Debabrata Biswas – the youth leader of the refugees of Marichjhapi.

We have been able to publish only about five per cent of the total matter on Marichjhapi we possess. Unfortunately, there are many pictures that I am unable to publish for the readers.

Mistakes or errors form a part of every work. This volume is no exception. If the reader comes across any mistake at any point in the book, then it is most certainly an involuntary error. I am aware of this fact and accept that my work is also susceptible to mistakes. It is with this knowledge that I have decided to go ahead with publishing this volume.

I am not an author or researcher or litterateur, the contents of this book are completely based on whatever I have heard, seen, experienced or come to know while I was working on my documentary for Marichjhapi. I have tried to reach the ones who are interested to know more about the massacre through the limited resources that could be used while publishing the book. The rest of the documents on Marichjhapi that could not find a place in this volume have been preserved for future researchers.

Tushar Bhattacharya

‘Swadhinotar Boli’ was a jatra composed in Marichjhapi. The youth leader of the refugees, Radhikaranjan Biswas, penned it. The manuscript of this creation was burnt down by the State sponsored terrorists. However, the song contained within that jatra refused to turn to ashes. The song still lives on in the beautiful voice of the eleven-year-old Rabindranath Paik who sang it aloud before the gruesome incidents took place.

(Swadhinotar Boli)

Freedom’s Sacrifice

Let us go to the refugee fair at Marichjhapi

The bend in the river

Is mooned over by the masses of the country

Let us go to the refugee fair at Marichjhapi.

The police keeps watch

Upon launches all around the coast

And as the people sing revolution

The State smashes our boats.

Snakes, tigers and animals of the wilderness

Helped us conquer our fears

But now we are only afraid of the Basu government.

Let us go to the refugee fair at Marichjhapi.

Bardhaman is torn apart with bullets

And so is the river flowing beside Sandeshkhali

The great dictum of freedom rings

And torrents of blood flow wildly.

Is there any soul left in this country

The refugees walk in their graves,

Is there any soul left in Bengal

The refugees make a home in these graves.

Let us go to the refugee fair

At Marichjhapi.

Face to Face with Marichjhapi

Tushar Bhattacharya

There have been consolidated efforts to cover up the incidents that took place in Marichjhapi during 1978–79. However, a challenge to such practices has surfaced quite recently – it is the move to smash the conspiracy that is being hatched to hide the truth, which many are so desperately trying to establish. Maybe such conspiracies will aid many political leaders, but what about the people who had to pay for it with everything they ever had? What about them, how much are we going to think about them, are we simply going to invite them to the podium, bestow a garland and pat their shoulders while saying – “Your struggle has taught us, enlightened us and shown us how to live with our heads held high”?

Will it be wrong to say, “Marichjhapi is a small effort in the direction of destroying everything good about the Bengali race”? When Lord Curzon decreed the division of Bengal way back in 1905, the masses exploded in protest. Such was the magnitude of the protests that the decision to divide Bengal was scrapped within six years. But how many among the masses revolted against the decision to cut Bengal in half in 1947? Not many among us. And why would we revolt? After all we had recently tasted freedom and become partners in what seemed to be a massive property division. Yes, we have composed songs, written poems and painted countless pictures on canvas all of which are related to the partition of Bengal; but none of us shouted loud enough to be heard before the heinous act was carried out in 1947.

The British had a hint about the revolutionary nature of Bengalis. This made them aim at exterminating Bengalis altogether. An appropriate reflection of this sentiment can be found in the incidents that took place in Marichjhapi, Singur and Nandigram. Who is responsible for contributing the building blocks to a culture and its aesthetic sensibilities? There is a famous poem by Bertolt Brecht that may be used as a suitable reply:

Who were the ones to build those seven gates of Thebes?
The pages of history are riddled with the names of Kings.
But the men who heaved those boulders so high
Are they counted as Kings?

We have tried defining them with different titles throughout West Bengal and India – Dalit, Harijan, Namashudra – in order to establish the profit-making business of politics. We have always been afraid of acknowledging workers as the creators and craftsmen of civilization. We belonged to the ‘babu class’ at one point of time in the past, gradually we transformed into the ‘educated middle-class gentleman’. Jaya Chatterjee has rightly explained in her research book – “The middle-class gentleman is exactly the opposite of the senseless and emotionless sons of the soil. This middle-class gentleman, also known as ‘babu’, considers his existence as inevitably more refined than that of the workers since he does not have to engage physically in

hard labor.” Jaya Chatterjee quotes Broomfield as saying – “Broomfield uses the word ‘gentleman’ to denote a person who has a ‘westernized pattern of thinking and is an exponent of the most refined class of human beings’. Broomfield considers them to belong to the ‘Weberian group’ as they also exhibit its traits.” They are now being identified as the well-educated middle-class intellectuals.

‘Marichjhapi’ did not surface out of the blue. It was not hiding in some secret dungeon. What was really in hiding was the process of uprooting the refugees from their surroundings. There were countless sources that revealed the truth of this secret process. Back then the Left Front’s pretense of ‘poor man’s source of strength’ stuck inextricably as a title and we did not want to enter the abyss of disbelief by ripping apart this notion. Besides, we have acknowledged these uneducated, hard working peasants and working people as the oppressed class. So how can we afford to look back at them?

The unspeakable plight of the residents in the countless refugee camps across West Bengal bear testimony to their indomitable spirit that rises in revolt in order to survive. Unfortunately, these revolts have been ruthlessly suppressed with guns and the knowledge of the same has been covered under the thin layer of dust that accumulates on the front pages of old newspapers or it has dissipated like smoke from a cup of morning tea unable to find a place in the reader’s heart. Consequently, the reader has turned his eyes away from the festering wound. Herein lies another instance of the conspiracy to mar the greatness of Bengali ethnicity.

The partition of the country was the first step towards segregating the entire population of Bengalis. Based on this successful move, the refugees were sent to the different islands of Andaman. How often can the Bengalis residing in one island contact those residing in other islands? How often have we tried to inquire about them who can barely make their ends meet by selling betel nuts throughout the year? We had never really bothered to ask them how they were doing in the transit camps kept for the refugees from East Bengal; we didn’t ask them about their well-being during those eight or ten years spent in the camps. The government had to deploy military to repress the refugee’s just demand of allowing them to stay in West Bengal. Colonel Shyamaprasad Nandi and Brigadier Das carried out their duty of shooting down the helpless refugees with flawless precision.

It is believed that each year more than a hundred thousand people from neighboring states and surroundings come to West Bengal to settle there permanently. They can get all the space they require. Salem, Jindal and Tata can also get a place in Bengal if they feel like it. However, there has never been any place for refugees from East Bengal. The leader are then reminded of the hackneyed statement that Bengal is ‘over crowded’; it is only then that they are able to realize, “There is not even a single ounce of space.”

The refugees were hurled upon the lifeless and stony Dandakaranya from an atmosphere of smooth-flowing waters and life-giving rich soil. If one quotes about the plight of these refugees from the writings of Saibal Mitra then we will be able to fathom the extent of exploitation perpetrated by the state and central governments upon these people.

The media department of the state circulated a magazine by the name of 'Dandakaranyer Katha'. It described in vivid details the stories of success through essays, photos and paintings. However, the magazine turned a blind eye to the numerous tales of suffering. It failed to speak about the farmers who were unable to sustain themselves annually with agricultural produce from their soil. It did not mention anything about those who lived and slept on an empty stomach or those who had to resort to any other means available to soothe their pangs of hunger.

"I should also mention an incident that will serve as an example of how fabrication of truth acts as a detriment to the course of events. The overenthusiastic media department had exhibited the movie 'Sakal thekey Sondhya' at Mana camp in my absence. When the refugees were sent to the interiors of different parts of the country, they were seriously disappointed. They said, 'We were not supposed to be brought into a place like this. Where is the place they promised us in the movies?' This is another reason that prompted the refugees to abandon their camps.

ICS Saibal Gupta was the chairman of Dandakaranya Unnayan Parishad. His writings were not salvaged from some personal daily record, instead they had been published by a newspaper. Subsequently, those articles found their place in a compilation that was released in the format of a book. ICS Saibal Gupta has enriched us with countless examples of how to make fools out of the uneducated and illiterate masses of a country. He has also demonstrated how helpless people can be easily denied their basic rights.

A group of refugees tried making their way into West Bengal towards the end of 1974. There were about thousands of refugees gathered at the Maidan in Kolkata. Siddharta Ray's government took action and incarcerated all of them after 4 days. There were still others who were trying to gain access to West Bengal; they were sent back from Kharagpur station after being intercepted. This was immediately followed by the Emergency. The refugee leaders were arrested at Misa during this period.

1977. It was supposed to be the year when refugees would finally realize their dreams turning to reality. The Left Front had come to power. We are well aware of what had happened before that year. The leaders and ministers of the Left Front had invited the refugees to settle in Marichjhapi. Jyoti Basu was one of them.

Satish Mondal, the refugee leader, along with a group of representatives met the Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, in 1977 at Writer's. In a meeting that span over two days, the Chief Minister assured the leader and his team, after which they returned to Dandakaranya. The next

step was to organize the refugees, which they did under the call of ‘Chalo Sundarban’. The entire history of Marichjhapi can be found from between the end of March 1978 to 16th May 1979. There are countless journalists and human rights activists who have been witness to this history. Many well-known artists such as Suchitra Mitra and Hemanta Mukhopadhyay have performed in front of audiences in order to raise funds. Sunil Ganguly, Jyotirmoy Dutta (journalist) and the youth leader of the refugees Debabrata Biswas had walked up to Satish Mondal and handed over twenty thousand rupees for the cause. The ones who had seen their dreams come to life – seen them die of hunger and bullets – should have written down this history. They were chased away remorselessly. And we really did not want to dig in whatever chanced afterwards. We never tried searching for them again. The people who could have written their history, could have inquired about the whereabouts of the lost ones were all:

‘Favored by His Highness
The royal poet pens his drama
Undone in the darkness of the stage
Bewails unfortunate Shakuntala.’

It seems as if Saroj Dutta’s poems have become all the more pertinent in this context. These refugees were cast away from their dwellings. None of us really bothered to learn about their condition after that. They had to go back to Dandakaranya, but no one thought of asking how their lives changed after they were forced to return. Saibal Gupta has stated, “There are very few responsible people, in my knowledge, who are genuinely eager to learn everything about Dandakaranya.”

... “Conspiracies or instigations have nothing to do with what’s really responsible. It is the simple desire for a healthy life and the will to do away with unbearable living conditions. If the government compels the refugees to leave the land regardless of these aspects, then it clearly demonstrates that there is no real difference between a Congress government and a Communist one. It is as if both sides would heave a sigh of relief if they are rid of this burden from their shoulders.”

I don’t fall in the category of a writer, poet, litterateur or researcher. I simply create documentaries. And it is through this that I made the acquaintance of Shailen Chakraborty. The year was 2002 and the venue was Kolkata International Book Fair. I distinctly remember to have met him and also discovered that his criticism on the book *Marichjhapi Naishabder Antaraley* written by Jagadishchandra Mondal had been published in the official magazine of the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, *Pustak Mela* under the pseudonym of ‘Jhinuk Chakraborty’. The criticism had probably managed to rile up some influential people. Soon after, the criticism disappeared completely, and a criticism on a new book took its place. I made up my mind to create a documentary on Marichjhapi. I did not have the technical expertise that was required to make the documentary. I started preparing for it in 2005. I

realized that it was essential to establish contact with someone who belonged to Marichjhapi in the first place. It is also evident that all such people resided in India, so it would not have been much of a problem if a search were conducted thoroughly.

Jagadishchandra Mondal was the first person who I was able to connect with. After that, I met the editor of the magazine, 'Adal Badal', Bimal Biswas, and heard everything about the village 'Pother Shesh'. Some of the families that were forced out of Marichjhapi are living there. A few beneficiaries such as the journalist Gourikishore Ghosh, Professor Amlan Dutta, Subrata Chatterjee, Bimal Biswas and Shibnarayan Ray along with a few others were able to help the survivors financially in setting up a village near Ghutiari Sharif. The refugee leader, Late Rangalal Goldar christened the village 'Pother Shesh' (End of the Road).

I arrived at 'Pother Shesh' by Bimal Biswas's car on the 14th of December 2005. Professor Dilip Halder, the writer Jagadishchandra Mondal and a few other artists, technicians and helpers accompanied me.

When I began searching for facts on Marichjhapi, my target was making a documentary. I had no intention of writing a book. It was aired for the first time on 24th July 2008; however, I learnt soon after that the name 'Marichjhapi' was unfamiliar to a large section of the people. I had been able to collect so much information on Marichjhapi back then that I could have easily penned down a thousand-page book. It is impossible to incorporate each and every detail in a documentary. It is attractive because we can directly view it and get to know more about what is being shown. We are also brought face to face with the survivors of the ordeal. Moreover, the narrative of a documentary is universally acceptable.

The English version of the Marichjhapi documentary 'Marichjhaupi 1978-79 Tortured Humanity' has been shown at the Amnesty International in London and at the International Human Rights in America. Many Bengalis residing there have also seen the documentary. Besides, it has also been screened in other countries such as Czechoslovakia, Italy, Holland, France, Australia and Nigeria. Many states within India have had the privilege of being witness to its screening as well – Mumbai, Bangalore, Nagpur, Punjab, Assam, and even in the Indian Social Institute of Delhi. I was able to meet many journalists after being invited by Other Media at the screening in Delhi. West Bengal has had countless screenings of the Bengali version – 'Marichjhapi, Akranto Manobikota 1978-79'. Unfortunately, I was able to be present at only four of the screenings.

The editor of Dainik Statesman, Manas Ghosh, requested me to submit an article on Marichjhapi for the newspaper. He had also fixed a date for submission of the article. I had no option other than penning the article. But the problem was that I am not a man who is particularly fond of writing. I was able to write it nevertheless, and soon after it was published, I began receiving telephone calls from all over the country. The article was republished in many newspapers and magazines. It was noticeable that people started writing on Marichjhapi

when the masses took an active interest in it. To my disappointment, I noticed that most of whatever appeared in print on this topic was replete with factual errors. That was the first time I felt the need to write a book on Marichjhapi in Bengali. Moreover, I also felt that it was necessary to answer certain questions that had surfaced in the meanwhile. It should be noted that there are a lot of things on Marichjhapi that still await proper research.

The journalists and sympathizers who witnessed refugees being driven away by force three decades earlier has written a lot on the ordeal of the survivors. Those articles and essays have reached a large section of the people. But it is very important to learn what the survivors themselves have to say, it is important to understand what they are thinking and how they have viewed the entire episode as it unfolded one step at a time. I had worked on the documentary for three years; starting from 2005 and going all the way to 2008. However, it was not possible to put a halt to my work on Marichjhapi after that. I had to go to Dandakaranya, after the completion of my documentary, to meet many survivors whom I did not have the opportunity to meet before.

There were many like us who kept themselves informed about the barbarity that the Jyoti Basu led government perpetrated on the refugees in order to drive them out of Marichjhapi. To be honest, none of us were really shocked to learn about the iniquities. This was mainly because we were familiar with the practice of the leaders of the State who seize political power essential for running the country, in the guise of the common man, and use that power for safeguarding the powers of the capitalists while oppressing the majority of the masses. It can be said that the detailed search for facts on the Marichjhapi massacre was made to unearth more such instances of horrifying State oppression. This became all the more important as the Left Front left no stone unturned in order to cover up all the incidents that laid bare their acts of unbridled cruelty; after all, the flimsy façade of ‘democracy’ and being ‘for the people’ is the safest option for any political party aiming to gain favor with the people.

The refugees came to West Bengal from East Pakistan. There were countless problems, and the Left Front came to power by using these very problems as a means to appeal to the popular sentiment. The Bengali refugees settled at Dandakaranya comprised a very important part in the entire ploy of seizing power. Besides expressing their solidarity with the demands of the refugees of West Bengal, many of the leaders of the present Left Front government, had started frequenting Dandakaranya even before 1977. Jyoti Basu had invited the refugees at Bhilai and held talks with them over there. When he had been successful in seizing power, he held a conference with them at Writer’s. Samar Mukherjee of CPI(M) had visited Dandakaranya a lot of times. The people of Dandakaranya are also very well aware of the deceitfulness of Ashok Ghosh and Kiranmay Nanda who were very close to the members of CPI(M).

Propaganda is the biggest weapon, regardless of facts. The cleverest person on the planet can be easily reduced to the level of a nincompoop with the proper use of propaganda. And these people knew the weakness of the simple and toiling masses. On 24th January 1979, they imposed Section 144 and cordoned off the island in a successful effort to stop food resources from entering the island. When the residents could no longer endure the pain of an empty stomach, they tried to make their way to the other side – Kumirmari – in search of something to eat. All of them were gunned down ruthlessly; it was 31st January 1979. They had used the same technique without spending any effort in hiding their ghastly methods at Nandigram. They had smoothly employed their heinous strategy, which was made all the more evident through the ‘life hell’ declaration. The only elements that they used in order to discipline an unarmed and unruly mass of people who were busy protesting against the atrocities they had been subjected to were State-sponsored bullets, goons and food crisis. It can also be said that the Left Front has repeatedly used these techniques and gained the trust of the capitalists all over the globe.

‘Mana’ is the daughter of the late Rangalal Goldar, a refugee leader from Marichjhapi. She was born in the Mana camp of Raipur and that was how her name stuck. Mana’s husband, Ananda Sarkar, was unemployed. Their daughter could not afford to go to school. She is sewing blouses at her home as a means of subsistence. Her mother had gone to the neighbor’s for some milk and sugar; she did not want to miss the chance of being hospitable to us. Their dwelling was made of mud. We crossed the small opening in front of the house and entered the hut. The roof was low and made of straw; we had to bend our heads while going in. I sat on a small stool and began my interviews with Mana and Ananda Sarkar. It was followed by the interview of Mana’s two brothers. One of the brothers drives the rickshaw while the other is an unorganized labor. They are unable to keep a track of what is happening around the world, and in the same way, no one really cares much about them either. They live in an island that is much more secluded than Marichjhapi. This is their last resort, their ‘Pother Shesh’. Ananda Sarkar, the refugee leader of Marichjhapi, told me about another refugee leader of Marichjhapi, the Secretary of ‘Shara Bharat Unnayanshil Samiti’, Raiharan Barei. He was supposedly engaged in the fish business at some fish market in Hoogly. But we were unable to find any trace of Raiharanbabu in Uttarpara, Konnagar, Srirampur, Tarakeshwar, Chanditala, Jirat, Balagarh, Jairambati and Hoogly. Situations were the same for three consecutive months. One day I asked the fish seller, Anil, whom I was familiar with, whether he knew anyone by the name of Raiharan in the fish market. Anil said, “There was a Raibabu once, but he has passed away. However, I know of another old man in the fish market, he might be able to tell you something regarding this.” The next day I boarded the fishermen’s truck to Patipukur, to the main fish market. When Anil introduced me to the old Raibabu, I realized that he was Raiharan. His two sons look after the fish market. His sons arrived after a while and I told

them my purpose for the visit. I gave them my phone number and address. After a few days I arrived at their home in Dumdum. I got a load of factual data on Marichjhapi from Parulbala Barei, Raiharan Barei's wife. I got to know of the whereabouts of youth leader Pabitra Biswas and Pabitra Biswas – the leader of the refugees at Mana camp in Chattisgarh, Raipur.

Our cameraman, Sanjoy Ghosh, told us that Marichjhapi colony was right next to where he lived. I told him to organize a meeting with the people living there; I would go the very next day.

Marichjhapi colony is situated very close to the Dumdum station. One has to walk towards Chiriamore, B.T. Road a few steps. The colony is located right after the Chhanapotti. This was not a colony or slum to begin with. It was created to serve the purpose of a bazar. A large number of poor families arrived at this place during the floods of 1978. They did not leave afterwards. After the Left Front government drove away the refugees from Marichjhapi in 1979, some of them came to this place and grabbed whatever empty space was left. Each room was just as big as the space a vendor took to sell vegetables or fish in a market, and entire families lived within that space. I have seen a lot of slums in my life, but never have I come across something like this. None of them were ready to talk. Moreover, they did not even let us click pictures. It did not take me long to understand that their meager dwelling was under the control of CPI(M). The lack of any other alternative forced me to click a picture of the Marichjhapi colony on another day while I was being driven around on a motorcycle.

Ashok Gupta, a social worker, worked really hard, while he was staying at Marichjhapi, in order to devise various means through which the women residing there could be empowered and made self-dependent. We discussed a lot of things together, but I could not persuade him to come in front of the camera. He kept on denying until he could not turn down my repeated requests. I have presented whatever he has consented to speak on screen. When our meeting was approaching its end, he presented me with a few invaluable books that belonged to his mother. There was also a book written in English–Bengali by Saibal Gupta among the rest of the books. I have only one major regret in our relationship. I had promised that I would gift him a copy of the documentary as soon as it was completed. The documentary on Marichjhapi was first aired on television in 24th July 2008; he passed away on 8th July 2008.

I had no idea that Upendranath Biswas, better known as Upen Biswas, thought so much about the oppressed classes. It was revealed to me while I was interviewing him. He was the first person to state that until the year 2000, there was no such place as 'Marichjhapi Sangrakkhita Bonanchol' designated by the government. No such record existed with the government until that year. Strangely, the court ruled against the refugees at Marichjhapi only because the government had been able to furnish documents that belied this fact. Upen da has declared in his interview that these refugees are the sons of Marichjhapi. He keeps working tirelessly for the uneducated and oppressed masses. He has also crafted a website for Marichjhapi. I will

forever remember the immense excitement and eagerness he had shown for my work. Moreover, he did not stop at that; he was present with me in many of the interviews that I conducted with others and always enriched me with priceless advice.

A case had been filed against the decision of the ruling Left Front government to block all food and water supplies to the refugees in Marichjhapi at the High Court of Calcutta. Shakya Sen the assistant of the late Niharendu Dutta Majumdar, a lawyer, fought this case in favor of the refugees. The High Court ruled that lawyers fighting in favor of both the sides should visit Marichjhapi for an investigation. Needless to mention, the lawyers fighting the case in favor of the Left Front government did not visit Marichjhapi. Shakya Sen carried out his investigation and submitted a report that was 35 pages long.

Soumen Guha had to bump into obstacles repeatedly in the case related to Archana Guha that dragged for 20 long years. In the end, he donned the suit of a lawyer himself and won the case. I had handed over all the documents dealing with the Marichjhapi incident to Soumen Guha. He has analyzed all of it in the writing ‘Itihaase Marichjhapi Mamla’.

There was a controversy associated with the name ‘Nirmalendu Dhali’. ‘Nirmalkanti’ was mentioned as the first name in some places whereas in others it was ‘Nirmalendu’. He has answered this controversy himself. His real name is Nirmalkanti Dhali. Satish Mondal, one of the main leaders of the refugees, advised him to identify himself as ‘Nirmalendu Dhali’ when he arrived at Marichjhapi. In Malkangiri of Dandakaranya, he is known as Nirmal da and Dhali da.

Satish Mondal, the president of the ‘Shara Bharat Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti’, lives in Chattisgarh, Raipur, at Mana. Raiharan’s wife and sons provided me with the contact number to reach Mana. They also told me that I could live there. I contacted the phone number they gave me. I got hold of the phone number of Swapan Mondal, the son of Satish Mondal. Satish babu had two more sons – Tapan and Tapas. He informed me that his father was unwell and had been admitted to a hospital. I called them every day during that time. He came back home after 10 days, and we left for Mana. I had Arun Sen, the founding member of ‘Sundarban Sramajibi Hospital’, as my companion. We reached Howrah–Raipur. Then we boarded an auto rickshaw all the way to the famous Mana transit camp. I still remember the date; it was the 27th of May, 2006. We hired a rickshaw at Mana to take us to our destination. The house we were living in was situated just beside that of Satish Mondal. It was a two-storied house; one would be easily able to infer that he was living in favorable conditions. We rested for a while and when we were back for our work, we learnt that the two houses had severed all connections between themselves. Of course, the reason was entirely personal. I also came to know that Satish babu was in the habit of sitting in the courtyard during the evenings. I saw that as an opportunity. It was summer and the heat was simply oppressive. As soon as the afternoon faded away into the evening, we arrived ready in front of Satish babu’s doorstep.

His eldest son made it clear that he would not let us speak to his father regarding Marichjhapi or any other matter. He turned a deaf ear to all of our appeals and requests. Moreover, he also expressed his disapproval when we asked to click a picture of the man. I informed the entire incident to Raiharan babu's in-laws. They came up with a possible solution. Robin Chakrabarty was the co-president of the 'Udbastu Sangathan'. He lived a few kilometers away. He was in the habit of paying an occasional visit to Satish babu's place. I had two days in my hand, after which I would be off to Indore. I took their bike and arrived at Robin babu's place in the evening. He had a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali at his home. I realized that he was spending his days in worship. His wife offered me some prasada while he stood listening to whatever I had to say. After I finished, he assured me that he would come over next morning at 9.

I kept waiting and calling him from 9 in the morning to 11 the next day. He took his own sweet time and arrived at 4 in the evening. We took his interview and went over to Satish babu's place at 5. The eldest son was engaged in fishery. His work demanded him to leave early in the morning and he could only return in the evening. Needless to mention, we had to complete Satish babu's interview before it was evening and his eldest son returned. Satish babu sat in the courtyard, he was visibly unwell and could not speak properly. His wife handed him a cup of tea. We were present for half an hour, but we could only record an interview that was 15-minutes long.

Dalit leaders in West Bengal are mostly intellectuals! Most of them live a luxurious life with the help that the government provides to the Dalit class. They generally start thinking about Dalits after their retirement. The meeting committee conducts seminars on Marichjhapi while many refugees from Marichjhapi are living in dilapidated huts on the sides of the railway lines just a few minutes away from the houses of these leaders. In truth, no one really bothers about them. It is really not that difficult to understand that these so-called leaders are able to gain prominence with the help of these very wretched people on whom they turn a blind eye. On the other hand, when I went to Dandakaranya, I saw that no one really cared much about caste. This is a big problem in West Bengal.

Mana transit camp. This was where all the uneducated, working-class refugees from East Bengal were kept. After 8–10 years, they were sent to five states that were considered to be parts of Dandakaranya – in the deep and dense forests of the Andhra, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Robin Chakrabarty took us around and showed us the central office of the Mana transit camp, the Structure where the goddess Durga was worshipped, the protest mancha (stage) that formed the first step of the rebellion. We kept recording videos of all the places and took several pictures.

Manmath Biswas came from Raipur on 28 May, 2006 at 7 in the morning. He is the president of 'Chhattisgarh Namashudra Kalyan Samiti' and also a bank employee. Binod Majumdar had

also come over; his countenance bore the impression of a workingman. I have included their interviews in the documentary. The very next day I had train to Indore from Bilaspur at 9:15 am. From Indore I had to go to Dhar district, which was about 3 hours by bus. The state of Gujarat expands right from where Dhar ends. Sameer Samaddar, a doctor at Marichjhapi Hospital, lived there in utmost secrecy. I got hold of his telephone number and rang him up. He repeatedly requested me not to tell anyone about his whereabouts. Afterwards he resettled elsewhere.

There was no possibility to reach Bilaspur from Raipur within 9 am. We left to catch the train at Raipur at 11 am without receiving hospitality at the house of Manmath Biswas. After spending the night at Bilaspur Hotel, I left for the station in the morning. The train journey lasted for 27 hours. We started the train journey with tea and biscuits. I didn't get any food at noon. We were accompanied in the compartment by two girls from Bilaspur. They were students of Indore Nursing Training College who had come home on a holiday. They offered Arun da and me two parathas each; when we refused they would not hear any of it. Furthermore, they assured us that we did not have to worry about dinner. Their uncle would come to a station in the evening and give them more food. They had informed him through the cellphone. I overate that night! The next morning, we boarded a bus after reaching Indore at 11. When we got off, we saw that Sameer Samaddar was waiting for us. His house was situated close by. The people residing there had to face serious problems with fresh water supply. They were supplied with water every alternate day and that too not for more than half an hour. He had bought two small drums of water for 200 bucks. We visited a few places in that marginal district of Madhya Pradesh. There are many Bengalis residing at this place as quack doctors. Most of them hail from East Bengal. They usually treat patients living in the villages. I spent two days interviewing some of these quack doctors.

If you want to reach Marichjhapi then you have to go through Kumirmari island. It was in Kumirmari that the refugees first came to from Dandakaranya. They foraged for food and drinking water on this island. RSP exercised their influence in this region. The refugees have repeatedly spoken of the contributions of Kumirmari panchayat chief Prafulla Mandal and Zila Parishad member Pradeep Biswas. Although Pradeep Biswas later joined the CPM camp from RSP. Despite trying my best, I could not find the contact for Kumirmari. Arun Sen ran a labor hospital and an agricultural circle in Sarberia. People from different parts of the Sunderbans went there to avail of the services. I set off for Kumirmari on the basis of such an unknown contact. It is a three to four hours' journey on a bhutbhuti from Dhamakhali. It was 11th February 2006. We got down at Chhoto Mollakhali went over to the house of our acquaintance. After finishing my meal there, I went over to Kumirmari right next to the forest department office. I met Dinabandhu Mandal and Bhabasindhu Mandal. Both of them had been hired by the police during the Marichjhapi refugee crisis to look after certain chores.

Unfortunately, I was unable to establish contact with Prafulla Mandal. Without any further delay, I established connection with, the president of RSP, Debabrata Bandyopadhyay. He sat in front of me and called up, the leader of Krishak Front of RSP, Ashok Chowdhury and assured me that I would get all the necessary help. It was 26th February 2006. The aged Ashok Chowdhury was the former MLA of Basanti in South 24 Parganas. I went to his home on 8th March 2007. Ashok Chowdhury can be regarded as the son of the soil. This aspect alone demonstrates the swiftness of his interview; there was not the slightest hesitation or vagueness in his words. We were impressed by his wife's hospitality. Diganta Mukherjee was accompanying me that day. We planned to go to Kumirmari once the interview ended. On 6th April 2006, he drove us from Sealdah station to Basanti. We picked up Arun Sen midway from Sarberia. Gosaba is situated right above the river Matla in Basanti. Prafulla Mandal had been asked to reach there. Prafulla Mandal had been the panchayat pradhan. He had served in that office for 25 years. He can be regarded as one of the witnesses of the Marichjhapi massacre who was in the middle of the tragedy when it unfurled.

Prafulla Mondal had brought along two more persons at the RSP party office in Gosaba. One of them was Nitai Munda; the brother of Meni Munda, the woman who was shot dead by the police on 31st January 1979. The other one was Rabi Mondal whose courtyard was filled with 40 dead bodies. They had been murdered by the police and gathered at one place so they could conveniently transport the corpses later. We took interviews of all the three persons present. I had a talk with Prafulla Mondal regarding going over to Kumirmari.

23rd April 2007. We boarded a steamboat coming from Gosaba at around 9:30 in the morning from Dhamakhali. We reached Kumirmari bazar at quarter to one. Prafulla Mondal lived around half a kilometer away; we reached the place afoot. We set out for our work the next morning. Birendranath Mridha, a teacher of Kumirmari was accompanying us. He has had personal experience of the refugees coming and settling on the island and the subsequent police torture perpetrated on all of them. He had very close connections with the refugee leaders. Much of it has been enumerated in his interview. I met Ram Munda – the son of the murdered Meni Munda. I heard the detailed chronology of events that explained how his mother was killed in his home. Basudeb Mondal was a regional member back then. He told us about everything he had witnessed. It included the accounts of the refugees and how countless corpses were made to vanish overnight. I had to video record every single interview. I still remember that I stood right next to the Karankhali river. It seemed as if it cut a huge landmass through the middle. The side of the river where I was standing on was known as Kumirmari whereas the opposite bank was Marichjhapi. While Prafulla Mondal was the panchayat pradhan, he had arranged living space for many helpless families coming from Marichjhapi. They settled down for good in those very places. I interviewed many of them. People such as Amla Sarkar and Panchanan Mondal were just able to make it to Kumirmari alive.

During the tenure of Siddharta Shankar Ray as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Suhrid Mullick and Prankrishna Chakrabarty of CPM's Udbastu Sangathan Kendriya Parishad (UCRC) visited Sunderbans along with the refugee leaders Satish Mondal, Raiharan Barei, Rangalal Goldar and Rabin Chakrabarty. They were taken to four distinct islands – Marichjhapi (it was named Marichchowk back then), Aarbele, Aardesia and another one. Subsequently, at the Jadavpur refugee meeting of UCRC, it was decided that Marichjhapi island would be the designated settling place for all refugees from Dandakaranya and every person present accepted the decision. It should be noted that all refugees in the Mana Transit Camp had not been moved at that point of time.

Jyoti Basu had proclaimed at the Villai gathering that if they came to power, they would rehabilitate all Bengali refugees in West Bengal. However, as soon as they came to power, he informed the refugee leaders that they could do something if they wanted to, in other words, take some initiative on their own, but the government would not be helping them in any conceivable way. The refugees came to Marichjhapi. There were major problems with proper water supply. Subrata Chatterjee, from the Nikhilbanga Nagarik Samiti, gifted the first water pumping machine. The Gosaba Police Station received the next two pumping machines. The Officer in Charge of the police station said that there would be problems if they tried to make a declaration and handed the pumps over to them officially. He simply told them to get the pumps themselves. They were even helped with a few boats by the police station along with proper licenses to operate them. The licenses were delivered from the Parishad of Alipur district. They were recognized as the permanent inhabitants of Marichjhapi Island in the licenses. The greatest mystery is the fact that all the people settled at Marichjhapi were forcefully evicted on 16th May 1979, but the Metropolitan Magistrate in Kolkata had issued an official proclamation to the refugees of Netaji Nagar and Marichjhapi stating that they were its permanent residents on 18th June 1979!

Even the Bengali chauvinist leader Ram Chatterjee was put to use. Many may think that Ram Chatterjee, being a Bengali refugee sympathizer, did all the work by himself. Ram Chatterjee had informed Sukhranjan Sengupta, a journalist, that he does not do anything without the permission or approval of Jyoti Basu. The refugees had great love and admiration for Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose – the great Nationalist leader. They had even named Marichjhapi as 'Netajinagar'. Ashok Ghosh of Forward Bloc was aware of this; he eventually started sympathizing with the refugees. The refugees of Marichjhapi were erstwhile denizens of Jessore and Khulna. The people living in Kumirmari were also predominantly inhabitants of Khulna. They belonged to the class of Namashudras. Moreover, the entire island along with Kumirmari was greatly influenced by the RSP. The refugees did not become members of any political party. Amalendu Bhattacharya, the Secretary of 'Amra Bangali', was in regular touch with the refugees. On the other hand, Nikhilbanga Nagarik Samiti was primarily concerned

with thinking of various ways through which they could assist the residents of Marichjhapi. On 13th April 1979, Nikhilbanga Nagarik Samiti organized a mass meeting at Sraddhananda Park in order to throw light upon the unbearable living conditions of the people at Marichjhapi at 5 in the evening. Refugees residing in West Bengal, especially those who had come from Dandakaranya, extended their hands in friendship to those who had vouched for their permanent settlement at Marichjhapi. They did not want to become official supporters of any political party. It should also be kept in mind that they were completely inept when it came to implementing political strategies like the shrewd political leaders. Satish Mondal, the leader, did not know how to read or write. He had learned to sign his name from Pabitra Biswas – the youth leader. Nevertheless, he had great capacity as the leader of an organization. Raiharan Barei, Rangalal Goldar and Debabrata Biswas were literate.

Jyoti Basu realized that he was not in an advantageous position when it became clear to him that the refugees would never become a part of his political party; moreover, he was upset with the fact that the leadership of the refugees might probably be taken up by another organization. Meanwhile, the Muslim legislators within the Left Front had already started to oppose any plans of refugee rehabilitation with the statement that Namashudras were “illiterate” and “fierce haters of Muslims”. Jyoti Basu did not subscribe to Saibal Gupta’s denunciation: “Why are they coming here?” Instead of associating himself with such controversies, Jyoti Basu cleverly tried to find ways to oppose the influx of refugees. He turned a blind eye to all considerations of humanity and human rights and embarked on a mission to alienate the refugees from their brothers in Bengal. In order to achieve the desired effect, he did not shrink away from falsifying facts and using them through hateful propagandas. He used so many ploys to garner people’s support for his decision that it is impossible to count them all! ‘They are getting financial help from other countries, Marichjhapi has been transformed into an ammunition factory, the established rules and regulations governing forests are being broken every day, it is a ploy to alienate India, they are running a parallel government.’ Jyoti Basu had pursued his higher studies in England and he implemented the doctrine of ‘divide and rule’ that had been introduced to our nation by the Britishers. He prepared for a multipronged attack by engaging the police to commit as many atrocious acts as they could on the refugees. He sent his ministers and secretary to the place. At the same time, he held various conventions at places such as Taki and Mollakhali and said, “If we let people settle at Marichjhapi then we will be endangering the very existence of other islands.” He employed such subtleties and weaned off the support that people residing in other islands had for the refugees at Marichjhapi. On the other hand, Jyoti Basu berated Ram Chatterjee and he was so scared that he had no option other than degenerating into a mere political pimp. He secretly escorted Aurobindo Mistry – refugee leader – to Writer’s. Jyoti Basu’s strategies to make the refugee leadership implode through such tactics thus become

clear. He had even tried to create major misunderstandings among Rangalal Goldar, Radhikaranjan Biswas, Debabrata Biswas, Raiharan Barei, Pabitra Biswas and Satish Mondal. Jyoti Basu had maligned Satish Mondal in the State Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) as well. Incarcerating the leader of the opposition Kashikanta Maitra, trying to create a sort of information black hole at Marichjhapi by refusing entry to journalists and later throttling the news media houses whenever they tried to publish authentic news on Marichjhapi or restricting entry to human rights activists were components of his well thought out plan of evicting the refugees. The president of 'Citizens for Democracy' was Jayprakash Narayan and the Secretary for the group was Justice V. M. Tarakunde. Niranjana Haldar, a journalist, requested Justice Tarakunde on behalf of Amnesty International to visit Marichjhapi. As soon as Jyoti Basu came to know of this he wrote him a letter saying that the refugees are breaking the law and destroying the forest. He did not stop at that. Jyoti Basu left the city and went over to Delhi to visit Justice Tarakunde at his place. Arun Shourie was then working for Indian Express. He never published any article on Marichjhapi in his newspaper. Arun Shourie took sides with Jyoti Basu and assisted him in trying to convince Justice Tarakunde. Inevitably, M V Tarakunde suspended his visit to Marichjhapi. He implemented his schemes with great cunning in order to throw the refugees out of the island once and for all. He laid siege to the residents of Marichjhapi with his police force and party cadres.

Santosh Sarkar suffered a bullet wound from the police on 31st January 1979; he subsequently lost one of his legs in the firing. I met him by chance. At that point of time 'Jalangiir Nadibhangan' was being edited. The video had been edited by Juhurul Naskar, he was aware of the fact that people were still researching on every thing that had chanced at Marichjhapi. One day he told us that he knew of a man who had survived the police firing in Marichjhapi, he lives at Ghutiari Sharif. I was waiting for the man, after gathering the necessary information, at a station along with Juhurul. He arrived. Santosh Sarkar took us to the very last village of that path. I had gone there before but never heard of this man back then. The Left Front government had imposed Section 144 on 24th January 1979. They tried to kill the refugees simply by keeping them hungry and cutting off all possible ways whereby they could gather something to eat. They had blocked all avenues that allowed food and fresh water to reach the refugees on the island. It should be mentioned that all edible resources were brought in from Kumirmari. 40 people were killed by the State on 31st January 1979 when they had traveled to Kumirmari Island in order to get hold of something to eat. Santosh was a part of that group of people who were killed mercilessly. The police shot him in the leg and he lost it forever. The law keepers did not stop at that; they locked him up in the prison. How could they let a criminal like Santosh go away so easily! Santosh Sarkar currently runs an NGO. It works to empower poor women and make them self-dependent.

Nakul Mullick had interviewed Satish Mondal, Aurobindo Mistry and Radhikaranjan Biswas in an audiotape just a few days after the refugees were thrown out of Marichjhapi. Prashanta Haldar was a member of the Communist party from Jessore in undivided India. He has been a lifelong believer in the Communist ideal. He settled in Taki after the partition of India. He had become the Secretary of the launch union. Prashanta Haldar was the elder brother of Niranjana Haldar, the journalist. Niranjana Haldar had helped us get in touch with his younger brother. He had played a special role in the Marichjhapi incident.

A majority of the upper middle class from East Bengal migrated to India after the partition of India. Subsequently, people hailing from the business class joined them. There was a massive exodus of people from Khulna in 1949 and from Barishal and Dhaka 8th February 1950 right after communal riots tore through those cities. The total number of people might have numbered close to a hundred thousand. As a result, the Nehru–Liyakat agreement was signed on 8th April 1950. Right after the introduction of passport and visa services in 1952, two hundred thousand refugees arrived in India, shortly afterwards every month saw close to the arrival of ten thousand people in our country as refugees. At around the time of Bhasha Andolon (the day that later came to be known as International Mother Language Day) about thirty thousand refugees came from East Bengal and took shelter in our country every month. After 1956, a form of border crossing required a permit. On 26th December 1963, a massive riot broke out all over East Pakistan around the theft of loose hair from Srinagar Hazratbal Masjid. A large number of Hindus, especially those belonging to the working class took shelter in India at that point of time. The issue attracted a lot of attention and the Home Minister of the central government, Gulzarilal Nanda, sat in a meeting with Finance Minister Krishnamachari, Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna and leaders of every political party in West Bengal. There were no rehabilitation camps for the refugees who came to West Bengal on 1964. They were given chits of paper from the receiving center and were hurled on to trains bound for Dandakaranya straight away. They were the ones who were identified as the excess burden for the government. Unfortunately, they were simply classified as burden or useless trouble; they were unable to ever achieve the status of human beings for the government. This was one of the primary reasons that contributed to the deplorable living conditions that they were subjected to in many of the camps. Some of them were worse off than criminals living in prisons! They were offered freedom from the horrendous camps after 8–10 years and then, almost immediately, thrown into Dandakaranya.

I have tried a lot, but I have been unable to get any leads based in Dandakaranya. Malkangiri in Odisha is one of the main spots in Dandakaranya from where countless refugees sought shelter at Marichjhapi. Try as I might, through all the leads that I have at my disposal, I am unable to establish any sort of contact with anyone from that place. Then one day, all of a sudden, I received a phone call from Jagadishchandra Mondal. Gobinda Haldar had read his

book and sent him a letter along with his personal contact number. Gobinda Haldar was living in Malkangiri at Malkangiri MV 79 (village no. 79) back then. I still remember that it was 15th December 2006. I called up Gobinda Haldar without wasting any more time and told him about my intentions. He informed me that he would send me the names and contact numbers of the people who, he considered, would be able to help me with my work. On 24th December 2006 he sent me the names he had promised; there were five people mentioned in his list, and he had also sent me their phone numbers. One among them lived in West Bengal and frequently visited Dandakaranya. He looked after the printing of the books published from Malkangiri. His name was Parimal Baidya; I gave him a call. He came on the 25th of December 2006. I followed his advice and left for Malkangiri on Januray 2007. Meanwhile, I had also been able to establish contact over the telephone with the four other people mentioned in the list. I did not have any problems after reaching Malkangiri. Early in the morning, the very next day after reaching Malkangiri, I went out to take a closer look at the villages. I was able to reach village number 82 on the first day. The total distance was a hundred kilometers. Sunil Biswas, Ashok Mali and a few other men were in the car with me. Sunilda was the man who took care of the essential. Sunil Biswas works at the labor office in the district of Malkangiri. He was striving to make Bengali, at least, an optional subject in the primary sections of the schools in Odisha. I noticed that none of the students in Malkangiri were able to read or write in Bengali. The medium of communication and learning was Odiya. Despite being Bengalis, they have to endorse Odiya as their mother tongue.

Kalimela is 40 kilometers away from the Malkangiri headquarters. I had already been able to establish contact with Subhash Chandra Tarafdar who was present there. He had taken the responsibility of introducing me to the people of the village who had been tortured at Marichjhapi. I took interviews of the other people after I had completed interviewing Subhash da. I went over to the ashram of Poteru Harichand–Guruchand after a couple of days. It is about 10 kilometers from Kalimela. It was surprising to observe that the roads were still not developed enough to be put into use back then. The villages situated near the road were placed at a distance of 20 or 25 kilometers. Initially, if anyone wanted to visit the bazar of Kalimela, he would have to walk the entire stretch on foot. Moreover, the visitors could not return to their homes on the same day; they would have to wait for the next morning to return to their villages. The roads were made of stone and there are hills on both sides of the road. We can find the village in the lap of those hills.

Poteru is the only river that flows through Malkangiri. The government had compelled the refugees to expect great things by promising them great initiatives on the Poteru. The ashram is right beside the river; it has a beautiful ambience. One of the main members of the ashram is Bijoychandra Pari. He is more than six feet tall, has an upright physique and is more than 60 years of age. Bijoybabu speaks in Odiya; he works as a contractor at Malkangiri. After having

witnessed the deplorable conditions of the refugees, he was attracted by the Matua community and became a part of Harichand's ashram. We lived in the ashram under his hospitality for quite a few days. It was here that we met the Head Master of Netaji Nagar Bidyapith in Marichjhapi, Nirmalendu Dhali. Apart from interviewing him, I had also interviewed Rabindranath Biswas. The medium of transport was very poor. There is really no option of reaching anywhere without a bicycle. I could not find a spare bicycle for myself. Besides, it is really tough to travel in such conditions with a camera, other accessories and three big bags. Nirmalda, the schoolteacher, lived seven kilometers away from the ashram. He had come on his cycle. I visited his home when I went to Dandakaranya for the second time.

Bijaychandra Pari uses a Maruti van. He was supposed to return by nine in the night from Kalimela. We had to leave the ashram by the next morning. We got a call at half past nine and learnt that there were trees and a few posters lying around. Do the people over here know what it meant? A bandh (strike) had been declared the very next day, that was 26 January, by the Maoists. Bijoybabu was unable to reach us that night. He had turned back and returned to Kalimela.

I met a few locals during my stay at the ashram. I asked them once: Are Maoists present here? They told me that Maoists were known as Jungle Party in that area. They also said, "If you told us beforehand, we could have arranged a meeting for you with the Maoists." They visited the Maoists every week. A general meeting is held which is attended by all of them; six to seven kilometers inland from the village, right beside a hill. They also told me that though there are a few Bengalis among the Maoists, the majority of them are indigenous people (adivasis). The Poteru Police Station is situated on the opposite side of the ashram, on the other bank of the river. The Maoists had twice laid siege to this police station, looted it and burned it to the ground. They still visit the place sometimes; they exchange their old weapons for the new ones found at the police station. The locals told me all of it.

I would have to return to Malkangiri by 26th January 2007, and then make my way to Umarnkot. I also needed to reach Raipur after visiting Dantewada and Bastar.

It was early in the morning and I was getting ready. All of a sudden, I noticed a bulletproof armored car belonging to the army on the road. I moved on with my plan of the day. While we were waiting with our luggage at the Poteru bus stand, I learnt that the Maoists had blown the armored vehicle to bits. It meant that there would be no transport for the rest of the day. A very few buses plied on the road in that area. Their utmost limit was Jepur. The road to Umarnkot started from Jepur. The Koraput headquarter was 30 kilometers away.

There was not much work throughout the whole day. It did not feel as if it was winter. We had to keep the fan switched on for as long as we were in the room. The only true touch of cold could be felt just a little bit deep into the night. One can see a large stretch of the Poteru river from the ashram. The road is also visible from the same place. There was a thin khaki clad

policeman walking to and fro with a long stick in his hand. One of the locals told me that the man was the Officer in Charge of the police station. The evening still had a few hours left to roll into the night. I went up to him and introduced myself in an effort to learn more about the condition. I asked, "How can you roam around without any weapons even after such an explosion chanced a few meters from this place?" The OC replied, "I don't have a mother nor have I married. If I have to die, I will die... but I will wound my attackers as well." I got to know about many more incidents from the locals. They told me that the Maoists had burnt down the house of the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly). The house stands as a testimony to its own destruction at present. The MLA lives in the city at present.

I got a bus the next morning. It took us two and a half hours to cover a distance of 40 kilometers. After reaching the headquarter at Malkangiri, we came to know that the police had stopped all routes to Chattisgarh. Inevitably, we had to cancel our plans of going to Umarkot and Bastar.

Whatever little we had been able to experience in our Dandakaranya chapter was at Malkangiri. It was from this very place that 90% of the people had sought refuge at Marichjhapi. There is not a single village that can boast of the fact that it has not lost a considerable number of its denizens during its shift to the Sunderbans. Out of the 217 villages recorded as existing in Malkangiri, each has on an average 50 families living in it. I have seen them breaking down while speaking about their memories. They keep on cursing Jyoti Basu and the Left Front government.

There were many families who had traveled from Betul in Madhya Pradesh and Mana in Chattisgarh. If anyone wants to conduct a research on the missing persons then he/she can easily do the same. I would say that it is possible to find them out. 12% of the refugees did not return to Malkangiri. More than a hundred thousand refugees had set off for Marichjhapi. And even after 27 or 28 years, while most of them have been able to gain a semblance of self-dependence through the excruciating labor that they have to undertake daily, almost 30% of the people spend their days on a half-empty, if not an empty, stomach.

Dandakaranya is composed of quite a few provinces. The distance between any two provinces can turn out to be hundreds of kilometers. It is impossible to think of the prevalence of Bengali culture, traditions and medium of education in these parts. All of it was done on purpose. I have already stated that the main objective was to wipe out Bengali ethnicity. The present generation cannot even speak proper Bengali in their homes. Yet they are adept at writing, speaking and reading in Hindi, Marathi, Telugu and Odia in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa respectively. It will take just another generation for them to forget Bengali completely.

I have always come across the same explanation for the incidents that took place all those years back while interviewing the people who had visited Marichjhapi – a ruthless and

coordinated attack by goons and the police. A selected few interviews have been proffered to the readers for their perusal.

Amiyakumar Samanta was the Police Super for both the 24 parganas in West Bengal. Many people were unaware of the fact that it was Amiya Samanta, himself, who led the anti-refugee action at Marichjhapi from the front. They came to know of it when it was shown in the documentary on television. He contributed in the act of his identification with the deed by writing an exhaustive essay in a collection at 'The Statesman Festival 2009' and Marichjhapi. However, there is no reason to think that everyone was innocent of his role in the massacre. He had been able to get his name etched in the good books of Siddhartha Shankar Ray by dint of being a torturous policeman. A famous journalist had once told me that when Jyoti Basu was worried with Marichjhapi, it was Siddhartha Shankar Ray who had come to his aid and advised him to entrust Amiya Samanta with the task of exterminating the refugees.

And it is not just with the refugees at Marichjhapi; Siddhartha Shankar Ray had also guided Amiya Samanta when it came to combating the Naxalites in Birbhum – in other words, the Congress leader had asked the police officer to slaughter the young men. As a result, a large section of the youth between the ages of 14 and 19 were murdered in cold blood within 20 days. It did not take long for the vice-chancellor in Shantiniketan to get whiff of what was about to happen. He had rushed to Indira Gandhi in an effort to put an end to the vile bloodshed even before it started. He was unable to do so.

Bharatjyoti Raichowdhury had to face the brunt of Amiya Samanta's fury; it must be mentioned that Bharatjyoti was the son of the freedom fighter who was a suspect in the Birbhum Conspiracy Case and a prisoner at the Cellular Jail in Andaman. Let me quote an extract from Bharatjyoti's book "Saatchollish thekey Shottor, Aagey ebong Porey" (a literal translation of the name would be: From 47 to 70, Before and After).

"...Amiya Samanta came from Lord Sinha. Special Superintendent, Special Branch. It might have been the 2nd or 3rd day in December 1973. I was brought before Samanta. There was not just that one Samanta, there were many. One Samanta had a stick in his hand while the others had pistols holstered near their waist; their hands were empty. I was handcuffed and a rope dangled around my waist. Mr. Samanta started his questioning. This was the first time that a police officer actually asked me a few questions. The funny part, in the whole ordeal, was that he was answering those questions himself. He held a small stick in one of his hands. He was occasionally beating me with that stick while asking questions. Yet, he did not stop for me and went on answering the questions himself. Policemen and IB (Intelligence Bureau) personnel surrounded us on all sides. It was something like this:

"Did you know Ashok Senapati?"

"It's already evident from my letters that I knew him." I also knew that the police had murdered him on 22nd November 1971 near the Nikda dam in Laujor village of Rajnagar

Police Station. Samanta was the Superintendent of Police at Birbhum back then. Raba Dutta Senapati's wife had been arrested from Parsiya village just half an hour earlier. He asked the second question before I could speak,

“Do you know where he is now?”

He answered the question before I could,

“We have murdered him.” His answer was complemented by two consecutive blows of the lathi (stick) he held in his hand. He was behaving like the ringleader of some circus. I should mention that he was intentionally not swinging the lathi with all the strength he had in his arms. It seemed as if hitting me hard and wounding me were not his main concerns, rather it was the manner in which he proceeded to hit me that was important. He was giving his subordinates free reign to do with me as they pleased by hitting me with those blows. Next question,

“Do you know Siddharta Mitra?”

As soon as I said “Yes” he questioned me (on 18th October 1971 the police released Sidhu from prison, then as he had moved away from the jail premises, he was picked up again by police officials and killed. Samanta was the SP in Birbhum),

“Do you know where he is now?”

I replied, “You all have killed him.” He roared, “Yes.” And followed it up with two blows of the lathi.

There are numerous such incidents that can be credited to Amiya Samanta.

In the end he is supposed to have told Bharatjyoti Raichowdhury, “You are a born terrorist.” One of the primary reasons behind making such a statement is the fact that Bharatjyoti's father Pradyot Raichowdhury was a freedom fighter. Amiya Samanta had proved with his own words that despite being an IPS officer in post-independence India, he was nothing more than a worthy heir to the barbaric British officers.

I should further add that I really would not have chosen to write at length about this Amiya Samanta had it not been for his efforts to emerge as a human rights activist during the Singur and Nandigram upheaval; it was there that he tried to absolve himself and Jyoti Basu's left front government from the incidents that took place at Marichjhapi.

The West Bengal Police had established a statue of Shahid Matangini Hazra right beside Tamluk Police Station. Sidhartha Shankar Ray had inaugurated the statue on 17th December 1975. The base of the statue was adorned with a shloka from the Bhagavad Gita: “Yatha Niyuktoishmi Tatha Karomi.” The name of Ranajit Gupta – a contemporary high-ranking police officer – has been etched just below these lines from Sanskrit. I received the news from Shukhranjan Sengupta, a journalist. Amiya Samanta could have simply blabbered those lines from the Gita and relieved himself from all the sins that he had committed. He did not do that. Amiya Samanta has, on the contrary, picked up the pen and weaved a humongous web of lies

in the name of opposing the police torture perpetrated at Nandigram. He has even gone to the extent of taking up the mic and making demonstrations at public venues. He has become a great worshipper of humanity. Secretly, he tried to put forth the theory that Jyoti Basu's police forces were progressive while Buddhadeb's police forces are reactionary. Strangely, he has not spoken a single word about police officers such as CI Gangadhar Bhattacharya – Gangadhar was his subordinate during the Marichjhapi operation; in fact this policeman was the subordinate in all the genocides that had been perpetrated during the Jyoti Basu regime. During the massacre at Marichjhapi, he was responsible for capsizing the boats of the refugees and killing them by drowning. Subsequently, this notorious police officer was killed at Tiljala. Amiya Samanta has also refrained from writing or mentioning anything about the tortures meted out to the people during the Emergency – under the regime of Sidhartha Shankar Ray. Ray had been unable to reward him amply for his murderous services, however, he had awarded Amiya Samanta with a certificate. It was with the help of this certificate that Jyoti Basu recognized him and sent him to Marichjhapi to exterminate the refugees. Jyoti Basu also helped Amiya Samanta with his promotion. Perhaps, he was under the impression that he would be rewarded with much more for his services, but Buddhadeb Bhattacharya never let that happen. This is, probably, one of the primary reasons that explain his extreme anger for Buddhadeb's police forces.

Through Amiya Samanta's attacks on Ross Mallik's research work, he has proved that the truth can only be known and spoken of through government documents and the speeches made by the administrators. He has not considered the words of the opposition worth listening to. Moreover, he has tried to trivialize the entire story of the violent attack on villagers. He has written, "It is true that the administration had created some pressure on the refugees to leave, but they were never forced upon boats nor were they attacked with lathis and guns."

It should be noted that Amiya Samanta has never gone on record to mention the exact instances of 'pressure' created by the government on the refugees. He wrote,

"They made a living out of illegally cutting down the forest, fishing in the nearby waters and working as wage laborers in the neighboring islands. When the police took action and tried to stop these activities, the volunteer teams and certain outsiders attacked the police camp at Kumirmari. Two adivasi women were shot dead when the police opened fire at Kumirmari. However, none of the outsiders settled at Marichjhapi came to any harm."

It should be noted that Amiya Samanta has designated activities such as "fishing" and "working as a wage laborer in neighboring islands" illegal activities. He also said that the "volunteer teams" and "outsiders" attacked a police camp at Kumirmari, but why did he not say anything regarding what kind of weapons the refugees were using against the armed policemen? How did the two locals die when the police opened fire? Are we to presume that the locals were helping them in that case? The bullets were fired on the 31st of January 1979.

All potential routes to transport food and drinking water from neighboring islands had been closed down with the help of Section 144 since 24 January 1979. Children and the aged living on Marichjhapi started dying owing to the crisis. Desperate to help the helpless, a handful of restless youngsters from Marichjhapi tried to make their way to Kumirmari in search of food. They were promptly shot dead. Meni Munda, an adivasi woman, was killed in the firing; her corpse was also piled up in the big boat along with the others. Since she was a local in the area, the police had been unable to get rid of her body. The people expressed their grave discontent against the police by means of a public demonstration. In an effort to hush up all kinds of protest and dissenting voices, a sum of Rupees five thousand was given to the Kumirmari panchayat via the Block Development Officer so that it could be handed over to the family of Meni Munda. The panchayat bought Meni Munda's family piece of land with that money.

Amiya Samanta has mentioned the names of two adivasi locals. In truth, however, only one local had been killed that day – it was Meni Munda.

Amiya Samanta has gone on to write,

“The people who make up such stories have easily transgressed the lines of reality and probability. Since there has been no revolt, their motivated imaginations have started to run wild.”

It seems as if he has started to compose a history of revolt since “there has been no revolt”. Why did he not mention the fact that he had provided an affidavit to the Kolkata High Court in support of the government? Why did he hide the fact that he had seized motorboats filled with commuters in the Sunderbans – an act that is illegal on both national and international waters? Why does he not support the idea of a fresh and neutral investigation into the factor of “motivated imaginations” running wild?

I only need to cite a few instances that would prove Amiya babu's expertise in weaving intricate web of lies.

Amiya babu writes,

“A CD on Marichjhapi has been released recently. It contains a portion of my interview on the subject. The entire interview has not been shown; the important and relevant sections of my interview have been omitted from the CD. I remember that this interview was taken sometime around the winter of 2006 or 2007.”

The interview was taken on 27 December 2006. The entire length of the interview was 42 minutes and 2 seconds. 88 people had been interviewed in all and the total video recording span out to 40 hours. The documentary was one hour long. Going by normal human logic, no one watches documentaries that are 40 hours in length, nor do the people associated with creating documentaries make them so long. Quite naturally, only selected portions were shown in the documentary. Does Amiya babu mean to say that his selected portions were not

important? He had accepted the fact that food was prevented from being transported to the island. What was his humanitarian excuse for killing people by preventing them from eating when they were hungry? Even criminals behind bars are entitled to food by law.

He has written,

“After that Niranjana babu told me that some people are scheduled to meet me for an interview on Marichjhapi. I accepted. As expected, some of them arrived with their accessories. They video taped the entire interview.”

Amiya babu has crafted the tale of the journalist Niranjana Halder. ‘Masoom’ had organized a seminar on ‘oppression’ at Rotary Sadan. The documentary maker of Marichjhapi was present in the seminar. It was there that he noticed Amiya babu was attending the event as well. Amiya babu had written down his landline number and cellphone number in the filmmaker’s diary. Later on, the filmmaker had visited Amiya babu without anyone else attending or helping him while taking the interview. The only person present apart from Amiya babu and the filmmaker was a driver. Niranjana babu had absolutely nothing to do with the entire episode. Moreover, Amiya babu has also written,

“The documentary that has been recently aired on television contains a small portion of the interview; majority of the documentary covers the interviews of the people who were supposedly exploited and oppressed. It should also be noted that animations and sound effects have been used to artificially include gunshots and moaning sounds in the documentary.”

He has gone on to write many more things. However, he seems to be perturbed that the filmmaker made use of animations in his documentary. The police can easily create and work on sketches of criminals made with the help of eyewitnesses, but when it comes to Marichjhapi, the filmmaker cannot use the accounts narrated by a witness to create a documentary film. What kind of logic supports this absurd demand?

How many journalists did Amiya babu and his police permit to enter Marichjhapi? Why did the journalists have to go into hiding at Marichjhapi? Why did the journalists Jyotirmoy Dutta, Dilip Chakraborty, Suranjan Sengupta and Shashi Mukherjee have to hide themselves for the fear of being arrested? If Amiya babu’s operation had been so simple and innocent then why did the journalists have to hide in fear?

Why did Jyoti Basu have to hurry to Justice V. Tarakunde’s place to stop his organization ‘Citizens for Democracy’ from investigating into the happening at Marichjhapi? Why did the police waste so much time of the investigating team appointed by the parliament by barring their passage on the riverways?

In an effort to save Jyoti Basu and the Left Front, Amiya Samanta has ended up entangled in the web of his own lies. He had said that the refugees smuggled rice out of the country into Bangladesh. He wrote, “Tobacco and biris were procured from Bangladesh. Biri from Khulna and Jessore are famous.” Unfortunately for him, Amiya babu has confused all the facts while

composing his great fiction. It is a fact that one cannot find biris made of leaves in Bangladesh. Biris are rolled in paper in our neighboring country. Bangladesh has a high demand of biris made in West Bengal. This can be regarded as one of the main reasons that prompt biri smugglers to gather in Murshidabad.

He has associated the topic of the gunfire on 31 January 1979 with a completely irrelevant issue. Amiya babu has been totally silent about the Calcutta High Court ruling against the food ban that had been imposed. Jyoti Basu ordered “throw him out” when it came to stopping Prafulla Sen from reaching Marichjhapi. Why did Kashikanta Maitra, the opposition leader, have to be arrested? If the refugees left by their own volition, why did Amiya babu have to attend those countless meeting at Writer’s?

It is essential to focus upon the testimonies given by the police, witnesses and the ones affected in order to arrive at the truth. Moreover, it is also important that all these testimonies are substantiated with the help of photographs and forensic reports. Amiya Samanta has simply made use of the government’s testimonial whenever it was necessary; a testimonial he had willingly helped to craft for the government.

Both ICS Saibal Gupta and IPS Amiyakumar Samanta were administrators. Saibal Gupta had always sided with humanity. He never lost his power of judgment when it came to ascertaining what was right and what was wrong. In fact, he never compromised with injustice. His prompt resignation from the Unnayan Parshad (Development Board) of Dandakaranya within ten months proved that he had not been transformed into a highly paid slave of the State. He had not forgiven the State’s atrocities on the innocents of Marichjhapi. Amiya Samanta had even gone to the despicable extent of attacking Ross Mallick’s works on the basis of his paternal lineage. On the other hand, he exercised complete silence in the case of Saibal Gupta’s writings on the same issue. Saibal Gupta’s compositions are very famous. Besides being published in national dailies, it had also been published by Anandabazar. It is true that Saibal Gupta’s descriptions are theoretical in nature, but it should be kept in mind that he was an adept administrator as well. Amiya babu was clever enough to restrain himself from commenting anything on Mr. Gupta’s works; he knew that it would compound matters for him further if he tried to lock horns with him.

History will not let Marichjhapi die an insignificant death in the memory of mankind. And this has scared Amiya babu. All his efforts to construct fictionalized versions of the genocide are attempts to save himself from the horrendous future that awaits him.

The oppressors always find it easy to oppress and exploit the masses as long as they linger in the darkness of illiteracy and lack of education. Governments all over the globe perpetrate the crime of trying to distance its masses from the kind of education that helps them have a practical outlook as much as possible. It is understandable that the governments do not want their people to be able to explain the basic facts by themselves. There was a time when the

term “janagan” (masses) was used to refer to the people who supported holistic development of a nation. The political parties could have gone to any length to please this “janagan”. However, at present, the term “janagan” has become obsolete. The political parties have started using the term “manush” (human/individual). It should be noted that Tata, Birla, Jindal, Salem and Ambani are also “manush”. On the other hand, farmers, workers and laborers can also be categorized as “manush”. If they are placed in the same category, there can be no distinction when it comes to the factor of development. Recently, I have come across certain articles based on the tigers of Sunderbans; they seem to focus on facts that have been quoted as “lies” and “theories”. One of the research papers has brought to light the fact that “the tigers have become more aggressive and have also started preying on humans after the Marichjhapi incident”. The sole reason behind the attacks on these researches is to stop any effort at unraveling the incidents that took place at Marichjhapi.

Jim Corbett was a famous hunter and researcher. He has carried out his researches in countries that abound in tigers – Kenya, Nigeria and a host of other places. He had been a resident of India for 27 years. Besides having a national park named after him – Jim Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand – our country has a vast array of organizations that have been formed in his name. He has penned six books in all. D.C. Kala had written the famous *Jim Corbett of Kumaon*, in 1979, based on the man himself. Jim once wrote, “Tigers are ‘not man-eaters’. Situations and surroundings turn them into ‘man-eaters’. The Sunderbans have the largest population of tigers in the entire world. Aged tigers hunt on human beings only when they are incapable of hunting for food elsewhere.”

I had visited Nafargunj via Jharkhali in the Sunderbans during the 70s. The inhabitants of Nafargunj had been facing a lot of problems due to the tigers at that point of time. Three boatmen and seven other acquaintances accompanied me. We were on a simple wooden boat that required oars to move ahead. I was able to catch a glimpse of the “Bidhoba Palli” (Community of Widows) as soon as we entered Khari from the river Matla. However, there is no such place with the name “Bidhoba Palli”. The name Bidhoba Palli (Community of Widows) stuck as almost all of the male occupants of the village had succumbed to tiger attacks. I noticed that there were a lot of bamboo poles that stuck into the soil, but the houses behind them were empty. There was no trace of human life in most of them. It was 1984 when I came to know that tigers were frequently attacking Dayapur, Jamespur and Lahirpur. I went to one of those places along with Animesh Sinha. A man whose wife had died in a tiger attack just five days back hosted us. I noticed that there were three little girls in the hose – ten years old, six years old and three years old. They had had their heads shaven clean (it is a prevalent custom in Hinduism to become bald whenever a close relative passes away); I understood that they had taken part in the rituals meant for bringing peace to the deceased. Those three little

girls told their father, “Do not go to catch fish anymore.” We were sitting in front them all the while. The man replied, “What are we going to eat if I don’t catch some fish?”

Hundreds of men, women and children plunge into the river to get hold of some carp. The tigers lie waiting in the dense bushes planted by the Forest Department as part of their project. And it was evening when the tiger pounced on the woman. His husband was right beside her. He quickly grabbed the fishnet and swung its barbs towards the animal. The tiger got hit and sprang away to safety. He boarded a rickshaw and tried to hurry his wife to the nearest doctor. Unfortunately, he was unable to reach there on time. We discussed about these problems with the villagers and, finally, ended up with the following points:

1. The population of tigers has increased exponentially.
2. The tigers do not have adequate food at their disposal. It is true that the piggery at Sojnekhali provides them with a couple of pigs regularly, but it is not enough to satiate the hunger of so many tigers.
3. It is almost impossible for tigers to hunt deers as they are way more agile.
4. Dogs are the most favorite pick of tigers. Cows and calves come next.
5. If tigers love hunting humans then there could have been no human habitation left in the Sunderbans.
6. Three parts of Sunderbans lie within Bangladesh. They are wild animals; they couldn’t care less about man-made borders. Tigers from both the nations freely roam in the Sunderbans.
7. The pangs of hunger drive many to venture deep into the forest to collect honey or wood without the permission of the Forest Department. Many become victims of tigers for trespassing into the dominions of the beast. In a bizarre twist of fate, the family members of the victim cannot cry their hearts out in pain for fear of being recognized by the forest officials. However, if they are caught while returning from one of their honey collection expeditions, they have to pay half of whatever they have been able to gather as bribe.
8. The Forest Department does not bother to feed the tigers daily. However, in a pathetic effort to ensure that the tigers do not set foot upon human habitation, they have bordered the riverside with fences and wires that discharge 12 volts of current.

Tigers try to get hold of humans only when they are left on an empty or partially empty stomach. It is a fact that almost all of us are taught from childhood that tigers are man-eaters – that they prey on human beings. We, inevitably, end up believing in all these stories. It is wrong! In fact, the sustained effort to hammer such false notions into the human psyche is nothing short of a crime. This is similar to the wrong concepts that people harbor regarding snakes. It should be kept in mind that everything that has been taught so far through stories, folklores, ancient epics and sagas does not necessarily have to be true. Those age-old books were not true when they told us, “The Sun moves round the Earth.” The truth was, “The Earth moves round the Sun.” How much time did it take to establish this simple fact? Goebbels was

not successful here as far as his theory is concerned. Experience based reality is the factor that has helped establish the truth. When it comes to Marichjhapi, it must be said that the tigers dwelling in the forests therein has tasted too much human blood – something that was quite unfamiliar to them until a few years back. The animals had been hungry for a long time and the availability of humans made them hunt for the helpless food gatherers in the forest. Furthermore, this statement will corroborate the fact that tiger attacks on human habitations had increased post 1979. The commoners can easily understand these facts; there is no need to qualify these with complex theories and lies. The experiences of the survivors are enough to bring the world in front of the truth.

The Rehabilitation Minister of the Left Front government – Radhika Banerjee – had declared that the government would not recognize any refugee colony after 1976. On the other hand, refugee leader Dr. Sanmathnath Ghosh had told us in an interview that he had established 11 refugee colonies in North 24 Parganas after 1979 and each of them has received government recognition. Shockingly, none of the refugees from Marichjhapi have been able to secure such a safe life in the state. There are nearly 3,000 survivors who are trying their best to keep themselves alive in dilapidated structures that run along the train lines in West Bengal. Their daily struggle to stay alive is terrifying to say the least.

The Marichjhapi refugees who live in West Bengal have formed the ‘Marichjhapi Sangram Samiti’. They have declared 31st January as ‘Marichjhapi Diwas’ (Marichjhapi Day). They organized an event in Kolkata on that day in 2010. Their main objective was to bring every man, who had gone under hiding for fear of being intercepted by the Left Front police, on a platform so that they could meet each other and spend some time in remembrance of their fallen friend. They had not travelled all the way from Malkangiri in order to inaugurate a book at the Kolkata Book Fair. They were only concerned with telling the people of Kolkata about the unthinkable tortures that they had had to endure in the past. There were many who had promised to provide the organizers with all kinds of possible help for the event. However, there were a few who refrained from extending their helping hands in the end; they did not even turn up for the program. They managed to come up with certain technical excuses. There are still some people who realize that all official processes, laws and regulations exist only for the benefit of mankind and not the other way round. These people came forward during such crisis and it was for them that friends and companions of the massacre were able to meet each other after 30 long years. A meeting that left almost all of them teary eyed, they had said.

“We have not been able to find a steady source of food to satisfy our hunger for all these years; do you think that you can at least consider loving people like us just a little bit? Bengalis will completely cease to exist a few years from now. There will be no trace left of their traditions, cultures and existence.”

I got a call from Debabrata Biswas midway through my writing. Debabrata Biswas had registered a case against the Left Front government's drive to ban transport of food into the island. He used to help journalists reach Marichjhapi from Kolkata. Whenever the children of refugees died, it was Debabrata who set their corpses adrift in the waters. I was told over the call that Debabrata Biswas' son, Rathin, aged 22, had committed suicide. It was 20 July 2010. Rathin was a very sensitive boy. I had had the opportunity to converse with him quite a few times. Rathin had been suffering from epilepsy. In order to cure him from the ailment, his father, a carpenter, had to travel to Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Asansol, and even Bhopal under the orders of a contractor. He had spent all his savings for his son's treatment. Rathin had called up his penniless father on 20 July and said, "Baba (father), they are demanding a lot of money for the treatment." Debabrata had replied, "I will go during the pujas, my son. I will be able to get hold of all that money by that time. Please try to endure the pain till then." Rathin relieved his father of all burdens on that same day.

How were the refugees of East Bengal living in the past, how are they now?

Subhashchandra Tarafdar

Subhashchandra Tarafdar is not a college-educated academic. He is not a literary researcher. His day starts within the confines of a motor garage with a hammer and welding machine in his hands. He can easily carry a conversation forward while working with his hammer. If he gets some time, he writes stories, poems, dramas, essays, and travelogues. He also takes pleasure in acting. He did not use a pen to write this essay – he simply took his hammer and bashed it on the temples of the sophisticated and civilized society we are living in.

The fight for the spoils of independence had begun even before the country was able to wrest independence completely from its oppressors. The tussle was mainly among the parties that wanted all the political power for themselves; the sanctity of independence was reduced to the preoccupation with all the benefits that it would bring. This prompted the big freedom that we were supposed to get to be divided into three parts. The concerned honchos got hold of their respective parts and fed off from the boodle while the refugees of East Bengal faced the consequences of the territorial divisions. Presently, these refugees have become nothing more than nomads, who roam all over India, uprooted from their native place. Their lives have been reduced to one of shame and infamy. A creed of power-hungry political leaders has shoved an entire race of helpless human beings into the bottomless pit of partition. Furthermore, they had the audacity to cruelly label them as ‘refugees’. Subsequently, these greedy leaders assumed their places upon the political throne and made sure that the power they held would be passed on to their successors seamlessly when they were no longer present. Since then, the throne has changed hands many times – their successors have held power in their absence – but the fate of the refugees have always remained the same; they have been relegated to the margins permanently.

The Bengalis of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) were caught in the midst of a predicament when Bengal was partitioned. Fearing for their lives, desperate to keep their self-respect intact, and determined to fight their way out of poverty, the Bengalis from East Bengal migrated to India. They chose India mainly because the country’s law stated that it would provide shelter to all refugees who belonged to minority groups and had borne the brunt of the partition. The law of the land also stated that the refugees would be conferred with appropriate respect and granted Indian citizenship. India promised its refugees a proper rehabilitation. These laws had prompted the large swathes of luckless people to leave their ancestral lands, their property and walk the road that opened into the great nation. The refugees disregarded the inclement weather conditions and set off towards India with their child clasped in one arm and the other arm balancing the heavy load on their heads. Since then, their fateful stories have remained etched in history as an unprecedented ruinous saga. There is no page in the history of

mankind, all over the world, that can match the atrocities faced by the refugees of East Bengal. Talking about those experiences and reflecting on them is a very painful process.

I remember how a woman, who had just recently become a mother, clasped her newborn tight against her breast and ran hard towards her companions. She was afraid that she might lose them after a while, so she ran as fast as she could. Alas, the little baby, unaware of the world around it, could not endure the harshness of the journey. It succumbed to death even before it could understand what life is. The mother, on the other hand, had no idea that the baby still clinging on to her nipples with its toothless gums was lifeless. The treacherous journey extorted every last bit of breath they had. At night, exhausted beyond sanity, they retired beside wild bushes or within a bamboo forest. The pangs of thirst and hunger coupled with the exhaustion of a long journey had numbed all of them. As the mother sat on the bare soil, trying to catch her breath, she looked at the tiny baby still clasped in her arms. It was then that she realized the baby's lifeless eyes were staring helplessly into her own. Her soul trembled at the sight! The densely clouded midnight skies of monsoon were rent apart with the piercing howls of the mother. No one in existence had the power to silence her as she screamed her soul out. There was nothing that her husband could do except try and be her silent companion; he had to bring her out of her misery. The father picked up his lifeless baby and discarded it somewhere in the bushes in the dark night.

There were countless young boys who were thrown into the predicament along with the grownups. It would, perhaps, be wrong to call them young as most of them had not even attained their youth. Though their little feet found it hard to hold their own weight throughout the torturous journey, yet they were burdened with huge sacks of luggage weighing close to twenty kilograms! Bent under the inhumane load put upon their little shoulder, they quickly felt the searing pain of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. However, it took them one look at the scarred and helpless faces of their parents to understand that they had been through a lot as well, and that it was not possible for them to provide their son with the basic facilities that life demands. No words were spoken after that; the little kids moved on with the weights on their shoulders while their eyes watered the scorched soil under their feet like monsoon clouds.

Despite not having the adequate strength to undertake and complete the journey for survival, the elders had started walking on the road for the benefit of their children's future. They had left their ancestral lands far behind and panted ahead towards a new country – trying to match their steps with the rest of the family. If only they knew about the cruel vicissitudes of fate! The old and beaten body of the father could no longer keep up with the rest of the family. The old man's life found its final conclusion before they could ever reach the new land. His son, numbed by all the adversities he had been subjected to, was unable to shed a single drop of tear at his father's demise. Moreover, there was no one willing to carry his frail old corpse to the crematorium for the last rites, not even the son. How could they? They would not survive

if they failed to reach their destination. There was no other choice – the old man’s corpse lay lifeless on the hard earth as his family raced towards an unknown address. I often wonder about the remorseless being that had penned down the lives of the refugees.

The forlorn masses reached the borders of India like that – some on foot while others through the river. Countless people were lost in the crowd of millions of refugees. A mother might have lost her precious children, a wife might have lost her beloved husband, a son and a daughter might have lost both of their parents. Relatives might have lost the ones they were closest to; many among them are still searching for the ones they lost but to no avail.

It is true that the government had arranged camps near the borders, but there was no place to stay within those designated camps nor did those places have any facility for a person to bathe or answer the calls of nature. The situation descended into total chaos and utter filth as the refugees were forced to relieve themselves exactly where they had to sit and eat. They were eventually compelled to hunt for small spaces beside railway lines or on the pavement; a thin polythene sheet hung over thin bamboo sticks became their home. These dilapidated structures would shelter them and their handful of belongings, tied in old and worn out pieces of cloth, until they are able to find someone who is able to help them out of the predicament. Their lives are characterized by the relentless strife to stay alive and the constant encounters with inhuman living conditions and death. They have to live in the midst of garbage heaps, surrounded by unthinkable stench and swarms of mosquitoes and flies. The refugees’ sufferings were tantamount to the anguishes inflicted in hell! Moreover, if a person could actually experience the pain of the refugee then he or she would surely find the flowery descriptions of hell in literature equivalent to some kind of a paradise.

It is impossible to express the horrors of their life on paper; and I am not even going to try something of that sort through the words I write.

The Government of India had decided to classify the landless people of East Bengal as refugees way back in 1970. They were slated to receive the right of entry to India and settling therein as well. The government had planned to relocate these refugees at transit camps set up in different places all across India. There was absolutely no one who ventured to verify whether the plan was being systematically implemented. In other words, a complete lack of order characterized this apparently systematic relocation program. Moreover, it will be hard to determine exactly how huge the final composition would turn out to be if someone really thinks of penning down the tales of sorrow – maybe it will end up being many times lengthier than an epic like Mahabharata. Regardless of all these limitations, something about the incidents should be written so that it is not completely lost from collective memory.

The largest transit camp for refugees from East Bengal in India was situated at Raipur district of Madhya Pradesh; it was known as ‘Mana Camp’. A number of other camps apart from Manar were placed in its vicinity, such as Kendri Camp, Manabhata Camp, Barda Camp,

Noyagaon Camp, and Kurud Camp. These camps were established in the midst of deserts that spanned out toward the horizon. The people from undivided Bengal were sons of the soft soil that gave birth to crops as precious as gold. Yet the government took hold of all the refugees from East Bengal and left them out in the middle of a burning desert where no plant dares grow.

The tents provided to the refugees were made out of thick cloth kept in place with wax. It was almost impossible for anyone to use bamboo sticks for the purpose as it could not be hammered into the tough floor of the soil – the presence of Muram mines was largely responsible for this. As a result, metal rods had to be planted in the soil to obtain a basic structure for the tents. There was one similarity between these tents and the lives of the refugees. The tents turned so hot when the sun was high up in the sky that it was impossible for anyone to use them even after sunset. Similarly, the light of joy and happiness had been snuffed out from the refugee's life ever since the country was divided, but their souls would forever burn in the pain and anguish of the partition.

There were only two seasons that wreaked havoc in the midst of this desert – summer and monsoons. Vultures circled the skies; there was no sign of any other bird. The underground water table could only be reached after digging four or five hundred feet into the soil for long hours with heavy machines. Even then the tube wells would require at least four or five strong and hefty men to pump out just three or four buckets of water. There was always about a hundred people waiting in queue at these tube wells throughout the entire day; and the queues had to be safeguarded at all times to prevent people from breaking it. Food was rationed and every adult was registered to receive 500 grams of boulder rice while the children were given 250 grams everyday. 57 paise was charged for every kilogram of rice. Every person was given Rs. 10 to buy rice and all other essentials. However, caution was taken by the authorities to ensure that no family got more than Rs. 78 no matter how big the family was. The city of Raipur had ample resources in its markets, but the refugees did not have the means to buy the food they needed to survive. As a result, they had to sustain themselves with stems of cauliflower, wild yam, and different plants that grew in the wilderness. The government did not provide us with fuel. There were a few businessmen who sold coal but it was way beyond our means. Most of us could not afford to buy from them. Such situations compelled each family to send out its members in search for dried wood or other fuels at the break of dawn with the bare minimum stuffed in their bellies. It was an excruciating task. The person had to walk for ten or fifteen kilometers before coming across an abandoned cluster of vegetation in the midst of the desert. He or she then had to tie all the dried twigs and sticks together into a heavy load and carry it all the way back to the camp. It is impossible to articulate the horrors of such a life. The glaring sun turned the sand beneath our feet to molten ore while the horizon seemed as if it were the bed of a blacksmith's smelting pot. The refugees did not have shoes;

many among them walked barefoot while others tried to cut out a crude slipper from rejected tyres. All of them grew big, painful blisters on their feet. Water was scarce and the unthinkable heat made the forager thirsty. That was not all, the desert played vile and vicious games with their minds as well. Many of them would often see a mirage in the middle of the desert and be lured by it. The searing pain of thirst within them would entice them to keep moving ahead, in the direction of the illusion. They would often keep telling themselves, “Is that not an unending source of crystal clear and cool water! I need to hold on to my senses for a few more minutes, just a few more minutes and this insurmountable thirst would be quenched within an instant.”

The person would keep walking with every last bit of strength left in his being and soon enough he would question his eyes, “How far? Tell me how far is that glistening pond from where I stand, my eyes?” Those helpless eyes would finally realize that they have been betrayed and abandoned in the middle of nowhere. The mirage had been luring it for a long time and it still was, but there was no way for the eyes to tell that the distance was decreasing. The great lie suffered by the eyes would prove too much for the frail man to bear and he would collapse on the burning desert sand. There is no book in the world that tells the tale of how countless refugees, sprawling on the hot desert sand, died of thirst and blood gushing out from their noses.

One day, in the afternoon, the screams of a young girl rent the air at the Baroda camp. The people of the camp rushed in terror to see what had happened. They saw a woman, holding the girl by the hand, giving her a sound thrashing. She kept repeating the same words, “Will you ever dare to steal again? Tell me! Why did you not steal away my soul you little thief!”

Everyone present at the scene rushed to the aid of the girl and tried to calm the woman’s anger. The people gathered around and asked her what the girl stole once she had been able to comport herself. The woman put one of her hands on her head and said, “I was able to get just one bucket of water after waiting in the queue since last night. There was no water anywhere... I could not even feed my kids for want of clean water! And this girl came up from nowhere and drank a glass of water from my bucket when no one was looking.

The little girl looked at the woman with pitiful eyes and said, “Please forgive me, Kakima... I had gone out to fetch some wood. I had been out all day and without any water. I was so thirsty that I could not keep myself from stealing a glass of water from your bucket! I was driven mad by the pangs of thirst.”

I doubt if the history of any people in the whole wide world have had to witness such horrendous tragedies.

I have already given a short description of how these displaced people used to gather food and firewood during their stay at the transit camps in Mana. Now, it will be an injustice to the readers of this generation if I do not enlighten them a little bit about the possessions the refugees could manage to procure to ward off their shame.

As per government grants, people were provided with different cloths, such as, dhoti and kurta (Panjabi) for men; saree, petticoat and blouse for women; pant, shirt and frock for the adolescents. The quality of the cloths was so cheap that a man wearing those kurtas would look like a scarecrow from afar. It seemed as if a shirt has been kept over a bamboo stick to shoo away pest birds from a farmland. The length of a dhoti was equal to 6 hands and a saree was 8 hands long. When washed in water, one could realize the actual quality of these cloths. They were mostly produced from mosquito nets after hiding the big gaps by starching. From the nature of these cloths given to the refugees for covering their bodies, one can understand the quality of the machines and the tailors that were instrumental in making them. For example, the fitting of the blouses was so pathetic that even after slipping one's arm into a sleeve, there would remain ample space for more arms to be slipped into. And the other sleeve was so narrow that it was impossible to let one's arms enter. A sensitive and mystic refugee poet gave an account of their struggle regarding food and clothing and voiced his protest in the following song,

I went to the Control, there was not an iota of space for standing,
I left my son back at home, he was dying of hunger.
They are giving us salt, salt grains are as thick as coal,
You need to smash the salt grains in husking pedals to make them better.
The cloths are pathetic, not worthy of putting on,
They look like sacks of onion,
These buggers have made the arrangements, don't they have their own dear ones?

Unfortunately, nobody paid any heed to this voice of protest.

Although there was a government hospital for the treatment of the refugees, the health workers neglected their duties immensely. All through the day, hundreds of patients used to stand lined up in the scorching sun in front of the doctor's clinic. Unless a sensitive and experienced person, it is impossible to conjecture the horrific experience encountered by the patients suffering from excruciating pain. Irrespective of their gender and age, people had to stake their life and undergo an elongated ritual of waiting to visit a doctor. Let me inform you that, except for D. K. Hospital, there was no other hospital in any of the camps in Mana that provided the patients with the facility of long-term treatment. Hence,

all the patients fighting for their life were not fortunate enough to even reach the hospital timely. Most of them had to breathe their last in the ambulance or inside the huge basket on their way to the hospital.

In other camps, a round tent or a fence made of coarse mat was considered to be a hospital where the compounder used to produce a few barrels of red mixture as medicine for the patients. Whatever the disease might be, the patients used to line up with vials to collect a file of that red mixture which they considered to be as infallible as Sanjeevani. If anyone violated this rule, there was no saving him from the furious admonishments of the compounder. Besides that, the doctors were coarsely abusive to those mothers, who, owing to shortage of food or malnutrition had given birth to a skinny or sick child. Its difficult to even pen down their condition. In spite of all this, the imperilled and helpless mothers used to digest these abuses silently and prayed for their sons' wellbeing. They never, even by mistake, uttered a word of protest. They used to beg for their sons' life to the doctors only through their helpless cries.

There was a big 'dead body store' in Mana's D. K. Hospital. Many a times, a dying patient who fainted due to intolerable pain was considered dead owing to the negligence of the doctors and was left forsaken in that morgue. A large number of people who had witnessed these incidents are still alive.

Here, I need to mention a tragic incident involving a child who had returned from the morgue alive. The child was barely a year old at that time. As he was suffering from a dying illness for a few days, his mother took him to the hospital. After waiting in a long queue of patients, she finally got her chance to see the doctor. The doctor examined the child's hand and pulled the eyelids inattentively. No one had any clue what he diagnosed. Then he summoned the sweeper who was standing near the door. The sweeper came in and stood silently in a gait to carry the doctor's orders. The doctor announced the child as dead and ordered the sweeper to take the corpse to the morgue. Hearing the doctor's words, the mother had a sudden emotional outburst. Unable to bear this unforeseen loss, she started pleading repeatedly to the doctor to re-examine her child. But all her attempts went in vain. Following the doctor's dictates, the sweeper forcibly snatched the baby from her lap and went on his way. The mother was still not ready to accept her baby's death. The excruciating pain within her started to turn into a volcanic eruption of unquenchable fire. She started chasing the sweeper while constantly slapping her chest out of sheer agony. At the order of the hospital authority, two nurses drove the bereaved mother out of the hospital.

That day, the dark clouds gradually engulfed the scorching sun of the bright blue sky. Lightning sparks accompanied by roaring thunders reigned all over the sky. In a while, the raindrops started rolling down from the sky in torrents. And for this reason, the dead bodies in the morgue could not start their journey towards the crematorium.

The following day, the sky was bright and sunny as usual. The mortuary assistants came to take the corpses to the crematorium. They stood at the morgue's gate. No sooner had the gatekeeper opened the gate, than all of them were taken by surprise. No, not a ghost. They saw that the baby, announced dead last day, was sucking the breast of a female corpse being driven by extreme hunger. They found the child screaming his heart out while slapping the corpse's empty breasts.

I do not know if the doctor was punished for this heinous act of playing with the life of an innocent child. But the refugees had to pay the price of these mistakes with their lives.

In spring, Bengal's scintillating natural beauty and charming weather resonated with the vibrancy of vernal hues. The tender breeze brought with it the scent of new leaves from the tree branches. The buzzing of hornets on the flower-buds announced the advent of the goddess Basanti. People, irrespective of their age, basked in the exuberance of its tune. At the same time, a sense of panic and apprehension gripped the people living in the camps of Mana. These people, living inside the wax-tents would face sudden attacks of life-threatening whirlpools. In a vast stretch of land expanded up to the horizon, a sudden and vicious gust of wind coiled up in circles and rushed towards them out of nowhere. The whirlwind gradually turned humongous as it moved over the ground picking up dust and stones on its way and soaring upwards, engulfed the entire sky. When the whirlwind reached the camps, the panic-stricken people over there started screaming in fear with their babies held close to their chests and ran helplessly without a clue. Some would stretch out their hands towards an indefinite direction to seek help and shouted at the top of their voice, "God, save us." Some of them, having lost their senses would restlessly toss about on the laterite track while striking their head against the ground. Others, embracing the image of their tutelary deities, tumbled on the gravel path. But nothing could save them from the grip of that cataclysmic whirlwind which started covering the entire sky in a lightning speed and hurled itself at the shelters of the destitute. In a flash, the tents disappeared into the vast unknown. Not only that, the wind blew away all their belongings and turned them from refugees to have-nots.

Those who were able to escape from the jaws of death were extremely fortunate. Others were robbed out of their life by the demonic power of the whirlwind. Many of them succumbed to death halfway and missed out on their opportunity to meet their relatives.

Then there is monsoon. On the plain land, the tents were set up one after the other to construct a block. The front side of a tent was only 2-3 hands away from another one. Within this empty space, a bed was dug up to build a furnace for cooking. Inside the tent, there were arrangements for staying and keeping furniture. Under this circumstance, a torrential rain could upset the entire set up of their lives. Water would flow down from the tent-roof leaving the furnace

and all the other stuffs floating in the vast expanse of water. Hence, the starving people were compelled to stand in that waterlogged space holding their babies in tight embrace. The babies, driven by hunger, gradually became unconscious and fell asleep in their parents' lap. The helpless mother would try her best to feed her family with at least a handful of rice. She would vainly attempt to remove water from the water-filled furnace and to light a fire on that soaked wood. Being unsuccessful, she would cry her heart out in sheer anguish and helplessness. Should this silent weeping of a mother always remain a secret? Will this enormous suffering never find its place in the deepest core of a sensitive heart?

In 1971, the minority Hindus from East Pakistan, being brutally tortured by the Pathan army, set off to India for survival. More than one lakh Hindus sought refuge in India in an attempt to save their lives. The Indian Government set up a few camps around Mana to give them shelter. The existing camps were already in horrible condition. On top of that, the addition of new camps escalated the horrific instances of untimely deaths. As it was impossible to control excessive population, all kinds of germs carrying deadly diseases killed hundreds of people every day. Unless you are a witness of this tragedy, you cannot even imagine how devastating it was to experience the occurrences of untimely death of so many innocent children, young and old people.

To keep the fire burning at this never-ending ceremony of funerals, a huge crematorium was constructed in a large area of seven acres adjacent to Mana aerodrome. Piling up one corpse on the other, a sky-high funeral pyre was formed. The fire kept burning all day and night in that crematorium. There was no opportunity to pay proper homage to the deceased. Even, dead bodies of the children were not spared from being thrown disdainfully into that ever-burning pyre.

Sometimes the corpses were not incinerated completely. Consequently, the predatory animals and birds like vultures, dogs and foxes engaged in tugging at the dead bodies as they let out fierce howls. It is impossible for a normal person to set his eyes on this shocking aftermath of a tragic demise.

The number of witnesses of these incidents are gradually getting lesser with days. And this will eventually make the grim reality turn into some petty cock-and-bull stories. In future, no compassionate person will come forward to reflect on the heart-rending life stories of the refugees. No distinguished historian will write about their struggles. The sound of their helpless cries will slowly disappear from the face of the earth.

Even mother Sita could not convince Ram about her father-in-law Dasharath's obsequial rites. The spectators gave false testimonies to accuse Sita of betrayal. Similar to that, if people do not testify in favour of the authentic accounts of that huge crematorium or the vast wilderness inflicted by the memories of the refugees' enormous struggles, I am not going to curse them. I just want to tell

the omnipotent almighty about the welcome we received in the beautiful and nicely decorated abode created by him.

Many people might not find it easy to accept my feeble prayer to the lord. After going through my article, even though they are apparently silent, but deep within they might be expressing their concern and anxiety, “You idiot, how dare you choose to remain silent even after this extent of torture? Are you dead or alive? A bloody coward!”

You can think whatever you feel like, but am I left with any other option other than conveying these accounts to God with deep sorrow? I leave the matter to the readers who are educated, intellectuals and thinkers to consider as to what extent the promises made by the freedom fighters and the politicians during the time of partition have been effectively fulfilled afterwards. For your information, I hereby highlight some of the promises made by the distinguished political leaders and other representatives who advocated in favour of the partition. **Headline – ‘The promises made by the Indian leaders addressing the minority, stuck in East Pakistan as an aftermath of partition.’**

- 1) The Hindus and the Sikhs who are stuck there unwillingly can come to India in whichever way possible for them. To bring solvency in their life, our first priority will be to ensure job opportunities for them.

(From: the collected works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol. 89 page 246. The Publication Division, Govt of India.)

Pundit Nehru promised, 2) We show our concern for those brothers and sisters who are separated from us by political boundaries and unfortunately are unable to enjoy the privileges of this newly obtained freedom. Whatever happens, they are a part of our country and will always remain the same. We will definitely accompany them through their thick and thin.

(From: Independence and after, (1949) page – 5, The Publication Division, Govt. of India)

3) We need to engage ourselves in the process of rehabilitation. We need to take up this job not as a responsibility, but because of the fact that it is against the very interest of our nation to keep them unemployed and allow them to toil under tremendous hardships. For that reason, we must make this happen. (Ibid, p-5)

4) As I have mentioned earlier, the minority Hindus in East Pakistan are not feeling safe and it has become impossible for them to stay there any longer. People who want to migrate here are even unsure of how longer they will be able to stay there. (Ibid, p. 29)

Dr. Rajendra Prasad promised:

“We are really anxious about providing rehabilitation to those people who have been and are still undergoing inexpressible suffering due to financial crisis.

(Speeches of Dr. Rajendra Prasad Vol. – 1, p-2, The publication Division, Govt of India)

Sardar Patel promised:

6) "Those who are connected to our blood-line, those who accompanied us in our freedom struggle, cannot be considered foreigners just because they live on the other side of the border. We still try to help those Indians living in South Africa or the citizens of Africa who are Indians by descent. If they have the right to seek help from us, the people living in the other side of Bengal also possess the same right."

(Speeches of Sardar Patel, p-121, The Publication Division, Govt of India)

Decision taken by AICC on the date of 15-11-47

7) "People who haven't left their homes yet, (meaning, who are yet to migrate to India) should be encouraged to stay where they are living at present, if not they themselves desire to come here. But if they make up their mind and set off for the journey, we should be equipped with all possible arrangements for them. We cannot brand them as infiltrators or consider them as dependents living at others people's mercy. They will enjoy all the privileges given to an Indian citizen and fulfil all their responsibilities."

(From the collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol 90 page 539. The Publication Division, Govt. of India)

Having negated the aforesaid promises made by these great leaders, the Government of India issued a special letter which dictated all the homeless, humiliated and oppressed people to go back, who in order to save their life from the inhuman tortures of the Pathan army escaped to India and sought refuge in 1971.

'Government of India's letter to the people who migrated from Bangladesh after 25th March, 1971.'

'To the chief secretaries and the administration of all the states and union territories'

Subject: Order for not receiving any application from the refugees shifted to India from East Bengal after March 25, 1971.

People who have arrived in India from East Bengal after 25th March, 1971, will not be considered as Indian citizens. If they get an opportunity, they must return to their birthplace. According to the Citizenship Act, section 5/1/(A) and the citizenship regulations of 1956, their names won't be enlisted as Indian citizens. If they apply for enlisting their names as Indian citizens following the Citizenship Act, section 5/1/(A), their application will be considered cancelled. In the Citizenship Act, section 5/1/(A), it is written in the queries related to application that a person who had migrated after 25th March, 1971 is not eligible to register his name as an Indian citizen. It is subject to investigation if anyone provides false testimonials or submits application using a previous date. All the registration authorities working under your command will be further intimated with necessary directives regarding this.

Sign: S. L. Ghoshal.

Under Secretary, Government of India.

In 1972, People's Republic of Bangladesh became a free country. According to the aforementioned guidelines, all the refugees were sent back to the newly formed nation of Bangladesh.

After the independence of Bangladesh, on 25th March, 1972, the India-Bangladesh treaty of friendship, cooperation and peace was signed. The signatories of this treaty were India's prime minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh's prime minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In the twelve articles incorporated in that treaty, there was no mention of the Hindu minority living in Bangladesh or the refugees already shifted to India. It is not difficult to understand how these leaders remained unperturbed by this inhuman suffering of the refugees.

From 1974 onwards, the government started to send people, erstwhile living in different camps, to the rehabilitation centres. Denying the instructions, people started launching fierce protests in those camps. It was mainly because of the fact that the government decided to rehabilitate people in the most underdeveloped and horrible places of India taking them away from the fertile lands of the golden Bengal. This was very similar to the experiences of the freedom fighters who were sent in exile by the Britishers to the places like – The Cellular Jail (Kala Pani) of Andaman, grey desert islands of Rajasthan, barren lands of Madhya Pradesh, dense forests of Dandakaranya and other snow-capped mountainous provinces. The destiny of the refugees coming from East Bengal was determined in a similar fashion by the architects of their fate. As a result, massive protests broke out in the refugee camps where all the people pronounced in unison, “We are the son of mother Bengal. We should be given rehabilitation in the land of Bengal, which is our mother's lap.” Their demands culminated into forming an organisation of refugees called, ‘Udbastu Unnoyon Samiti’ under the leadership of Sri Satish Mondal, Sri Rangalal Goldar, Sri Raiharan Barei, Sri Arabinda Mistry and the likes. At that time, absolute control of the camps lied in the hands of Colonel Nandi. On behalf of the committee, an application for rehabilitation in Bengal was submitted to Nandi. It was the beginning of huge protest rallies, hunger strikes and other indefinite strikes that were soon to follow.

The refugees refused to board in the buses allotted to them for taking them to the rehabilitation centres. As a result, they were accused of showing contempt to the governmental orders and to take necessary measures against them, the government deprived them of all the grants. Consequently, people in the camps became infinitely helpless as they were driven by extreme hunger. In empty or half stomach, keeping their own lives at stake, these undaunted people demanded for rehabilitation in Bengal. Afterwards, they were lathi-charged ruthlessly and were forced to get into those cars. As a result, when they saw any postal car, they started running for their lives since they were absolutely unwilling to go to the places allocated for them by the authority. Nandi Saheb tried his best to resolve this issue but failed.

Colonel Nandi got his transfer. He was considered to be inefficient in controlling the state of affairs in those camps or taking strict measures against the refugees. Hence, the government ordered for his transfer and appointed Brigadier Mr. Das as his replacement. Mr. Das having assumed his position, did not entertain any kind of protest and unleashed military force against the demonstrators right from the start. First, they used tear gas and then lathi-charged to disperse all the strikes, hunger-strikes and rallies that were taking place. Even after all this, the voices of protest could not be silenced and hence, they enforced section 144. The strict enforcement of section 144 made all the roads of the camp look deserted. Now, to take the refugees to the rehabilitation centre, the cars would stand in front of the camps. Accompanying them were the CRPF army with 303 rifles.

The refugees were not frightened by all this. Males and females, teenage boys and girls, old men and women – everyone cried out in unison their demand for equitable rights – “We are the people of Bengal. We must be given rehabilitation in Bengal.”

But did anyone listen to their words? Not at all. Nobody paid any heed to the helpless, heart-wrenching cries of these people in destitution. Rather, having been instructed by Brigadier Das, the CRPF force launched ruthless oppression on the refugees of Vata and Kumud camps which initiated an epic battle between the two opposing forces.

The references of epic battles in the Ramayana or the Mahabharata make us flinch even in our imagination. But the people who have actually experienced this devastating battle in the camps of Vata and Kumud are still alive. Countless people are still wandering with the scars caused by firearms in the battlefield. Even today, a rush of memories concerning the dreadful and tarrying day of September 1974, flash in their mindscape. The day transformed Mana Vata into Shahid Vata.

Since Brigadier Das was an exalted army officer, he had a history of engaging in confrontations with the opponents. But I don't think he had any experience of a fight of this sort where the helpless opponent was merely equipped with tear-soaked eyes against the deadly weapons of the army personnel.

One who has a minimum humanity left in him cannot even think of inflicting such brutal torture by firing gunshots against a group of people who are dying of starvation. No civilised society would ever entertain this ruthless mentality from a fellow human.

But Brigadier Das was merciless in his approach of completing the task. At first, he unsparingly lathi-charged and afterwards used tear gas against the demonstrators. The poisonous gas infected everyone from new-born babies to elderly people and made their lives miserable. Mr. Das was still not satisfied. To quench his thirst for destruction, he ordered- Fire! No sooner had they received the order, than the CRPF jawans started firing their 303 rifles.

Amidst the hue and cry, the ceaseless rattling of bullets caused destruction on a massive scale. The carnage caused death of countless helpless refugees. There were pools of blood everywhere. Though some of them were able to escape, others died on the halfway writhing in pain after being shot. Kids, elders, women who had a failed attempt to escape, tried to hide themselves under the tin roofs or the barracks made of thatch covering. Unfortunately, their lives were also not spared. The force of the bullets ran through the roofs and made the coverings tumble into the air. Numerous innocent people succumbed to death as bullets hit those ravaged houses. Those who survived, turned deaf, deformed and demented having lost parts of their bodies owing to this massive carnage.

Although, this bloodbath caused innumerable deaths, the government reports claimed that only three people were killed and twelve injured. A report published by the magazine 'Path Sanket' stated, during the time span of 1964 to 1975, no proper arrangements were taken for rehabilitation of the refugees living in different camps of Mana. Some organisations, namely, Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti, U.C.R.C, C.P.I.(M) and Leftist Forward Block had been in constant touch with the refugees all this while. On 8th September, 1974, three people were shot dead by C.R.P in the camp of Mana's Shahid Bhata. 12 people were injured. U.C.R.C.'s general secretary Samar Mukherjee (MP), Pran Krishna Chakraborty and Suhrid Mallick visited Mana Camp for inspection on 6th and 7th November. Samar Mukherjee and his companions visited two more camps and conducted several meetings with the refugees. A central mass meeting was also held in the presence of twenty thousand people. Pran Krishna Chakraborty presided over the meeting. Besides, Suhrid Mallick Chaudhury, Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti's secretary Satish Mondal and Kalipada Basu delivered speeches. Samar Mukherjee was the main speaker who raised pertinent issues regarding the crises of the refugees. He wrote a letter to the central rehabilitation minister, Khadilkar, narrating the experiences of the U.C.R.C. leaders during their visit to Mana camp. In the letter Samar writes that they had a discussion on the subject of rehabilitation with the Samiti leaders. They are ready to be rehabilitated. But they were doubtful about certain issues like, quality of the lands, irrigation facilities and weather. Their past experience had not been good in these regards. Consequently, even after rehabilitation, the refugees came back in large numbers. They did not want the same thing to happen again. They had an earnest longing to be rehabilitated in the Sundarbans. (Path Sanket, February 1975, P- 73).

Other than that, several magazines bear testimonies of the instances of torture, humiliation and sexual assaults on women committed to suppress their protests in different camps of Mana. (Source – *Marichjhapi : Noishobder Antaraley*. Jagadishchandra Mondal. P 40-50)

On 25th January, 1975, Jyoti Basu went to Villai to conduct a meeting. He summoned the refugee leaders, Satish Mondal, Rangalal Goldar, Raiharan Barei

and Kali Basu to Villai and promised, “If C.P.I.(M) comes to power, we will take all of you to Bengal. The claim of the refugees to be rehabilitated in the Sundarbans will be fulfilled.” In June 1975, bullets were fired at the camps of Kurud. One night, C.R.P.F. abducted a young girl from the camp. She was raped by multiple men and was returned to the camp in the morning.

Afterwards, the refugees set off en masse towards Kolkata, West Bengal. On 26th June, Anandabazar Patrika published their slogan on the first page, “Let’s go to Kolkata, let’s go to the Sundarbans.” In a handbill found in Raipur it was written that, in the month of May, a contingent of Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti went from Hansnabad to Marichjhapi, situated in Goshaba police station area. There is an old village on the opposite side of 125 kilometres of outstretched sand bed. They were informed by the local people that in that place the high tides didn’t rise above 5 feet. The locals added, if we can build an embankment of 5 feet length and continue farming for hundred years, why won’t you? There you have a scope of fishing as well. Hence, the population of sixteen thousand families living in Mana camp can be easily rehabilitated here. In Sundarban’s Dutta Pashur, 30000 more refugees can be rehabilitated. (Anandabazar Patrika, 23rd June, 1975)

From Kolkata it was reported that, the opposition leaders of the state along with the MPs of different other states were going on deputation to the President and the central minister Khadilkar towards the end of that month. The group of representatives comprised of leaders like Jyoti Basu, Tridib Chaudhury, Jyotirmoy Guha, Dr. Kanai Bhattacharyya, Jatin Chakraborty and the Forward Block MP of Maharashtra, Shri Dhoute. They demanded that, more than 1.5 lakhs refugees coming from Bangladesh were still not rehabilitated. The central and the state government should take every responsibility of their rehabilitation (Anandabazar Patrika, 22nd June, 1975).

For the refugees, all of this was nothing but deception. Even at the cost of their life, they could not procure the land they were deprived of. At last, with shattered hopes, they started boarding the trucks and set out for a fateful journey with their families towards the rehabilitation centres. “Pity! Humans are considered to be the greatest creation on earth!” I wonder if the person who said this could ever imagine this extent of human suffering.

As soon as the camp controller gave his order, huge freight trucks loaded with refugees started moving towards the rehabilitation camps to unload them at their designated places. The trucks zigzagged through the hills, mountains, riverbanks and plains on this long wayward journey of almost a thousand kilometres. Somewhere people were loaded in huge ships and after a journey of two-three days through huge mass of water they were deported in a desolate island. Others were taken to the arid sand deserts of Rajasthan.

In this way the powerless refugees of East Bengal were placed in 164 (according to governmental records) different regions all over India.

Especially in the dark dense forests of Dandakaranya where not even a ray of sunlight could find its way through, the refugees were forced to live in the camps. The place was an unhindered haunting ground of fierce wild animals like tigers, bears and foxes. By cleaning the weeds and creating a certain space on the ground, the camps were set up. Truckloads of half-dead people were thrown into this desolate land throughout the day and were forced to succumb to their destiny.

It is impossible to even imagine the extent of psychological trauma these people might have undergone when they were evicted from a civilised society and were taken to the barren mountainous region of Dandakaranya. Even an attempt of imagining this situation might cause an educated person lose his senses.

A proverb says, “God save those who has no one.” Although you can refute such statements if you have the privilege of leading a luxurious urban life, it is not that easy for the abandoned refugees living in the perilous landscape amidst the mountains. Having no one by their side, they could only turn to the almighty to save them from this enormous suffering.

Hence, everyone went into the tent with their family and screamed in despair, “God, where are you?” “But nobody knew to what extent they were destined to suffer. They had no option left but to wait for the inevitable.” This incident was not an exception. Even after the journey of 800 kilometres through the uneven and bouncy tracks enduring jerks and jolts all the way, the refugees were devoid of the sense of hunger or sleep out of sheer panic. They were preoccupied with a sense of constant fear to be killed by the wild animals. “Last night many of us saw a horrifying scene in our dreams, whose memory chills our spine even in broad daylight. The refugees living in Dandakaranya had to go through the experience of being a victim of that ominous dark night.”

The infernal darkness engulfed them like an all-devouring demon. The shrilling voice of the crickets started to haunt the desolate landscape. The wild animals trampled the dark and quiet woods to rush into the localities. Their clamorous howls intensified the danger of the situation. The refugees were so terrified that they could not sleep peacefully even for a day. Being numbed by fear, they could only pray to God for their lives sitting inside the tents.

The desolate land was an unobstructed territory of the wild animals. These nocturnal animals were initially not aware of the presence of the refugees as these people had settled in when the predators were having their day-sleep. As the evening crept in, the lords of the forest slowly started to wake up from their sleep. The smell of human flesh intensified the hunger of the carnivores like tigers, bears etc. They rushed towards the tents in groups. At the prospect of the grand feast waiting for them inside the tent, they began to salivate driven by hunger. In extreme excitement they were roaring loudly to shower their blessing on those people who have sent them food in forms of humans.

But this was soon to stop. Now it's time to launch an attack on those feeble tents with their violent paws. The bears could easily destroy the tents as they

tore them apart with their teeth and nails. At this point, the refugees began to scream helplessly, "Save us! Help!" They made an attempt to fight back with whatever they could manage. With scythes, shovels, spades, sticks, they tried to battle out those deadly savages. Although the clamorous sound of their cries was able to drive away the wild animals for that day, the danger was not over at all. Later on, the animals never missed an opportunity to devour their preys. In this essay, I have given a brief description of their journey from Mana transit camps to the rehabilitation centres of Dandakaranya. Before going further, I must provide a detailed account of the formation of the rehabilitation centre in Dandakaranya.

Although partition happened on 15th August, 1947, there was an unhindered influx of people between East Pakistan and West Bengal until 14th August, 1952. Until then, people were not awakened to the fact that, "This country is not mine, my friend. This country is not mine." On 15th August 1952, both the countries' government announced the enforcement of passport system. Under this circumstance, the Hindus living in East Pakistan became utterly helpless as they were constantly tormented by the oppression of the Muslim League. The place was uninhabitable for them because of the factors like, religious persecution, socio-economic oppression, sexual assault on women and zero security. Consequently, an enormous crowd of people began to move towards West Bengal in waves. Until 1954, there was an opportunity to shift to India by procuring a migration certificate. As per government records, over 50 lakh people came to India during that time leaving behind all their belongings. To shelter them, Indian government set up some make-shift camps in different districts of West Bengal, mainly in the places like, 24 parganas, Bardwan, Ghosuri, Sonarpur, Hoogly, Sealdah, Hawrah, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Madhabpur, Bagjola, Medinipur etc. Almost 3 lakh people were accommodated in these camps. The rest managed to find their shelters by themselves. Despite giving assurance of proper rehabilitation, the government made no arrangement of that sort until 1959. Consequently, a few refugee organisations were established, namely, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samsad, United People's Organisation, U.C.R.C. etc. Their agendas were to communicate with the government officials and to address the issues of the refugees' crisis and safety. These organisations started to negotiate with the government regarding certain matters.

In 1957, the government took the policy of sending the refugees outside of Bengal for their rehabilitation. As a consequence, significant protests erupted in all the camps of Bengal. Against this evil governmental policy, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samsad organised a huge meeting in Bagjola on 11th and 12th January, 1958. In that gathering, Sri Jogendra Nath Mondal was invited and he actively participated in the movement. On the second day, Jogendra Nath Mondal gave a speech opposing the government's policy to send the Bengalis out of Bengal.

On 11th August, 1958, U.C.R.C (United Central Refugee Council) presented a charter of demands to the then chief minister of West Bengal, Bidhan Chandra Roy. It stated, "... For their rehabilitation, the refugees can be provided with 62.5 square kilometre lands for 6875 families and 12000 acres of fishery dams for 3000 families."

On the other hand, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sommelson, in their charter of demands mentioned, "With the money allotted for Dandakaranya it is possible to do away with the crisis of the Sundarbans and to successfully build the barrage on the Ganges."

On 18th September, 1958, in the convention of Sammilito Kendriya Bastuhara Parishad held at Jadavpur Bapuji Colony, it was announced that, "There is no point in sending the refugees to Dandakaranya or any other place outside of Bengal against their will while it is still possible to rehabilitate them in West Bengal. So, the convention has decided to strongly oppose this governmental policy. We also think that, by executing the definite plans proposed by Sammilito Kendriya Bastuhara Parishad and other organisations, the government can advance towards finding proper solution to this major crisis. But unfortunately, the government has denied implementation of any of these plans. It not only intensified the misery of the refugees, but also added to the crises of the entire population of West Bengal. To mitigate the crises of the refugees as well as to facilitate the process of development in the state, the government should reconsider their current policy. This convention thinks that the change is impossible without organising a powerful mass movement. If the government does not change its policy in the meantime and announce a new strategy concerning the rehabilitation process as well as of a holistic development in West Bengal, the convention hereby gives an ultimatum to start direct action from 14th November onwards. This convention further decides, 1) To conduct a nationwide signature campaign in demands of rehabilitation of the refugees in West Bengal with the help of the allotted money as well as proper development of the state by engaging the refugees into the process.

- 2) To strike a unity among different refugee organisations and to bring together all the democratic refugee multitudes.

All the refugee organisations of Bengal unitedly formed a massive mass movement (source: *Marichjhapi Noisshobder Antaratrey*). The agitated protesters burnt the effigy of the Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna.

According to 'Lok Sevak' magazine's report, "A gathering and a procession of over 10 thousand people rising in protest today, on 22nd December, bears the testimony of their enormous suffering caused by the Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna's incompetence, worthlessness and anti-refugee policies. Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelon and Purba Bharat

Bastuhara Sangsad jointly organised a huge rally today at 3 pm. At the end of the rally a long procession marched up to the house of the Minister to burn his effigy.

The meeting was presided over by Jogendra Nath Mandal. Sri Haridas Mitra (MLA), the Secretary of Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan, was present in the meeting as chief guest. Among the speakers of this meeting, there were some important leaders like, P.S.P. leader Sri Sibnath Bandyopadhyay, joint Secretary of Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sangathan and P.S.P. leader Sri Dharendra Bhowmik, Jana Sangha leader Sri Satyen Basu and Sri Haripada Bharati, Secretary of Purba Bharat Bastuhara Sangsad Sri Manaranjan Basu and Sri Sudhangshu Ganguly (Lok Sevak, 23rd December, 1959).

The Dandakaranya plan for refugee rehabilitation was sanctioned in Kolkata in the presence of the Chief Ministers of 6 states. Each state government agreed to sanction 1 lakh acre of land for this purpose.

In a report of Anandabazar Patrika, it is stated that – “To organise a large-scale rehabilitation process, Indian government’s Dandakaranya plan was approved by the Chief Ministers of 6 states on Tuesday in Kolkata.”

While presiding over the meeting, Union Home Minister Sri Govind Ballabh Pant mentioned in his speech that there was no space left in West Bengal for further rehabilitation of the refugees.

Several state governments have unanimously agreed to sanction almost one lakh acre of land each for the refugees who have migrated from East Pakistan and have been staying in different camps. The state governments will survey and retrieve those lands. The central government will bear all the expenses of this project.

This decision was taken today in the meeting presided over by the Union Home Minister Sri Govind Ballabh Pant and in the presence of the Chief Ministers of Bihar, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and West Bengal. Along with the Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna, the Rehabilitation Ministers of the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Rehabilitation and Minority Affairs Sri Purnendu Sekhar Naskar was present in the meeting (Anandabazar Patrika, Wednesday 22nd January, 1958).”

Opposing the policy of rehabilitation outside of Bengal, all the refugee organisations rose up in protest. They wrote a memorandum to West Bengal Chief Minister Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray stating their demands of proper economic rehabilitation inside Bengal. On the basis of that memorandum, on 21st February, 1958, a meeting was held where Sri Jogendra Nath Mandal, Haridas Mitra, Mohadeb Bhattacharyya, Hemanta Biswas and Indra Narayan Ghosh were present on behalf of the Bastuhara Sammelan. On behalf of U.C.R.C., Sri Hemanta Kumar Basu, Sri Ambika Chakraborty, Sri Jibanlal Chattopadhyay and Smt. Sudha Ray attended the meeting.

On government's behalf, Chief Minister Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray, Minister for Rehabilitation of West Bengal Sri Prafulla Sen, Assistant Minister for Rehabilitation Smt. Purabi Mukherjee and the Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner for the Rehabilitation ministry were present in the meeting.

In this meeting, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray made the government's stance very clear, "There is no space left in West Bengal for proper rehabilitation."

At this, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelon demanded, "In places like Medinipur, Jalpaiguri and Murshidabad, some lands can be procured by the process of reformation." The Chief Minister said in response that the government did not have enough money needed for the execution of that plan.

Now, different refugee organisations started non-violent hunger strike in protest against the government. Thousands of refugees were captured and put in jails.

Many refugees lost their lives. Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna assured the members of Parliament in Rajya Sabha that he will start the rehabilitation process only after ensuring that the place is fit for living.

"Today, Union Minister for Rehabilitation Sri Meher Chand Khanna has promised the members of Parliament in Rajya Sabha that the refugees of West Bengal will not be sent to Dandakaranya until he himself is satisfied with the process of rehabilitation (Lok Sevak's report: New Delhi, 14th March)."

Member of the Communist Party Sri Bhupesh Dutta's claim of having proper scope of rehabilitation and resettlement in certain lands of West Bengal was refuted by the Union Minister Sri Meher Chand Khanna. He said, "We have to consider the rehabilitation crisis with a humane approach. We need to set up schools and hospitals in Dandakaranya. We must ensure that the Bengalis will run them." He added, "In the border area of Orissa, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh a huge forest area of 80 thousand square miles will be cleaned up to make arrangements for rehabilitation. The first stage of the project will be effective in 3 years and one lakh people will be rehabilitated there (Lok Sevak, Saturday, 15th March, 1958)."

In subsequent times, the protest movements in demand of rehabilitation within Bengal started getting more and more intense. Three thousand non-violent protesters were arrested. Police started to inflict ruthless torture on them. In this context, I would like to quote from Jagadishchanda Mondal's book, *Mahapran Jogendranath* (6th Volume), "17th March, 1958: "A non-violent mass movement started today at the call of Sara Bangla Udbastu Shommelon. They demanded for rehabilitation in West Bengal. The Socialist Party leaders of West Bengal State Legislative Assembly Dr. Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay and Sri Haridas Mitra (MLA) led a non-violent protest rally consisting of 3000 refugees towards Writers' Buildig. The protesters were arrested for breaking section 144. "At 2 pm in the noon, the refugees gathered at Subodh Mullick Square. Many speakers gave their speech in that meeting. Afterwards, at 4 pm, when the mob came out of Subodh Mullick Square and moved towards Rajbhaban via Dharmatala Street, police stopped them. Then they held a procession where

speakers like Sri Jyoti Basu, Hemanta Basu, Jogendranath Mondal, Sunil Das, Debesh Sen, Dr. Pabitra Ray gave speeches. Afterwards, in Dr. Banerjee's leadership, Haridas Mitra and other protesters broke section 144."

Reaction to the government's decision on the issues of refugee crisis and the minority of East Bengal – "Having neglected the issues of employment and livelihood, just on the basis of giving small financial loans for business and agriculture, the government has taken a whimsical as well as inconsiderate decision to send the refugees to random places for their rehabilitation. This has been done absolutely unscientifically and without an awareness of the actual reality. Hence, the crises of the refugees have remained the same. The government has spent 350 crores for 9 lakh refugees in Punjab. In West Bengal, among 50 lakh refugees, 40 crores were spent for 20 lakh people. So, the policies taken by the respective governments are different in these two states. In Punjab, Congress' ideological basis was not hampered while they implemented exchange policy for the refugees coming from West Pakistan. But in West Bengal they had a different approach to deal with the refugees and the minorities coming from East Bengal. Since in recent times, the laws related to migration certificates have become stricter, the minorities of East Bengal, despite having extremely difficult times, are unable to leave their country. On top of that, in a meeting at Darjeeling, a deadline has been set in terms of migration of people from East Bengal as well as the government's duty to arrange for their rehabilitation and a decision has also been taken to send the people coming from East Bengal outside Bengal. Consequently, the refugees are being taken to different provinces outside Bengal and are pushed to death. Even the orphan women refugees are taken from PL camp to Sourashtra. In these camps, their cash-dole has been stopped by the government and people are thus forced to leave Bengal. This decision taken by the government has psychologically affected the Hindus living in East Bengal with deep-seated anxiety and despair. And for the people who have already migrated to West Bengal are rising in protest against this as they will suffer the worst consequences of this decision."

Dandakaranya Development Authority was established on 12th September, 1958, with 25000 square miles of neglected forestland from Orissa's Koraput district to Madhya Pradesh's (Now, Chattisgarh) Bastar district. In 1958, for the first time, the refugees were taken from West Bengal to the lands of Bastar's Pharasgaon. 105 families were provided with agricultural lands and 45 families were engaged in small industries. Second rehabilitation process was done in the Umarkote region of Orissa's Koraput district. In 14 villages 1240 families were given shelter. Nearby in Raipur region, 1545 families were resettled in 24 villages. In the third phase, 2239 families were rehabilitated in 45 villages at Pakhanjor and 1027 families in 5 villages at Kondagaon. At last, at Malkangiri, 1023 families were resettled in 23 villages. This zone was an unplanned territory where there was no proper transportation. Under Malkangiri

administration, there were many AEO centres. In 1975-76, people living in the camps of Mana since 1964 were rehabilitated in the workers' camps of Malkangiri. The camps were situated in the villages which were 10-15 kilometres away from the AEO centres. People had to cross such long distance through an intensely dense forest path to meet the officials of Dandakaranya Project Authority. At that time, the numbers of villages in different places were: MV – 134, RV – 64, PV – 133, Kondagaon – 15.

I shifted to Malkangiri from Mana camp in early 1975. To reach the workers' camps, you need to stay for two nights in the temporary camps located in Pandripani, close to Motu, Jaipur. The place is 25 kilometres away from Malkangiri. From there, if you move 2 kilometres into the forest, you will find another village named MV 92. The villages meant for Bengali refugees were numbered like prison inmates. The 'MV' written before the number signified Malkangiri Village. PV means Parulkot Village. Similarly, UV and RV are Umarkote Village and Raiganj Village respectively.

When I came to know about the village, I felt a deep urge to reach out to them. I really wanted to know what were these people doing in this impenetrable mountain range after being deprived of the fertile lands of golden Bengal. I along with my 8-10 friends went to survey the village at noon. What we saw there filled our minds with utter despair. Each and every villager appeared gaunt being clad in tattered clothes. In each house, there was a room made of corrugated tin sheets. The unclean floors were made of clay. Some houses had verandas which were used for cooking, others didn't even have one. Every furniture in the rooms reeked of extreme poverty.

Seeing us a villager asked, "Are you new to this place?" We said, "yes." When we wanted to have some tea, we asked another village folk, "Is there any teashop nearby?" He replied, "How would you find a teashop here? Tushar has a grocery shop here. You might visit his shop if you need anything." Walking a little further, we reached Tushar's shop. The shop had the same worn-out appearance. There were some racks made out of bamboo where he kept cheap biscuit packets, detergent soaps and some chocolate toffies in a glass jar. An oil tin was cut into two halves and in the lower half, dal, potato, jeera etc. were placed. I asked Tushar, "How does the business go?" He replied, "How can business run well while there is no scope of earning? The villagers buy oil, salt and spices from time to time, mostly in credit. Unless they earn anything, they can't even pay off the money. Hence, my shop is gradually going out of stock." We bought a few necessary things. Tushar asked, "Will you like to have some liquor tea? I can arrange for that." Getting our approval, he went inside. In the meantime, local people and kids gathered there to see us. We asked them, "How are you all? For how long have you been staying here? How much land was given by the government? What kinds of crops grow there?"

From their reply, we came to know that they were rehabilitated in the year 1964. The government had given them 6 acres of land. The crops they grow in that

stretch of land help them to sustain for 3 months. After that, they start to starve. To feed their stomach, they go deep into the forest in search of food. They have to boil and eat the seeds of arum, potato and other vegetables to survive. It is not easy to gather vegetables from the forest as they have to crawl on high mountains averting the gaze of wild animals. The whole process involves a high amount of risk. If fortune betrays, the consequence might be as fatal as death. I asked them, "What kinds of crops do you grow in your land?" Someone replied, "paddy, rosella, legume, sesame, lentils." I asked further, "None of these crops have good production?" The reply was, "In this hilly uneven land water doesn't stand. Since these lands are dependent on rainwater, if it rains at least once or twice after sowing the seeds, only then a proper harvesting can be possible. But that doesn't happen here. If it starts raining, it goes on until the crops are completely damaged. And, if the rain stops, there will be no rain until the crops are dried out. The only hardy crop we harvest is rosella which grows a length of 2-3 hands on the watery land within 3 months of sowing. Then these plants are reaped and decomposed to extract jute. After drying up the extracted jute, it is carried 25 kilometres from here in bullock carts or loading them on our heads to sell in the market. With that profit money, we have to repay the loans. After that, we are simply left with nothing to feed our stomach or to buy cloths. Other crops that we harvest help us to sustain for 3 more months. A young man named Kalidas said in a cheerful voice, "Haven't you listened to that song by Gaur Sarkar?" Then he started singing that sad mournful song,

Who the hell wants to live in this country?

You toil hard all day, still can't satisfy your hunger,

Your stomach burns, you even sell out the bullock cart,

You are now left with the tin-roof and cycle, iron bangle and chain harvester.

Black markets run smooth, rice is unavailable in normal markets,

You need to take the snake by its throat, to catch a black marketeer.

Dandak is a living hell, only corn and rosella grow here

The price is so cheap, the farmers sink into despair.

Selling the goods doesn't help, as their loans are not paid off

They are left empty handed, after paying off the creditors.

Kalidas had a graceful voice and he was a talented singer as well. And this

mystic poet Gaurapada Sarkar was rehabilitated in MV 35. His horrific

experiences expressed through the song made our eyes watered. In the

meantime, Tushar served us tea. In a plate, he gave us something that looked

like fried lentils. After seeping some tea, when we put the fries in our mouth, we

understood that they were not lentils. The taste was not familiar, rather it was a

bit acerbic. I asked, "What is this?" Tushar Babu felt embarrassed, "Please do

not take it otherwise. I know this food is not something you welcome your

guests with. Although for the whole world, this food is inedible; for us, rosella

seeds have become a staple food. Since you wanted to know what we eat, I just

tried to show you the reality." Back then, I didn't recognise rosella properly, but

later on I came to know that it is a kind of jute. I have seen two types of rosellas; one is red and the other one is green. Its whole body is full of small and sharp thorns. The fruits are as big as Indian gooseberry. On top of the fruits there are petals like flowers. Inside, the seeds looked like pulses. Although it was not tasteful at all, people used to eat rosella seeds out of scarcity and crisis of food. This invention was named as “Dandakaranya food” which helped them to survive.

While we were talking about the future of the refugees rehabilitated in Dandakaranya, evening started to creep in. Kalidas told us, “Its better if you go back to the camp now, because in the dark you might find bears on the way which is dangerous.” The mention of bears made us finch in fear. Once, in Raipur town I chanced upon a magician who was making a bear dance on the footpath. The bear had long iron rings in its mouth while its legs were fettered. What a horrific sight! How dangerous it might be for the people living in this forest where dangerous animals roam freely? An old man sitting next to us uttered, “Not only in fields or forests, in the evening they even attack our houses and run away with ducks and chickens.” Tushar Babu showed us a room made for chicken in his house and said, “Can you see the room for chickens made out of wooden logs? The bears are even capable of toppling these heavy wooden logs and taking away the chickens.” Pointing towards a 10-12 years old girl, he continued, “She is Fulmoti. One day she went into the forest with her father in search of mahua flower. A bear came from behind and stood with its hands held high. Seeing this, her father alerted Fulmoti of the bear and fainted instantly. Fulmoti turned back and saw the animal. She started shouting her heart out. Hearing her cries, while we tried chasing the bear away with sticks and bats, we saw the animal plucking out one of her eyes with its paw. Our hullabaloo shifted its attention towards our direction. We threw big stones at the bear to drive it away. Look, the girl doesn’t have an eye. You better not late, its already dark.”

Hearing the incident, our throats went dry in panic. Everyone was afraid considering what would happen if a bear actually comes on the way. Would it be at all possible to get back to our family members? Our faces had clear reflection of our anxious minds. On seeing that, Tushar da and other villagers made flambeaus for us with jute sticks. Some of them came with us towards the end of the village and said, “Light the flambeaus while walking through the deep forest. Don’t panic. We are all surviving on our fortune. Take God’s name and set off for the journey. You will surely reach your destination.” We started the journey in anticipation of the worst. As soon as we left the village, darkness covered us from all sides. We lighted our flambeaus. Shiver ran down our spines. None had the courage to walk behind others. We walked together forming a group. Halfway through the path, we saw the light of our flambeaus was glimmering on the body of a huge python. One of us lost his grip on the flambeau. We have never seen such slow-moving humongous python before.

The intensity of the shock made us completely unnerved. Someone took the courage to move forward. Following him, with our half-closed eyes we tried to walk together keeping a safe distance from the tail of the snake and eventually managed to reach our camp.

Two nights after that we were taken to the workers' camps in Gadagiri, which means a truck delivered us to a vast wide region at the slope of the hills. Babu said, "You might have to stay here for a year or so. You arrange for your own accommodation by building a house with bamboos, leaves and branches. The government will provide you with jobs here. Each able family member should visit the nearest AEO centre and collect their work equipment."

None but a homeless will understand what it means to a homeless to have a home. The prospect of a house is like a dream to a person who has been uprooted from his own land. Immediately after getting the permission to build their houses, young men of each family took his axe and chopper, tied a towel around his waist and set out to collect leaves of bamboo and other trees akin to the palm. Within a week, we made beautiful small houses standing on a row just like a painting. From afar, it looked as if the saints have built their ashrams in the core of the forest.

Near our camps there were some old residential villages. MV 83, MV 84, MV 101-102. In MV 102, we dug a huge pond for jute decomposition. The economic condition of these villages was similar to other villages. They belonged to the same level of poverty and impassivity. When we reached there, they came to see us. There was an old woman who previously lived in Faridpur district of East Bengal. She looked outside from her door and said, "Let me see, let me see. So, these are the new sinners who have been exiled in this land of nightmares. We are already suffering the worst consequences of coming here. Didn't you have any other option? You could have given your life to the waters of the Ganges. Why have you come here? To be eaten by tigers and bears?" While articulating the feeling of extreme suffering that she had undergone, her eyes watered as she went on her way.

To keep us mentally stable amidst all the chaos, we organised a football tournament along with other young boys at a village in MV 83. Seeing us, the villagers, especially the youths of Padmagiri area felt the urge to form a consciousness of Bengali culture. We also organised a Jatra which is the traditional genre of Bengali drama. There was a folk poet amongst us. His name was Narayan Sarkar. Along with him, we got another folk poet named Brahmacharan Sarkar. On certain occasions, we arranged for a contest of poets where they would participate. Thousands of homeless people came to experience this event. The poets sang mind blowing Bhati music, "the river of Bhati glides on - narrating the pains of its afflicted heart - the river of Bhati glides on." Tears ran through the eyes of those people who have been separated from their motherland. Irate waves of anguish flooded the core of their hearts.

The natural surrounding of Dandakaranya was never at the favour of these uprooted people. The prime reason behind this was “failure”. For our weekly shopping, we had to go to Kuttipalli which was located in the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh. The place was 25 kilometres afar from our camps. On the day of our weekly shopping, father told me, “You go and do your work. I will manage the shopping with other people.” I was doubtful if my father will be able to travel such long distance. When I tried to resist my father from going to the market, he replied, “I don’t earn anything. You are the one who toil for money. If you do not earn your daily wage, what will we eat? All of us are dependent on you. Don’t worry about me, son. I won’t buy heavy things from the market. I’ve heard that good catfish is available in the market. If I find it, I will get some for us.” So, on hearing this, I set out with my fellow workers to be engaged in digging the pond. Father went to Kuttipalli market with his friends. He also bought a few big catfishes. In that intense heat, on their way home through the rocky path, my father felt tremendous pain in his stomach. He lost his ability to move forward as he started writhing in pain lying on the side of the path. Being clueless, his companions gathered some bamboo leaves from the forest and made a cradle. They carried my father home in that cradle a little before the evening. All the camp dwellers gathered to see what happened. They tried to apply all forms of quack remedies, enchantments and mantras on my father to help him recover. But none of them worked. My father’s naked body fainted as he was unable to bear the intensity of the pain. When I reached home tired from my work, I was shocked at this sight. Nobody was a doctor amongst us. So, I ran towards the old village. Even there, I couldn’t find any doctor. Someone suggested, “You have to go to Malkangiri to find a doctor.” Although Malkangiri had a hospital but that was 30 kilometres away from our camp and there was no proper road to travel. Only a narrow path through the jungle can take you there. But I was not familiar with that route. At 8-9 o’clock at night, someone said, “Don’t even try to look for a doctor at this time of night. Go to Joga Pagol in 84. He will surely do something.”

I ran like an insane in search of Joga. Having reached the village, I came to know that he was at Upen Majhi’s house. Joga was a Matua guru. Upen came from East Bengal’s Barisal. When I asked him about Joga, he said, “Pagol is lying in the corner of the veranda. Offer him 1 rupee and pay respect in his feet. Go and tell him everything.” Then he asked Pagol, “Baba, can you please get us? Someone has come to meet you.”

Matua guru Joga Pagol was also originally from Barisal, East Bengal. He was a man of small build, humble and generous. At Majhi’s call, he immediately got up. He was lying in the dark. Getting up, he said, “Who has come here at this hour with his problem?” In the meantime, Majhi lighted a kerosine lamp. I kept 1 rupee coin in front of Joga and prayed for my father’s recovery. Joga, in turn, started to pray to his lord Hari Guruchand in his mother tongue, “O Father Harichand! You have taken your children to this forestland. There is no doctor

to treat them. Do you understand that? Now, if you don't ensure their wellbeing, where will they go?" Then he shifted from veranda to the open space below, gathered some dust in his hand and said, "O Father, here I am giving him dust from your leg. Please take away his father's pain." Then he caused a handful of dust to touch his forehead and gave that to me saying, "You are feeling hot, aren't you? Take this. Saying Guru's name smear the dust on your father's stomach. Lord Harichand and Lord Guruchand are very generous. They will ensure your father's recovery. And, remember to take your father to me tomorrow. Now, go."

As I was utterly helpless, I had no other alternative but to have faith in the dust sanctified by the mantras of Joga's prayer. I once again touched Joga's feet and returned to my camp. As I was smearing the dust on my father's belly, a constant flow tears rolled down my eyes. About an hour later, my father's pain was abated. He fell asleep. That entire night I was brooding over our future in this place. How long would we be able to manage like this? Where there was no security of living at all, how could we be able to survive?

Putting other works at rest, I set out with my father to Malkangiri in a cycle. On the way, we met Joga. Joga stroke his hand on my father's head and said, "Go and see a doctor."

There was no stretch of plain land amidst the rugged streets of the forest. I was taking my sick father through this impassable path, sometimes on foot, sometimes carrying him in my bicycle. From our camp the AEO centre was 15 kilometres away in MV 87. Having reached there, I asked AEO sahib, "How can we survive if we do not have minimum health infrastructure?" Sahib said in reply, "If the government does not pay heed to facilitate a proper health system in Dandakaranya, what can we do? But if you ask for our emergency service, we can take the patient to Malkangiri Hospital." I said, "It is so dangerous for even a messenger to travel 15-20 kilometres through the dark, impenetrable forest at night. It is so time-consuming that the patient might die in the meantime." Sahib's reply was, "We have nothing to do."

Having travelled 30 kilometres when we reached Malkangiri Hospital, we saw that there was no place left for even an iota. Under the open sky, countless patients were writhing in pain lying or sitting on a vast field. It was just a living hell. Some of them were tortured by bears or beaten by snakes. Some others were injured by falling trees or rocks. Pregnant women were having labour pain. The sight of this hell chilled my spine. I lost my ability to move. Father told me, "Let's go in search of the doctor." When we tried to go inside, we were blocked on the way, "Where are you going without standing in the line? We are waiting in the queue for one and a half hours. Go and stand at the end of this line."

Without having any alternative, I kept my father seated in a shadowed place and stood at the end of a huge line of almost 150 people. It took two hours to get to see the doctor. The doctor looked at my father and asked in signs, "What happened?" When my father started to narrate the incident of his sudden

stomach ache on his way to the market, the doctor stopped him saying, "Listen, we do not have time for so much talk. Tell me what's your problem." Being snubbed, my father only said, "Stomach ache." That put an end to the enquiry. No more check-up was required. The doctor quickly wrote a slip and gave it to my father. When my father got out, I gave the slip to the compounder. He passed on a 50 ml. file of Gelusel and said, "2 spoonful, thrice a day."

In the year 1977, we were carried off from Padmagiri to a huge teak wood forest that was located one mile away from the Adivasi slum area called Gumka. A few miles away from that place, there was a Bengali village named MV65. Between the Adivasi and Bengali village, amidst the big trees of the teak wood forest, we built makeshift camps to stay for 3 long months. From there, we were taken to the proposed villages that were going to be established under 'Potteru Irrigation Project'.

In 1962, 47 villages were established in Malkangiri zone. Taking into account these 47 villages, at the advice of the officials of Dandakaranya, a zonal committee was formed in 1962. This committee used to operate from a temporary camp in MV 7. Its secretary was Annada Halder. Until 1965, the number of villages was 70. The committee was re-established during that time. Sri Haren Mazunder became its president and Sri Nikhil Biswas, its secretary. Most probably, this Nikhil Biswas later became an MLA (independent) in 1985. Until 1975, the number of villages in Malkangiri, Umarkote, Parulkot and Kondgaon were 138, 64, 133 and 16 respectively. After 1964, 5 acres of land were given for the formation of new villages. From 1968-80, 4 acres of land were allocated for rehabilitation purposes. In 1975, an embankment was constructed in the river Potteru to start a big irrigation project. The villages formed under this project were named as 'Malkangiri Potteru Village (MPV)'. People rehabilitated here were provided with 3 acres of land, among which 15 decimal was for residential purposes. In MPV, 83 villages were set up. The total number of villages in Malkangiri was 217, two of which were allotted for small-scale industries. The village I was taken to for rehabilitation, was located in MPV 34. I had no other information except for this number. There was no trace of any village. It was a vast stretch of open land. The workers of previous camps might have cleaned the forest to turn it into a desolate landscape. The place was encamped with several tents where 65 families were rehabilitated. From each existing workers' camp, 9-10 families were taken to this new shelter. This process involved a shrewd strategy. If the authority had wished, people from each camp could have been given a separate village. But they did not do the same, because they well knew that these people had constantly been involved in mass movements for their demand of proper rehabilitation since 1968 up until 1975-6. The current situation is so intense that given a chance, these unified people might strike up another protest movement against this mismanagement. That's why all their requests were bluntly denied and they were scattered in different villages all over Malkangiri.

Immediately after being rehabilitated in those tents, we were put to work. We were provided with the equipment needed for deforestation. Allocation of land for our houses was still not determined. Under the commands of the contractors in charge of those forests, we had to toil ceaselessly from morning to night for one long year. For us, the forest was an unknown territory inhabited by deadly wild tress, at the touch of which the skin would burn and gradually decompose. There were plenty of poisonous insects whose bites would make our bodies swelled up and we would squirm in pain. On top of that, venomous snakes of different species used to haunt those areas. Well camouflaged against the green leaves, a green snake could kill someone at one bite. Except for that, there were other wild animals like bears and foxes. Our lives were constantly at stake. All the refugees were promised that once the forest was cleared, their residential area will be determined. That's the reason why everyone set sail towards an unknown destination with a slight glimmer of hope in their hearts. Previously, while living in East Bengal, these people were associated with various professions, like, teachers, litterateurs, poets, businessmen, sculptors, musicians, fishermen, farmers and so on. They were not familiar with excessive physical labour. Now, they were keeping their life at stake for the dream of a better tomorrow. But, did everyone get what they desired for? No. People would go out to work in the morning with equipment for deforestation, food plates and glasses. It was uncertain if they would return home safely in the evening. Nirapada Halder was a sturdy young man of 25. Before shifting to the rehabilitation centre from Mana, he married Latika. His family consisted of 3 members which included his mother. Like everyday, he got out along with his group to clear the forest. He was carrying 7-8 roties tied to a plate, a pot of water, a spade, a shovel and a gad. Since afternoon, their family members used to wait for them to come back safely. Latika and her mother-in-law were doing the same on that day. One by one, all his group members came back, but Nirapada did not. As the evening approached, Nirapada's wife and his mother became extremely anxious. To get a glimpse of her son, Nirapada's mother started walking towards the forest. But there was no trace of him. So, she came back hurriedly and enquired Nirapada's companion about his whereabouts. But none of them had any definite news. Being utterly helpless, the mother pleaded everyone to go in search of her only son. Her incessant screaming reminded everyone of their responsibility towards their missing companion. Keeping their tiredness aside, all the young men from the camps set out in search of their friend into the forest. They made flambeaus, took their shovels and spades and as they marched forward, their shout pierced through the silence of the deep dark forest.

They walked almost 2-3 kilometres through the heart of the dark impassable forest and continuously shouted Nirapada's name at the top of their voice. It seemed as if the dense forest was quaking severely in response to their desperate screaming. Nearby mountains echoed Nirapada's name repeatedly.

The light of the flambeaus and the sound of their screams echoed through the hills made the wild animals got alarmed as they started to run away. The forest was so deep that there was always a possibility to lose one's way. That's why they were trying to mark their way by collecting dry leaves and setting them on fire in some places.

After walking for an hour in the light of the flambeaus, they reached the spot where the deforestation was taking place. But there was not the slightest trace of Nirapada. As soon as the boys shouted Nirapada's name, they could hear a horrific roar of a bear. As they looked at that direction, they saw a huge black bear running away trampling the weeds and the tree branches on its way.

Everyone yelled at the top of their voice and started chasing away the bear.

Having moved a little further, they saw Nirapada lying senseless in a pool of blood under a tendu tree. Without wasting a moment, they heft Nirapada up. He was still alive. But his neck was bleeding badly. The bear pawed at his neck and snatched out a considerable amount of flesh. As a result, an incessant flow of fresh blood was running down from his neck. Being senseless, Nirapada was groaning in pain as his life was hanging by a thread. On seeing this, his friends immediately wrapped a towel around the wound. But to save Nirapada's life, they desperately needed water which was hard to find. Even Nirapada's own jug had fallen on the ground upside down at a distance. Without having an alternative, they formed a cradle with bamboos and leaves and carried half-dead Nirapada to the camp at the middle of the night.

Having returned to the camp, they splashed water on Nirapada's eyes and face and applied other quack remedies to bring him back to senses. On the next day, Nirapada narrated the incident to us in details. He said, "I was taking rest under the tendu tree after I finished eating the rotis. As a cool breeze touched my tired body, I felt asleep. The bear came from the other side and seized my neck with its paw. Initially I thought it was a man. But when the action was repeated, I looked back and saw a bear balancing on the tree with its hand and was attempting an attack on me. I stood up and got hold of its hands from the other side of the tree. I realised if I released its hands, I would be finished. So, resting my legs on the tree, I pulled his hand as tightly as possible while chanting god's name, "Save, father Harichand!" The bear was putting all its force to free its hands. I uttered, "As long as I am alive, I will never release your hands."

Looking around I found that all of you had already left. I didn't know what to do. But I was determined, if I die, I won't spare the bear either. Afterwards, I heard your screaming and looked at that direction. At that point, the bear got an opportunity to free its hand. It pawed at my back violently and ran away. I have no idea what happened after that."

Nirapada's incident was not the only case of this sort. These occurrences were so frequent that describing all of them would seem like mere repetition. It would surpass even the volume of the Mahabharata. So, it's better to avoid dragging it further and to concentrate on the next episode.

On July 1977, 16 decimal plot was measured and given to us for habitation. We built our houses in these lands with tree branches, leaves and woods from the forest. Each family was given a pair of bullocks for farming. Some families got bullocks with broken legs but they were promised to have a replacement later, which obviously was never to happen. We were given ploughshares and were instructed to make ploughs from them. Afterwards, groups were formed and each group consisted of 5-7 families. Also, we were provided with paddy seeds, rosella seeds and legume seeds and were instructed to cultivate as much as we can.

With these fallow lands and unfit bullocks, growing crops was next to impossible. The stony lands contained the remnants of the roots of the felled trees. When they informed the authority about this, the government provided them with a tractor-drawn harrow for farming. But this type of farming involved double amount of risk. Improper harrowing could damage the soil badly leaving it uneven on the surface. On top of that, to continue farming with unfit bullocks was almost impossible. As a result, crops would either decompose being soaked in water or they would dry out and rot on the stony surface. So, even after this extent of relentless toil, some of them were able to procure a small amount of paddy and others were left with simply nothing.

In 1978, the government stopped all the grants allotted to the refugees of Dandakaranya. Each family was instructed to build their own house by making asbestos roof on the poles. They were asked to make walls out of mud. The newcomers were yet to obtain any official allocation of lands. The irrigation system was still not in process. The only job they had was to build mud houses for those who were unable to work for themselves. The crisis gradually became more and more intense all over Dandakaranya. From our village, we had to travel the distance of 40 kilometres crossing 7-8 hills on the way to reach Dongkorai, a place located in Andhra Pradesh. We would get broken bits of grains at a very cheap rate there. It would take 2 more days to come back to our houses. Throughout the journey, we survived on fountain waters and wild fruits. In Dandak, there were plenty of mahua fruits and flowers. Those fruits and flowers could be used for producing liquor and oil respectively. That's why they had market demand. Although the Bengalis were granted permission for felling certain precious trees, like, shal, teak, mundi, bija, shirisa, they were not allowed to cut mahua trees. So, they had an opportunity to sell mahua fruits and flowers. In the Adivasi areas, people usually did not go in fear of being attacked.

Since the beginning of the Dandakaranya project until that time, there was no bonding between the newcomers and the natives. Because, the Adivasis used to avoid the company of Bengali speaking people. Until 1965, they didn't know anything about clothing or cooking. They used to wander in the forest all day with bow and arrow for hunting. When they would come across any people clad in cloths, they would hide themselves in the forest. There was no furniture in

their rooms. They only used utensils made of clay. To drink water, they used the shell of gourd as a container. Although they had plenty of cows, bullocks, goats, sheep and buffalos, there was no shelter for these animals. They didn't even drink milk or extort milk from the cows. For farming, they were dependent on flat surfaces on the hillslopes or on the areas where the forest was not so deep. Having cleared the plants that would grow there, they somehow ploughed up those lands to sow seeds. Having sown paddy, corn, sorghum and other cereals during monsoon, they used to visit their fields again at time of reaping. They were satisfied with whatever was left behind amidst the weeds after the wild animals trampled the fields. They were even unaware of the usage of money or savings. They needed very little to sustain which was mostly managed from forest resources. Although salt was very precious to them, they didn't know how to produce it. In Bejengiwada, Sikhapali, local markets would be held where they would exchange daily necessary goods. Some unscrupulous traders used to arrive there with salt and dry fish. In exchange of one bucket of salt, these sellers used to take away one bucket of rice mahua and other such things. The refugees could not trade in those markets. If they gave money for buying anything, it was thrown away with disgust. To trade their necessary things, the refugees had to travel either 90 Kilometers from Malkangiri to Motu or 200 Kilometers from Motu to Jaipur. For transport, they only had bullock carts provided by the government. During 1969, Jaipur-Motu and Jaipur-Poria; only on these two routes the buses ran for once a day. Sometimes, it would even take 2-3 days to set the journey in motion if the cars broke down on their way.

Until 1976, they were gradually getting acquainted with the usage of clothes. The young girls used to split a lungi into two halves. While they wrapped one half of the lungi around their waist; with the other, they covered their breasts draping it over the throat. The male adults (who lived adjacent to the Bengali villages) would generally wear loin cloths. There was no linguistic exchange among people. Both the sides used to find the other's language incomprehensible. Although, the newer generation of the migrants who were rehabilitated here before 1964, had a certain command of the Adivasi language of that place. There was an Adivasi village adjacent to ours, named Salemari Kunda. While coming here from Mana, I brought with me a radio and a cycle. When I drove the cycle through the village, people irrespective of their age, rushed to hide themselves out of fear. We had to go to the AEO centre through that village. While coming back, I saw a group of archers sitting behind the tree with their arrows fixed at the bow. If the strange looking machine, called cycle, caused any disruption to their security, they would throw arrows in my direction for self-defence. Considering the situation, I never took out my cycle again until our interactions were at ease.

Among the villagers of Salemari Kunda, there was a fifty-year old man called 'Moka', who was exceptional. I had always seen him wearing a towel around his body. Sometimes, he would also wear a full-sleeve vest. At that time, I had

no proper control of the Odia Language. But my Hindi was good owing to my stay at different camps of Madhya Pradesh for 5 long years. Because of that, I could naturally interact with any Indian other than the Bengalis in Hindi. One day, I met Moka on my way. I asked him in Hindi, "Brother, where are you going? What is your name?" His instant reply took me by surprise, "My name is Moka. I am going to the fields." In these remote mountains, a primitive man without having any connection with education is speaking our national language Hindi! With increased enthusiasm I said further, "Man! you speak Hindi so well." He answered, "Why not? What's the big deal? I can even speak English a little bit." Now I asked, "Do you know how to read or write?" Moka answered in the negative. I was curious, "So how did you learn English?" The look in his eyes was forlorn and distant as he said, "That is a long sad story." I became more curious about the matter. Moka continued to say, "A good 25-30 miles away from here, there is a big river by the name of Sabari. The other side of the river is Madhya Pradesh where there is an iron ore range called Boiladila. To extract iron ore from that hill, the Englishmen had built a railway track up to Visakhapatnam. Since no one wanted to work on those tracks, the Englishmen forcefully took the Adivasis to engage them in breaking stones wherever they wanted. Having built the road from Jaipur to Motu, they used to drive their cars for the sole purpose of collecting woods and to capture the Adivasis. One day, I was going to the forest for hunting. Along with the other Adivasis of the village, I was chasing a wild boar. Suddenly, some English gunmen got down from a car and captured many of us. Quite a number of Adivasis survived a narrow escape. But we were caught and put to work cutting through the hill. If we denied their orders, they whipped us ruthlessly. We would only get loafs for food. I was compelled to stay with them for 10 years. Then, one day, I capitalised on my opportunity to escape. The people there used to talk in English and Hindi. Perhaps, because of that, my Hindi is good, although I can't speak enough English.

I said, "After the partition, unfortunately, we left our homeland and sought refuge from the Indian government. According to their convenience, the Indian government had given us rehabilitation in your motherland. In future, both of our next generation will consider this country as their homeland. In terms of living and growth, we both need to extend our hands to each other. In this respect, the Bengalis and the Adivasis need to build up a steady relationship. But, can you tell me why do the Adivasis run away when they come across a Bengali? This won't definitely help us in the process of striking a good friendship." Moka said in reply, "British has left this country, still there is a persistent notion in our mind that the people wearing clothes are not good human beings, rather they are ruthless and violent. Given a chance, they will take us away and won't free us ever again. Initially, we had a firm belief that these people had been brought here only to capture the Adivasis. Your attire is similar to that of the Englishmen. Your food habits and ways of living are much

different from ours. And for that reason, we can never have a faithful and cordial relationship between us.”

Besides that, Bengalis also found it very difficult to keep pace with the culture, social structure and condition of living of the Adivasis. Let me narrate an incident which happened in 1965. An aged man from MV 68 told me, “Having been rehabilitated that year, an innocent couple harvested good quality crops with untiring labour. When the sheaf of paddy turned golden in colour, they built a makeshift platform to keep a watch on the land all day and night. One day, at dawn, they left their farmland and went home. Having come back to the field after two hours, they found an Adivasi woman carrying a large hollow basket around her waist who was plucking paddy from the field and filling the basket with it. On seeing that, the couple took the woman by her hand to the village to show this matter to everyone. The villagers released the woman after taking all the paddy from her basket.

“Just before the evening, the woman came back to the village with a group of Adivasis equipped with bows and arrows and started attacking the villagers. Under this circumstance, the Bengali residents of the village came to them and wanted to know what was wrong. Why had they come in numbers? The Adivasis said in reply, ‘You must be punished for holding our woman’s hand. Or else, you would have to give us a big goat as compensation.’ The villagers said, ‘Their woman had stolen paddy from Nagen's farmland.’ In response, the Adivasis said, ‘What would she do if there is no food in store for her at home? That doesn't mean you would hold her hand.’

“According to their judgement, an FIR for defamation was lodged against Nagen in the local police station since he could not afford a goat. Subsequently, Nagen was summoned to the police station. When Nagen went to the police station for his attendance, the officer-in-charge gave him tight slaps on both the cheeks. Nagen’s face turned red and tears rolled down from his eyes. The furious officer charged at Nagen, ‘Idiot! Why have you held an Adivasi girl’s hand?’ Nagen started trembling in fear, ‘She stole my crops. I took her to the villagers to show them what she had done.’ The officer cut him short, ‘These innocent people are unable to recognise what belongs to whom. Perhaps, unknowingly, they took your crops. Why did you hold her hand?’ Nagen found it difficult to answer and said, ‘It was my mistake.’ Now the officer said, ‘It’s not enough to acknowledge your mistake. It took me a lot of effort to convince the Adivasis to go back home. Now give me 100 rupees or I will put you in the lock up.’ Nagen started shuddering and in a quavering voice he managed to say, ‘Sir, I haven't brought any money with me. I have to go home and collect the money.’ The officer told him, ‘Go and manage it by the afternoon, or I will put you in the lockup.’

“After being released, Nagen could not arrange for the money anyway. So, he had to sell the chickens at a very cheap price. Then he went to the police station with his wife. Nagen left his wife seated on the road and went to the officer by

himself. Having received the money, the officer became very satisfied and said to Nagen, 'You are free to go now. But remember, never hold an Adivasi woman's hand.'

"When Nagen came outside, his wife asked him, 'Is it resolved now?' Nagen said, yes. The wife inquired, 'He took all the money from you, have you asked him where you should bring the miscreant from next time?' Nagen answered in the negative. The wife now asked Nagen to go and ask the officer. Nagen went back and stood in front of the officer. The officer inquired about the purpose of his coming back. Nagen replied, 'My wife wants to know where should I bring the thief from now on.'"

Until 1975-76, there was no proper education system. There was a school in every AEO centre up to class seven, a high school in Malkangiri and a few primary schools in some of the old villages. But, no one was mentally prepared to take classes in those schools or to have a permanent settlement in the adverse conditions of Dandak. Meanwhile, the left front government had come to power in West Bengal. On 28/11/77, home minister Ram Chatterjee, along with Rabishankar Pandey and Kiranmay Nanda, members of the legislative assembly came to Dandakaranya to conduct a spot investigation. Ram Chatterjee was a known face to all the refugees who migrated from the Mana transit camp to Dandakaranya, because, in May 1975, a three-day long program of 'Sarabharatiya Udbastu Shommelion' was held in Mana. In that conference, Ram Chatterjee gave a long emotional speech addressing the weal and woe of the refugees and promised them, "If our government comes to power, we will rehabilitate you in Bengal." He added, "What I witnessed in Dandakaranya, it seemed as if the government has kept you in exile rather than providing rehabilitation. I will take this matter to our chief minister Jyoti Basu and we will definitely find a way out to resolve this crisis."

The entire population of Dandakaranya started to wait in anticipation after hearing Rambabu's words - when will their dearest Rambabu come and arrange for their rehabilitation. In the deepest core of their heart, they harboured hopes of going to Bengal with all their belongings. On 16th January, 1978, Rambabu came again with the secretary of the Left-front Committee, Ashok Ghosh. Ashok, too, made a similar promise to them, saying, "If you want to go to West Bengal, ten billion hands of five billion population of the province would gladly accept you as their own." Rambabu further promised, "Your day will come. Until then, stand firmly on your ground. I was there with you in the past, I am here now and I will be there in future, too." At this, the large number of people congregated in the huge maidan of MVP 23, burst out in loud applause of sheer exhilaration and showed their gratitude to Rambabu. Countless proletariats started dancing in joy with their hands raised in the air and screamed, "Hail Ram Chatterjee!"

Not only in MPV 23, Ram Chatterjee conducted huge meetings in various other places like 110 Malkangiri Damsite, MV 79 and MPV 81. On several occasions, he assured the crowd by saying, “We will provide rehabilitation to all the people living in different corners of the country at Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans.” I am a witness of Rambabu's excited speech myself. In the Dam-side meeting, he said, “We never forgot the promise we'd made. Currently, we are in power in West Bengal. The wheel of fortune has turned in our favour. The dark clouds in the sky of our fortune being wiped out, we have come here to arrange for the resettlement of all the Bengalis in Bengal. Five billion Bengalis are waiting to welcome you in Bengal with extended arms.”

These words of reassurance from a strong leader of the left-front, Ram Chatterjee, inspired hopes in the minds of the refugees. From March 1978 onwards, staking their own lives, they started to rush towards Marichjhapi, leaving behind the government-given land in the rough and perilous forests of Dandakaranya, with dreams of permanent rehabilitation in the long-desired fertile lands green with plentiful crops of their golden Bengal.

The refugees from Visakhapatnam, Koraput and Raipur crowded the buses, lorries, trains, cars and all the other modes of transportation that headed towards West Bengal. Crossing the Sarabi River from Poria, one would get to Dronapal, Madhya Pradesh. From the riverbank of Dronapal, the road (towards Raipur) was beautiful up to the distance of 1.5 kilometers. For almost a month, thousands of refugees used to gather in that vast stretch of land waiting for a vehicle to take them to Raipur. There were some Marwari grocery shops that imported food items from Jagdalpur through lorries, but their stocks would be completely exhausted by the evening. Even the boatman got rid of his extreme poverty as the influx of refugees helped him building a new brick-house.

Starting from Raipur railway station as far as the balcony of the rail-storeroom, there was not an iota of room left. On top of that, throughout the station premises, people waited in anticipation for their opportunity to board a train. They had to manage defecation and urination in unimaginably pathetic condition. In a deadly unhygienic atmosphere where the filthy drains were infested by mosquitoes and flies, amidst the helpless cries of the hunger-stricken children, some had to collect papers, some boiled a meagre amount of rice they could salvage or chewed a small piece of loaf or dry flattened rice, while the others spent days in starvation throughout their journey to reach Hasnabad railway station. Unless you are a witness, it is impossible to even imagine the plights of these people fighting against such hardships. In general eyes, they did not have any respect or esteem. Common people covered their noses with handkerchief and looked at these people through side glances when they happen to cross them in the street. They were even deprived of the minimum dignity of a disgusting mongrel.

Police frightened to lathi-charge on the refugees of the train I boarded and forced them to get off at Kharagpur station. The policemen were extremely alert

to ensure that no passenger could reach Howrah station by train. When we got off at Kharagpur, we saw a group of extremely gentlemanly people seated in a circle at platform no. 4. The refugees did not have time to look into everything happening around. Everyone was preoccupied with their aim of reaching Marichjhapi at any cost. To achieve their goal, they were so undaunted that even if they suffered the loss of their sick old parents, their little infants or their precious belongings, they did not have a chance to be overwhelmed with grief. Throwing them aside, they resumed their journey to Marichjhapi, Sundarban.

I slowly stepped into the crowd to discover what was happening in the middle. As I went near to the scene, I could hear a woman's loud screaming that silenced the crowd of those noisy gentlemen. The gentlemen were so curious to discover the matter that they were shouldering each other to catch a glimpse of the scene. Amidst all the chaos, considering my failure to discover what was happening, when I decided to move out of the crowd being disappointed, I saw two female police standing with canes in their hands. They covered their faces with their hands while talking and continued to cackle loudly. I came to them and inquired about the matter. One of them replied, "A refugee woman is delivering a baby." Her companion patted lightly on her back and said, "Shut up you fool! Don't use the word 'delivery'! Do you think this old man will understand that!" Then she pronounced it in Bangla to make it easier for me to understand and said that people had crowded there only to witness it. Having said this, both of them burst out laughing once again.

I was fuming with rage at their laughter. But considering my situation, I controlled myself and said, "You are also women. While it is such a disgrace for a helpless woman who is compelled to deliver her baby in front of thousands of men, is your conscience sleeping? Don't you feel a prick of your conscience? These avaricious men, blinded by their lust, are competing with each other to witness the process of how they were born on this earth from the mother's womb. They are making fun of an agonised and helpless mother. And, you two, being police-women with big canes in your hand, are cackling so insensitively and enjoying this amusement? If you have minimum qualities of motherhood or womanhood left in you, use those canes properly. Make arrangements to send the imperilled woman to any restroom or to the railway hospital."

My words acted like cold water on hot oil, as these two mother-women started burning with rage. Their facial expression changed instantly from heartiest laughter to wild rage and they said, "No one has commissioned you to give a long lecture here. It doesn't suit the refugees. We will arrange for waiting rooms or hospitals for those who are wriggling all over the country like pests having no hearth or home! Get out of here, else, you will be put to jail for travelling without ticket."

Though I was not a traveller without ticket, being a refugee was my crime. Even if I bought tickets, millions of my refugee brothers could not afford it. Then I remembered the song written by a distinguished folk artist, "While protesting,

you need to take the snake by its throat.” But I did not have the courage or strength to even lay my hands on the throats of these black cobras. Being dispirited and dejected, with tears in my eyes, I took the blessing of mother Bengal and looked at the sky saying, “O mother Bengal! This is how your five billion sons with ten billion raised hands are welcoming the homeless proletariats! Keep yourself satisfied with your happy sons, I am heading for my exile in the forests!”

After being stopped at Kharagpur by the police forces of the Left-front government, the refugees could never move towards Marichjhapi again. Returning to the desolate villages, I saw their left-out cows and calves grazing in the vast stretches of forest. In the evening, they would come back to the desolate thatched houses. The villages looked like crematoriums blazing in the hot sun in dreary loneliness. At night, this deserted land seemed to turn into a haunted place. I, sitting there alone, left bereft of my near and dear ones, couldn't help but shedding tears at the memories of the bygone days. “Although the bonds of affection are lost, the memories are still inscribed. O dear, my hurt aches, I cannot bear this loneliness.” I have no direct experience of the episodes that followed regarding how the Left-front government, to fulfil their promise, lured the refugees to go to Marichjhapi and welcomed them. I only possess some tearful and raw interviews of the victims and some tragic handwritten documents signed by the general secretary of the Marichjhapi Udbastu Unnoyonshil Committee. Those papers graphically depict the genocide perpetrated by the Left-front government during 1978-79. Other than that, I have no secret information about how this leader and his henchmen, the perpetrator of this genocide, conspired to affirm their control on the throne of Bengal.

[Sunil Halder was a member of the refugee group who came from Dandakaranya during Siddhartha Ray's regime. He was there in every discussion table with Jyoti Basu. He witnessed the severeness of the term 'betrayal' and to what extent it affected the refugees.]

Betrayal

Sunil Halder

'Shara Bharat Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti' was established in 1967. Its central office was located in Mana, Raipur. Bimal Chakraborty was the first president of this association. The refugees of the Mana transit camp were so fed up with their camp life that they were compelled to organise themselves under this banner.

Colonel S.P.Nandi was the administrative head at that time. He used to kick out anyone who'd violate the rules of the camp. Raiharan Barei was still not married. He had a sense of acute judgement and a strong organisational power. In 1968, he was ruled out of the camp. Then he started organising the volunteers. Having realised that without any manpower or financial strength an organization could not function properly, he concentrated on its consolidation. In 1970-71, Satish Mondal became its president, whereas Rabin Chakraborty was the vice president and Raiharan Barei, the secretary.

At Mana, Durga Puja was usually organised by Dandakaranya Project Authority that was run by the central government. For the first time, in 1970, the refugees took the initiative to organise Durga Puja without any help from the government. From 1970 onwards, the rift between the Board of directors of the government and the refugees were getting prominent. Captain Nandi had indiscriminately used tear gas and gunshots to throttle any demand of the refugees. The camp dwellers only demanded for their rehabilitation in Bengal. Samar Guha first came to Mana in 1971. Having arrived here, Samar witnessed that the Bengalis were chased away from their own land and were living an infernal non-existent life as a burden of the free nation.

During that time, I used to study in high school. Where there was crisis of food and identity, education automatically took the back seat.

Afterwards, UCRC, the refugee organization of the CPIM, summoned the refugees to West Bengal for discussion. I was also a member of that team. We talked about our condition. We expressed our wish to live in West Bengal as Dandakaranya was uninhabitable for us. Then, Prankrishna Chakraborty and Suhrid Mullick, the main leaders of the UCRC took some of our refugee leaders, Satish Mondal, Raiharan Barei, Ranganal Goldar by boat to show four different islands in the Sundarbans. Among them, the refugee leaders especially liked the island called Marichjhapi. These news were published in 'Satyayug' magazine of Kolkata.

That year, in 1975, Jyoti Basu went to Villai for giving a speech. He had a discussion with our leaders there. I was also present in that meeting. He assured us by saying, "If we come to power, we will rehabilitate all of you in West Bengal." This news was published in the daily newspapers of Raipur, namely, 'Naya Duniya' and 'Nababharat Times'. In 1975, just before the Emergency, when Siddhartha Ray was the Chief Minister, we tried to come to West Bengal. 2500 of us gathered in front of the Monument of Kolkata Maidan. The rest who attempted to come, were halted at Kharagpur, beaten and sent back again. The others were detained at Raipur station.

We were arrested after staying for four days in Maidan and sent to jail. During those four days, we were provided with food and water by Bharat Sebashram Sangha. Just after this, the Emergency was declared. Most of our leaders went underground. Rest of them were arrested. During that time, any CPIM leader from the UCRC neither tried to contact us nor helped us in any possible way. I was arrested along with Satish Mondal, Rangalal Goldar, Rabin Chakraborty, Shyamal Patra, Harekrishna Pal, Amar Dey and Ratan Sil. We got parole from the jail once the Emergency was lifted. We went back to Raipur again. Afterwards, Ram Chatterjee and Samar Mukherjee of the CPIM came to Dandakaranya to observe our condition.

In 1977, after Jyoti Basu was elected in power, we came to West Bengal to discuss our matters with him. Ram Chatterjee took all of us to Jyoti Basu's chamber in the Writers' Building. Along with me there were Satish Mondal, Raiharan Barei, Rangalal Goldar, Rabin Chakraborty, Samir Halder, Asha Saha, Moynamashi and three other women.

Over a long discussion, Jyoti Basu said, "How can we give you lands while we were unable to provide it to the landless peasants of West Bengal?" Then we showed him the newspaper articles of Naya Duniya and Nababharat Times which bear the testimony of his speech at Villai. We had a discussion for twenty minutes. He finished the discussion by saying, "If you can come to the Sundarbans by yourself and make your own arrangements, our police won't resist you unlike the Congress government." We paid him another visit at the Writers' some other day. His words remained the same. From Kolkata, we all went to Ram Chatterjee's house. He discussed many a matter with us and confirmed, "Come, all of you."

Ram Chatterjee and Ashok Ghosh from Forward Block visited Dandakaranya to conduct four meetings in different venues. Now, all over Dandakaranya, an outcry could be heard, "Let's go to the Sundarbans."

The history that follows is marred with shame. We had no idea whatsoever that Jyoti Basu could be so inhumanly insensitive in dealing with the lives of so many proletariats like us. People like him were enjoying the benefits of freedom at the expense of so many refugees who were dependent on their leaders. He couldn't have conspired to fire at us or kill us starving like this if he had the slightest humanity left in him, let alone his communist identity. Such an act of

betrayal was only possible for him because we belonged to the lower class, we were hard working farmers, fishermen, blacksmiths, potters and most of us were uneducated. We are even worse than the animals. And so, we are exposed to the whims of these people. Even after so many years, those horrific memories haunt us from time to time. We shudder at the memory of this betrayal even today. They claim themselves to be the friends of the poor! Will the history of our struggle and their betrayal ever be written? Will these human looking beasts ever be punished?

2010

Interview: 10th June,

[Social worker Ashoka Gupta was the wife of Saibal Gupta, the chairman of the 'Dandakaranya Unnayan Parishad'. It was her last interview on 'the refugees of Marichjhapi' as an witness.]

How Many Times Will They Be Homeless?

Ashoka Gupta

Question: Didi, tell me about your experience in Dandakaranya and in Marichjhapi. You were with Dada all the time and you stood by the common people which is exceptional.

Answer: Since the days are long gone, it is difficult to even recount them properly. In the year 1963/64, we were in Dandakaranya. We came to Marichjhapi later, at the time of the incident. But during our stay in Dandakaranya for 10 months, we visited each and every village there. We went to Amarkot, Parulkot, and then, Malkangiri. Observing the course of things in those places we understood that the refugees were not happy with their condition. The main reason for this situation was mismanagement. Amidst all this, they tried to settle down wherever they'd gone. When I went there, I came across many people whom I met in Noakhali. It is interesting to note that, the people I'd met in Noakhali before, were there in Dandakaranya too and the

familiar faces of Dandakaranya were seen in the camps of Kolkata as well. So, it seemed to me that these huge waves of people, uprooted from their own land, were just moving from one place to another helplessly. How to find a way to help them? And, why were they uprooted from their own land? With the assistance of the governmental or non-governmental organisations, these people could certainly have been rehabilitated. While roaming around different villages of Dandakaranya, I realised that they were trying really hard to earn their livelihood from agriculture. But, after cultivating for six months, they thought they wouldn't need anything else for the rest of the year. To tell the truth, it was not possible to sustain for six more months with their cultivated food. On top of that, their ration was also stopped. They were even denied access of the food they had in stock. As a result, this government initiative, undertaken in common interest, was not sufficient for them at all. Consequently, they had suffered tremendous hardships. To get rid of this suffering, one needs rehabilitation! We could not abate their suffering. The government officers who were in charge at that time were mostly non-Bengali people. Since the petitions given to us by the refugees were written in Bangla, it took us even months to 'put up' those documents. So, the arrangements were becoming 'unpractical' and it made our purpose in Dandakaranya totally ineffective. And talking about Marichjhapi, why did people start to migrate there from Dandakaranya, this is what you want to know? People shifted to Marichjhapi voluntarily on their own effort. Without taking any help from others, they wanted to inhabit there permanently depending on farming, fishing and boat making for their livelihood. The government did not allow them to stay there. The refugees were suppressed with guns and inhuman torture was inflicted on them. To escape this infernal suffering, the refugees arranged for their own rehabilitation but it did not turn out to be successful. The government of West Bengal lacked sympathy to deal with this matter and failed the refugees. Since this is a recent phenomenon, we should discuss it more often and considering the extent of torture inflicted on the people in Marichjhapi, it is literally shocking to think of how inhumanly oppressive a government can be. What surprises me the most is that in spite of being so ruthlessly oppressed, these people who didn't have anything except for the bare minimum had the ability to endure so much pain.

Question: Do you think that this case needs to be put on trial?

Answer: Tyranny of this sort should never happen.

Question: Those who oppressed the refugees were, in fact, the same people who brought them to Marichjhapi and displaced them afterwards.....

Answer: No, that is not true. People migrated from Dandakaranya thought that there was an island in the Sunderbans where they could rehabilitate themselves by farming fish. They wanted to inhabit there with all their might. We visited those small huts they built on the sand bed. One day, about noon, when they were cooking rice for lunch, police opened fire at them. The instance of

inhuman torture we have recently experienced in Nandigram bears a resemblance with what happened in Marichjhapi back then.

Question: Don't you think that this incident needs to be judged properly?

Answer: Of course, it should have been. As a matter, once a few members of an international organisation came and started staying at my house. Their agenda was to see how the refugees were persecuted and how they tried to earn their livelihood. But they neither managed to get any interview, nor received any help from the government. In my opinion, that is the reason why these kinds of attempts remained unsuccessful. This is more or less my account of the Marichjhapi massacre. Bulletins have been published on why did they come here, how did they arrive and how were they displaced. Along with the Marichjhapi bulletin, there are 3 articles written by my husband which can be reprinted. Other than that, I have no information of the whereabouts of those people who came back from Marichjhapi. But at least, we know that the people living at Dandakaranya were facing the same mismanagement. I distinctly remember to have written a full-length article on the refugees of the Mana Transit Camp. I stayed there for days and observed that the non-governmental workers were more sympathetic towards the need of the refugees than the government employees. They were putting immense effort into making the habitation at Mana a better place for living. If a township had been built at Mana, it could have been transformed into a city like Faridabad. My husband made its plan but it was not effective. If you wish, you can go through the old papers and find out that there was a clear distinction between the approaches of the non-governmental and the governmental organisations. Whereas the government employees were inordinately complacent with their own efforts, the NGO workers tried to provide the refugees with all the favours and aids from the government. That's why the refugees received many things from them. If you read the article on Mana camp in the book of Dandakaranya, you will find the account of things they received. These things could have led them build a proper city if they were not oppressed like that at the camp of Mana. Although they were tormented brutally at the camp of Mana, still there was an administration. In Marichjhapi, there was nothing of that sort. In my opinion, an incident similar to the massacre of Marichjhapi can never happen in a civilised society. I can't think of anything else right now. The proper region of Dandakaranya is a beautiful place. So many people have migrated there and tried to settle in. Those who could get hold of the legal documents for their lands built their own houses there. Later on, they were even elected MPs and MLAs of those places. But those who couldn't manage to get legal documents or got delayed in returning to that place from Marichjhapi, were unable to claim their lands. Even their loans were not sanctioned. Another important thing is that, be it in Dandakaranya or in Marichjhapi, if they had no legal document, it was not possible to find any job due to the absence of official records. It was literally impossible to sustain without a job. But amidst all this, those who

actually survived, had immense amount of strength as they tried to live like human beings adjusting with this abnormal surrounding. And, I hope, people who are still writing about this episode would very well understand that those of us who had gone there after partition, tried our best to provide the refugees with a proper rehabilitation where they would live with the dignity of human beings. This is all I have to say.

Interview: 10th June, 2007

[The people of Marichjhapi didn't have such bitter experience back then. Perhaps, that's the reason why so many people were not there to support them. Today, the entire country has stood for their cause.]

The People have awaken

Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta: When the refugees migrated to West Bengal from East Bengal, there were long discussions on where would they be rehabilitated in India, where would they be provided with the settlement etc. and then they were sent to Dandakaranya or some other places, I think they were also sent to some places in Panjab as well....

Q: The Punjabis were sent to Punjab.....

M : Yes, Punjabis were sent to Punjab, and, because they were sent to many different places, some went to Andaman as well. All the places are marked with the history of displaced people. When they were sent to Andaman, it was sheer injustice against the people who had already been staying there for a long time. As both the groups were equally weak, wherever they had gone, they suffered injustice. So, it happened this way. But I came to know that, on the pretext of sending them to Marichjhapi, Jyoti Basu had promised, "If we come to power, you all will be rehabilitated in West Bengal." Other ministers also said the same. They are not alive now, at least Ram Chatterjee is certainly not. After migrating to Marichjhapi, the refugees were severely tortured and were compelled to go back to Malkangiri, where there was no water, no farmland, not even a paddy field and for these people who lived on agriculture, the place was simply uninhabitable. Today this tragedy has become all the more relevant because we can see the same incidents taking place in the fertile lands of Hooghly's Singur or in Nandigram of East Midnapur or even in Khejuri. Although in these places, the people actually belong to this state itself and not from East Bengal, still the state government is devising the same mechanism of violence on them. Now the people are having a prick of their conscience while considering the tragedy of those who left Marichjhapi owing to a similar

predicament. This similarity is getting prominent with the unfolding of so many events. The Left front, since the early days of being in power, played the same role of an oppressor. Thousands of children died as they were forced to starve or drink poisonous water. In spite of having the High Court's dictate, "These people cannot be deprived of food and water," the government seized all the launches and starved them to death. Thousands died of diarrhoea as they tried to survive by eating grass. The torture went to this extent at that time.

Morning shows the day. The incident happened in Marichjhapi bore a clear indication of what the Left Front will turn out to be in future. The way people are driven away from their own fertile lands and are rendered homeless, the same degree of oppression was exercised in Marichjhapi also. People are being forcefully evacuated from their ancestral lands.

So, we can clearly see that while the United Democratic Front (1967) was in power and not the 'left front', Jyoti Basu was the minister. These events took place during his regime. Adivasi women were shot to death in Naxalbari. Their manifestation of undisputed power on people over the years has reached to such an extent that with every passing day, their real face is being exposed more and more. They are increasing their degree of torture every day. In my opinion, they don't even have the right to run the government in the banner of the 'Left front'. It is, indeed, a part of the larger scheme of globalisation happening all over the world.

You cannot finish the common people by any means and the most important part is that these common people, belonging to both Hindu and Muslim religion, are now rising in protest against the oppression. In Nandigram, the Hindu women are blowing conches and the Muslims are summoning for prayer to alert people against their enemies. And, it is testified that in Nandigram, the CPIM goons who indiscriminately fired at people in disguise of police, killed both Hindus and Muslims. Now they are blaming the Muslims as communal and branding them as Jamat-e-Ulema. Thus, a state government is becoming instrumental in striking a communal riot. So, there is nothing to expect from them, the sooner they are finished, the better.

Q: Didi can I ask you something? Is there any chance that sporadic incidents that are taking place now, will turn into something very similar to the events of the Kanoria Jute Mill? Shouldn't there be a leader like Medha Patkar who would lead them from the front? Would they be able to move forward in the battle without a steady leadership?

M: It is all the more important because the same thing is not happening here. In Singur, Mamata did not carry forward the protest single-handedly. It was a spontaneous outburst of the common people of Singur in general, especially the women. In Nandigram, too, the common people have stepped forward. When they went to Haripur to build a nuclear power plant, the women were the first to alert the villagers by blowing conches. Then these undaunted women came and lied down on the ground. They even attacked the policemen. The police got so

frightened that the state government could not enter Haripur even with the assistance of a few thousand personnel. Haripur too is situated in East Midnapore. No outsiders entered that place. I was the first to enter there. So, it is not justified to consider this protest movement as a product of any particular leadership or political party. The common people have stepped forward to announce loud and clear that they won't let these things happen. We should respect that. Back then, the people of Marichjhapi didn't have such bitter experience. Perhaps, that's the reason why so many people were not there to support them. Today, the entire country has stood for their cause.

2007

Interview: 8th February,

[The day that issue of 'Pustakmela' was published, the situation became intense. Guild member Tridib Chattapadhyay threatened to resign and said, "if this writing comes out in public, I will be sentenced to death."]

Item Marichjhapi

Sailen Chakraborty

While the genocide was actually taking place in Marichjhapi (1949), we had started for school with new books in our bags. Back then, we were little boys and there was no media in that remote village of Bankura except for the radio. The children didn't have any interest in news either. So, we had no knowledge of the state sponsored genocide happening in another part of Bengal. Was this a blessing? In the present day, the gory images of people at Singur-Nandigram-Jangal Mahal are tainting the innocence of childhood. They will have to bear these wounds of time for their entire life. Looking at it from that perspective, probably we are fortunate enough.

The massacre happened in Marichjhapi. The number of people who died afterwards was higher than those killed in the direct attack. Still, we had no information about it. That's why, the people of Bankura and Purulia did not have any definite grudge against the Left front or Jyoti Basu. In general, the people of Rarh are satisfied with the bare necessities for survival. Their only dream is to live together in harmony with minimum comfort. Hence, we also grew up with that sense of satisfaction.

The people of Rarh Bengal had no active role in the course of determining the policies of the state and its governance, at least for the last three decades. During the left-front regime, a few leaders or ministers managed to have their entry into Mahakaran, but they were simply yes-men. They were only concerned about how to improve the condition of their own familial life in Kolkata. When they would visit their villages, they only showed off their 'Kolkata' splendour. In this way, they became the wonder-lords in the eyes of the destitute of the area.

We had to cross three villages on our way to school. The distance was five and a half kilometers from our house. In the intense heat of 44°, we used to team up and walk bare feet on the stony paths of Bankura. Going to school was like dream come true for us. Some days, we saw him ride past us on a motorcycle blowing dust from the road. In those days, he even used to have a motorcycle driver. People walking on the road used to greet him by joining their hands up in the air. I am referring to them as people because they would cover themselves with a mere towel and they did not even consider themselves as human beings. In their opinion, they were base people. I have also seen people lying down on the ground to touch the feet of their leader. He, in turn, continued walking while chewing a betel leaf as if he was doing them a great favour. The villagers considered it to be the advent of the almighty god who would fulfil all their dreams.

This 'man' was the MLA of that area. The absolute left.

We grew up in this environment. We got two bighas of land on lease which ensured our sustenance. It was a huge relief for us. So, the people of this area were happy accepting the Left MLA as our 'Lord'. While studying in Bankura College, we could never think of anything beyond that. In Tamlibandh Maidan, the Santhals used to come walking from Susunia hills to attend the meeting of Jyoti Basu. Walking a distance of 30-40 kilometers was like a child's play for them. The person having the image of Jyoti Basu on his chest badge was the luckiest of them all. They even used to involve in a scrimmage for it! As if, they were going to see the almighty!

This is how a college student of 1980s Rarh Bengal perceives his contemporary time. Amazement and wonder! They see eye to eye with one another. The lords of this area used to rejoice at their triumph in Kolkata and say, "Absolute majority once again, sir. We have swept away the opposition." There was no

opposition left except in Bankura town. Those who lived in the town were not mere 'people', but proper 'human beings'.

We literally used to harbour grudges against those town people. This was certainly a reactionary conspiracy on their part. We thought like this because we knew or we were taught that only the leaders were progressive.

So, when did I become disillusioned?

That time when I started living permanently in the village after completing my college education. The villagers had a lot of expectations from a young graduate in Physics. They had so many demands from me like writing an application, applying for bank loans, arranging for blood in hospitals etc. When I actually started doing these works, I realised that the Village Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad were full of corrupt people. This Panchayat cum party member used to shamelessly deduct 50 rupees even from the allowances granted for the widow and the old. The obliged people thought, "at least they are giving us the money. Until today we haven't got an ounce of it. We had suffered day in day out, none cared to visit us. Jyoti Basu is our Lord. Long live the red party."

Consequently, we have gained absolute majority once again, sir.

In our village and even in the neighbourhood, I was gradually getting 'isolated'. These people in dire need can never think of any protest. At least, the left front is giving them something!

From Bankura employment exchange office I received a call for an interview in school. In the entire exchange, only a few were graduate in physics. So, there was a series of vacancies in multiple schools.

In the interview board, donation was demanded directly, which means, I could become a school teacher only by bribing them. In spite of being graduated from the college, most of the young men and women were yet not ready to protest. In most cases, the educated youths from Bankura-Purulia-Medinipur were 'party workers'. So, a letter of recommendation from the local committee did not ensure a job because everywhere there were multiple candidates from inside the party. That's why, the custom of giving 'donation' had started. During that time span from late 80s to late 90s, no teacher was recruited without 'bribery', until the School Service Commission came into existence. All my acquaintances who are teaching in schools at present are the products of bribery.

As I protested, I got isolated. I was alone. I couldn't manage to live up to the expectation of my family and turned out to be a 'fool'. I was attacked and was eventually chased away from my area. It was such a relief!

I was left with nothing but my pen and the zeal to protest. My life was like that of a bohemian who glides according to his will. Eventually, I landed up in the Sunderbans. Gosaba-Satjelia-Kumirmari. Marichjhapi! Senescent people were unfolding to me the bloody chapters of history. No tide of the river has ever been able to wipe out the blood stains from the landscape of Marichjhapi. As I discovered these chapters, I flinched in fear.

The perpetrator of this massive genocide was none other than Jyoti Basu, the 'lord' of Rarh, where the left had an absolute majority.

My involvement in the research on Marichjhapi was mainly instigated by the urge to inform people about the true colours of Jyoti Basu.

When I reached Kolkata, I chanced upon this book called *Marichjhapi Naishabder Antaraley* written by Jagadishchandra Mondal. I was stunned. I felt the need to inform people about the book. I approached many of those so called 'progressive', 'defendant' people who bear a 'clean image' in the eyes of the society. But none of them agreed to either publish or print the book.

So, without having an alternative, I published this book under the pseudonym 'Jhinuk Chakraborty' in 'Pustakmela' (6th year, 1st issue, Baishakh- Ashar 1409), the mouthpiece of Kolkata Book fair. The headline was 'Lojja O Ghrinar Kalo Itihas'.

Why did I use the pseudonym?

To earn my living, I was working as the co-editor of 'Pustakmela' at that time. The editor was Sabitendranath Ray (Bhanu da) from Mitra and Ghosh Publishers. Bhanu da suggested, "Since publishing the book is the priority here, don't use your actual name. In any case, be prepared for the consequences."

I was certainly prepared for it. I had the zeal to start from scratch every day.

The day that issue of 'Pustakmela' was published, the situation became intense. Guild member Tridib Chattapadhyay threatened to resign and said, "if this writing comes out in public, I will be sentenced to death." The guild members got split into two halves. A secret meeting was held. It was said that I must produce another piece of writing pointing out the list of misinformation provided in that book and that would be published in place of the former one.

All the copies of 'Pustakmela' were 'sealed'. Fortunately, I managed to secure 5 copies beforehand.

The pressure on me was getting more and more intense which was accompanied by continuous threats. Some of my well-wishers advised me to compromise considering my future. They told me that I was making a fool of myself by not compromising.

Inside, I knew I was extremely stupid.

I resigned from the guild.

'Pusktakmela' was reissued after pasting a new write-up cancelling the old one. And, that 5 copies of 'Pustakmela' containing 'Lojja O Ghrinar Kalo Itihas' were being photocopied every day. It was reprinted in a few little magazines as well. The writing was translated into English and Hindi and was published outside Bengal.

Eventually, I noticed that Marichjhapi was awakening. Many people were showing their interest in the gory history of Marichjhapi. Some of them became engrossed in their research. I was getting acquainted with the direct 'victims' of the massacre. What a horrible experience!

My pertinacity was also increasing with days. I had to inform the people of this generation. They need to know about the real face of the perpetrator. I came across a number of dedicated people who were tirelessly working on it.

Then I met Tushar Bhattacharyya. In a small room, an attempt of making a documentary on Marichjhapi was in progress. Script-voice-editing.

Coincidentally, the episode of Nandigram massacre happened around that time (March 14, 2008). While drawing a comparison with Nandigram on news media, the events of long forgotten Marichjhapi started coming up.

This set the ball rolling. Gradually, Marichjhapi became a media item. The documentary which had been lying fallow for so long, was now being broadcasted on electronic media repeatedly. It was even sold in the form of DVDs.

It is an age of 'sell'. If the item is packaged properly, one can make good business out of it. So, the 'idealist' businessmen got interested in Marichjhapi. In the garb of idealism, their main agenda was business. So, Marichjhapi served their purpose. There are some editors at College Street (Boipara) who gathers bits and pieces from here and there and claim themselves to be editor cum researchers! One such 'editor' compiled the book between two covers and shared it with the publisher for some good business. The 'banned' writing of Jhinuk Chakraborty was also printed in that collection. Now, plenty of glamour, money and media hype were involved in selling this collection on 'Marichjhapi'. But the 'stupid' writers or the 'victims' of Marichjhapi neither received any money nor a proper valuation. These publishers had an air about themselves that they were doing a great favour to those people!

There is a limit to this pretence.

We were hurt by this uncouth and petty business-mindedness. Those injuries led us to write again.

The blows inflicted by the incidents of Singur-Nandigram-Lalgarh had already exposed the actual nature of the leftists in Bengal to a certain extent. Since history repeats itself, the winds of change in Bengal have brought back the memories of Marichjhapi. In Rarh Bengal, the scenario of the undisputed authority of the left has certainly changed. Those teachers who were the products of 'bribery', are now thinking in retrospect having reached their middle age. Is money the only thing one can attain in life!

There is no denying the fact that even in today's world, most of the people are money-minded. Once money is obtained, one rushes towards attaining power, fame and wealth. In this recent trend of change in Bengal, this group of opportunists has become active again. These agents of money and fame are downright opportunists.

Not Marichjhapi, I am writing this today to make people aware of these hypocrite progressives who champion change to mask their selfishness.

Do you consider this to be a pessimistic or a negative approach?

To be honest, I cannot see any ray of hope at this moment. But I am not in despair also. I know that the number of greedy, polymorphous reptiles are large in number, still there are people that are honest, courageous and possess a firm spine. I can't help but salute these people.

Dear readers, are you feeling the need to sit face to face for once?

That will certain happen someday.

How will we be able to connect?

I believe, the connectivity is very advanced now.