

## **Marichjhapi, in its own words/ Listening to Marichjhapi**

**Edited by Madhumoy Pal**

*(This translation has been made possible by the efforts of Dr. Ross Mallick)*

*Standing over the burnt dead bodies the executioner proudly*

*Declares, The ease and beauty with which we dispatched these*

*Refugees, even the military would not have been able to do it!*

### **The Taste of Freedom!**

Nirmalkanti Dhali

How much blood was spilled, how many fresh lives were given up for our shackled country to finally find freedom. The imperialist rogues may have finally left the country, but have our people truly found freedom? Our undivided land was broken up into several fragments and parceled out here and there so that some people could find peace and satisfaction in occupying the seats of power. And the ones who selflessly spilled their own blood to fight for freedom, lost their lives, struggled until their last breath, fought with their last reserves of energy- due to whose efforts the British were forced to leave India- as soon as freedom arrived, many of them disappeared from our view forever. The people of our country did not even know where they disappeared. A group of thoughtless power-grabbers divided India into pieces and engraved the sign of an irredeemable curse on the foreheads of lakhs and lakhs of people.

Several lakh Hindus of West Punjab and East Pakistan suffered under the inhuman tortures of the Muslim population and were forced to leave their ancestral properties and land; they were beggared out of a country, becoming cursed refugees. They made their way towards the secular nation that was free Hindustan (India).

I am also the only son in a refugee household. I was born in East Bengal's Khulna district- at No. 3 Union's Chorkhali (Jhorbhanga) village, which was contained within the jurisdiction of the coastal

Batiaghata (or, Boithaghata) police station. My father is late Rameshwar Dhali, and my grandfather, also deceased, was called Gopal Dhali. We belong to the middle-class community of Nomoshudra farmers. In 1970, I was a student in the ninth standard of our local high school. After finishing their meals at night, the people of the village- especially its strong men- would get together and go somewhere. A few days later, I asked my father where they were all going every night armed with shields, spears, sickles, lances and other weapons. In response, my father said that Muslims were arriving in launches down the river to attack us. They want to harass us and drive us out of the country so they can claim our houses and property. In order to prevent this from happening a group of us from the neighbouring villages get together to stand guard on the river, so that they cannot come on to the land. I asked him again, Why father? Why should they drive us out of here? What harm have we caused them? Where will we go if we have to abandon these lands and houses? And why should we have to leave? Then my father began to explain the matter to me properly.

He said, firstly, that this is the terrible fruit of partition. After dividing the country and handing over the reins of power to whoever seemed convenient, a few self-interested political leaders have left us in the midst of this dangerous conflict. As a result of the partition, we Hindus have become a minority here. This part of Bengal was divided and handed over to the Muslims. So, this is now a Muslim country. They are calling it Pakistan. Moreover, the state has empowered them now to drive us out of this country. In other words, there is no possibility of us staying here for much longer. I do not know where we will find shelter either. But if do not leave Pakistan for Hindustan (India), we will not be able to protect you. Then I asked my father, "Hindustan is a different country. Why would they take the responsibility to shelter us? My father said, I have heard that they concluded some agreements at the time of partition. Hindu and Muslim leaders had divided the country between them. At the time, they had agreed that if the Hindu minority populations were facing the depredations of Muslim majoritarianism and were forced to leave their houses or come under the protection of Hindu leaders, then the Hindu politicians would provide them with whatever relief measures were necessary and help them re-settle elsewhere. That was why we were going to leave Pakistan for the protection that the Hindu leaders can provide in Hindustan. I said to him, then my studies will come to a halt. What will happen then? My father said, if you do not survive how will you get educated at all? I did not ask him anything after that; I understood that we must leave.

Soon the inhuman tortures of the Muslims began- including regular looting, rapes and murders. At night, under the cover of darkness, they would enter one village after another and destroy them.

Feeling helpless, the Hindus abandoned all hope and began to leave for Hindustan. Emerging from Bengal's riverine areas, people began to leave their belongings behind and take their families by the hand to walk into the uncertain night; some took the boat and headed into the unknown through unknowable paths, having become refugees.

Probably towards the end of May, 1970, my father took us away during the night with the help of a Muslim middleman. There were five of us in the family then. My father, mother, grandmother, myself and my younger sister. My grandmother was almost 80 years old at the time. She also had a heavy physique. She could just about walk around somehow. The four others were able to walk well. We went out on a boat. The Muslim middleman was originally from East Pakistan, but from a border area; he would come to our parts for fishing and spent most of his time here. My father knew and trusted him. Therefore, my father, in fear of being robbed, had given him our last monetary resources for safekeeping. He had said to my father, Brother if you hold on to that money you might get looted very easily. You should give it to me. After taking you safely across the border I will hand these over to you. My father was too simple to suspect him and gave him the money. We went by boat till Shaatkhira then we were made to descend. The Muslim middleman's house was about 25 miles from there. We would have to walk that distance. The middleman lied to us when he said that his house was a short distance away. He said, you can eat at my house and rest for a while. When I see the right opportunity I will transport you across the border. My grandmother could not walk. Unable to find any other means, my father and I had to carry her on a makeshift sling and reach the middleman's house with much difficulty. The middleman arranged for some rice and dal for us; I saw there were about 7 or 8 families gathered there. We cooked and ate. It took some time for us to recover from the ordeal of the journey. We stayed there for a day.

The next day, the middleman arrived very late at night and said that we should cross over immediately. Come with me to the river bank. So, we set off for the river immediately. There was a boat ready for us. Many others were brought by the middleman, and they were waiting there too. They helped us get on the boat. My father said to the middleman, You should come with us. The middleman said, All of you should get on this boat. I'm coming with the others on another boat. We crossed the river and reached the other shore. Others came in the other boat. But the middleman did not come. We were immediately transformed into dispossessed creatures without a nation. There were a few other families with us there. They were in the same situation. They too had given everything for safekeeping to the middleman.

In the darkness of the night we climbed up the banks of the river when we reached that shore. After walking for a while we stopped at a place. It seemed to be a market. There were small huts with roofs. Probably a weekly market. We spent the night there, starving. The next day we crossed the Ichamoti river and arrived at Hasnabad. There we saw a lot of people had gathered by the railway tracks, on the platforms and the roads outside and they were living inside temporary shelters made out of polythene sheets and rough construction materials from the boats. Instead of staying there we took the train to Basirhat. My father heard from someone that at Sealdah station people were taking down the names of family-heads in order to provide state assistance. So he went to Sealdah. I accompanied him and saw that Sealdah was besieged by a sea of humanity. Thousands of people were queuing up outside it. My father asked someone, Are you standing in this line to put down your name? The answer came: I've been standing in this line for the past ten days. I do not know when I'll be able to put my name down. My father went to the end of the line and stood there. He told me, You should return to your mother. Bring them here tomorrow.

The next day I brought everyone else in my family to Sealdah. My father and I took turns to stand in that line, and it took us about 15 days to get our names registered in the official books. We were living on the railway platform then. My mother had some money on her so we could purchase some eatables for those few days. But we were soon reduced to near-starvation. Sometimes a relief agency would provide us with some puffed rice, jaggery and bread. We barely managed to survive on it. After registering our names, we were given some rice, lentils, puffed rice, jaggery and bread. The kind of rice they would provide us with- we had never seen such before in our lives. Boiled, large grains- even after boiling it for two hours it would not cook. My grandmother and mother were unable to eat it. Within a few days they took to fever. And we had no means for securing medical treatment. Once we got some medicines from the Mission their fevers reduced somewhat.

Meanwhile, the ones who had put their names down initially were already being sent ahead to Dandakaranya. This was the month of July. After the 20<sup>th</sup> our family was called up. My mother and my grandmother were then bedridden. On 21 July we got on the train. We carried my mother and my grandmother with much difficulty in order to put them on the train as well. On the way there was just some dry puffed rice and jaggery to eat. On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> we were made to descend at a station. The police were guarding us. But I didn't know where we had arrived. Suddenly, as my eyes travelled upwards I saw a sign in English that said 'Raipur Junction'. Raipur is a big city in Madhya Pradesh. Travelling in the special refugee trains, there were about 300 or 400 families with us. After

arrival most of them were kept on an empty platform. Everyone was shouting and remonstrating due to hunger. Those who had some money on them were unable to evade the eyes of the police so that they could get out to buy some food. The police were saying, Please wait here for a while, your food arrangements will be made here too. Towards evening some kedgeriee arrived on a train. Queuing up to receive some of it took hours until it was late at night. Another train brought water. We had to queue up for that too. Burning with hunger, we had somehow stuffed whatever we could find in our mouths and then eased in to our bitter fate. Late at night the police said that we will have to move on to somewhere else now. A car was waiting outside the platform. You should all get in it. We walked some distance out of the platform when we saw a lot of open-top lorries standing about. As soon as we reached those the police asked us to get on them. Having been ordered to do so, we got on to the lorries quietly. Around 2 am the lorry went a little distance and stopped.

The date was 24.7.1970. As ordered once again we got off the vehicle. It was a dark night, there no lights around. As far as we could tell it was an open field. Those among us who were elderly and educated went up to ask, Babu, where shall we go now? The Babus took an upbraiding tone and said, You will have to stay here. We will see when morning comes. The elders said to them, If the boys and girls get nothing to eat there will be a lot of trouble. In response, the babu said in a harsh voice, We cannot do anything about that now. This will have to do. We will see what can be done in the morning. There was no water available for drinking. Everybody was distracted with hunger and thirst. The babus left on a vehicle after saying those things to us. We tried to search nearby for sources of water. As we were looking for water in the darkness we came across a series of habitations through which a path was visible. Moving closer we saw that it was a line of temporary cloth-constructed settlements that looked as if they were set up by a group of nomads. I had never seen tents before. Someone said, These are tents. As we got nearer to the tents we could hear sounds of breathing coming from within. We could guess there were definitely people inside. So we started calling out. After a while an old woman got up and said, Who's calling there baba? Why are you calling us? One of us said, Aunty is there somewhere we could get some water around here? The babus dropped us off here and left. The kids are really suffering from hunger and thirst. We need some water urgently. The old woman said, What can I tell you baba, they dropped us off here last night too. I can't tell how much I have suffered. Earlier in the afternoon they had dropped off some kedgeriee for us- they brought some water too. So we finished whatever we could and are now lying around like the dead. You should take this right turn and walk for a while until you come across a small bend in the river. There is some water available there. You can bring some of that back and try to survive on it, what else can you do now?

Taking the old woman's instructions we walked almost a kilometer and eventually found a small water body. Red, turgid water: I filled a container with some of it and returned. It was an effort to survive, after all. After drinking that water we lay out in the open field under the sky and spent the rest of the night there. I don't remember when exactly my tired body drifted into sleep. I woke up to the sound of someone crying. Some people from the families lying next to us were crying. We learned that some of the children had died during the night.

When we went back to the cloth tents we had seen last night there were a crowd of people making a racket. Slowly we went towards them. As soon as I reached a gentleman, who was dressed like a gentleman at least, looked at me and asked, Son, where is your family's tent? I did not understand what he meant so I remained quiet. He said further, Come on tell me, where are you people living? I understood finally and said immediately, They brought us here at night on a truck and left us in the middle of that field. We do not have a tent. He said, After bringing us here at night they left us in the middle of the field. They came back the next afternoon on vehicles and asked us to take some of the tents they had brought with them and some bamboo sticks. I asked him, Uncle, did they arrange for any food for you that day? He said, That night they gave us nothing else. The following day they came on a truck around 12 at noon and gave us some kedgerie and water. We stood in line and received it. They said they'll bring some today as well. They will bring some for you as well. But they won't arrive before afternoon. He told me, Son, you look starved- let me see if I have anything for you; then he went inside the tent and came out a little while later with some dry puffed rice and a small piece of jaggery, which he handed to me. He said, Please eat these. I said to him, I'm taking these with me, Uncle. My little sister is waiting there, I'll share it with her.

I greeted the stranger and returned to where my family was. After a while a lorry arrived with tents along with a jeep full of babus. One of them got down from the jeep and said to us, Your tents have arrived. You will have to put them in place. Then he got on the jeep again. He told a guard, Call them towards that empty side. Then he left. The lorry carrying the tents also went after them. The guard ordered, The heads of families should come with me. So we went with the guard. In an empty space the jeep was waiting. The babu said, Call out their names and give each of them a tent and a pole. A brave soul among us said, Babu we can barely lift our hands or feet in hunger, how are we going to take the tents off the lorry? The Babu shouted at him, If you don't take the tents you will have to live in the open field! Take the tents. Otherwise you will get into more trouble. The guard spoke even more roughly to us, Arre take the tents quickly! Otherwise where will you go in the rain? Names began to be called out.

Each family head was summoned and given a tent. Then the guard showed them where to put them. They had to be arranged in a line, one almost stuck to the next one. There would be about 1 or 2 feet space in front of each tent. As our names were called out and our places shown, we took our family members over to that spot.

At 2 in the afternoon trucks with kedgerie and water arrived. All of us stood in line and received them. Now, we had to construct the tent. I went to see how the others who had arrived earlier had done it. The problem was to find the right way to stick the pole into the ground. It was not clay as much as stones and laterite. There were no trees or vegetation around either. No grass or vines grow in the monsoon. After searching for a long time I found a foot and a half long iron bar. We struggled to construct the tent all day. It was about 7 feet high and 5 feet wide. There was space for one person to fit into it. Instead, an entire family had to live in that space- even if there were 25 or 30 members. There was just a single tent for each family. July was the month for monsoon. Water began to leak through the roof of the tent. A drain needed to be carved on the side. It was impossible to do it without a firm stone-cutting implement, something which none of us had.

At a distance from the refugees a series of round tents had been set up. That was where the babus sat when they came. A few days later the heads of our families were called and given some money. They were told, You will be given a dole very ten days. Dole meant money. Rations of rice and wheat were also given to us. Half rice and half wheat. 3 kilos for every head per ten days. We had to use the money to buy rations and every other thing we needed. The rations were priced at 57 paise per kilo. There was no tube-well dug in the camp at the time either. We would wait all day in queues for the water trucks to arrive. That was our biggest source of suffering- near-constant thirst. There was a slight advantage to our having arrived during the monsoons. As soon as the rains came people hung their clothes out to strain the water into pots below. There was also a shortage of pots to hold water. A few months later the state gave each family a bucket to use.

Eating the parboiled rice and boiling the whole wheat grains led to a steady rise in the death rate. No one could keep count of the number of people that were dying every day. Even when children died the state had provided no way to arrange for last rites. When the elderly died the state gave Rupees 25 to the family. But there were many rules around that too. An application needed to be made. If it was approved by one of the senior officers the money would be given. It could take up to 3 months to receive it, however. This 25 Rupees would have to do for buying cremation wood, performing the last rites and feeding family and relatives.

There were five camps included all together at the Mana Camp. Mana, Manabhata, Kendri, Kurundo and Nowga. The Mana camp was made much earlier. So there were *pukka* houses and offices built there where the government workers and officers would live. When new refugees arrived in 1970 the other four camps were built. A few months later, after making some arrangements for living spaces and water sources, a few low-level functionaries of the state began to stay at a short distance from our camps. Most of them were refugees. Their work included caretaking, guarding, security services and sweeping or cleaning. We were living at Kendri camp. Over 5,000 families had been kept at this camp. There was no bathroom provided for any of us to relieve ourselves. Even the field was totally featureless, without a single shrub or shade. Men and women were forced to use that open field as their toilet.

As far as medical services went- everyday a doctor would arrive with 2 or 3 nurses or compounders in assistance, and they would sit in that round tent. The queue of sick people extended to over 1 and a half kilometer. Some get to meet the doctor, others do not. They come and stand in line again the next day. Medicine meant a bottle of coloured water. Patients were asked to take 3 or 4 bottles of them. Some bottles contained a red liquid; while others contained white or yellow waters- they were given to a patient and sent away. If it seemed a more serious case, 2-4 loose tablets would be handed out. As soon as it was time for lunch the doctor and his assistants packed up and left for Mana in their car. The hundreds and hundreds of sick people standing in line would burst out crying and shouting. But who has time for their tears? This kind of medical attention and distribution of medical aid perpetuated the high death rate around the camps. Many families were reduced to single members, if not totally wiped out. Some fled the camps after losing their children. Initially, for over a year none of the camps had any educational facilities even until the first standard, except for Mana.

Meanwhile, in East Pakistan, after our departure, the ugly depredations of the Muslim population upon the Hindus grew exponentially. They entered the villages of Hindus and behaved atrociously- snatching whatever money was available, taking utensils and objects, grain that was stored in the granary, cows from the cowshed, fish from the ponds that were full of them; they would tie husbands up against trees and rape their wives, and sisters would be humiliated in front of their brothers. After looting everything, they would set fire to the houses. The reins of the state in East Pakistan were in the hands of the Khans of West Pakistan. Ayub Khan, Monayem Khan, Tikka Khan, Yahya Khan, and many other Khans. Encouraged by the government, therefore, communal violence reached a horrifying peak. When people were running for their lives to this country, Muslims had



captured them in go-downs, locked the doors and butchered them or shot them dead. Pretending to distribute food they would get people to stand in lines and shoot them down. Whoever survived these killings made their way to this country. Since the partition those who had arrived in this country until 1970 were called 'the displaced' (*udbastu*). After leaving all their possessions behind, when they kept arriving even afterwards, fortune almanacs were consulted to see how the planets aligned, and they were finally termed 'refugees' (*shoronarhi*).

Let me talk about camp life now. Every camp had been divided into sectors, and each sector further into blocks. Each sector was overseen by a sector officer and each block by a government-appointed caretaker, who was kept to do that job. A roll-call was taken every evening. This caretaker babu called the rolls. The head of each family had to be present. The census was conducted every week. The caretaker went into each tent and noted down the number of people living in them. If someone was absent their name would be struck off the rolls.

Meanwhile, we had been given clothes to wear. It would be wrong to not mention the value of those garments. For unmarried men, including the elderly - a dhoti or kurta was given; women- young and old- were given only saris. These saris or dhotis and kurtas were thinner than the mosquito nets. It was impossible to wear it outside after soaking it in the water. For the newborns and those children up to 15 years of age were given kurtas and police-style khaki shorts. When the caretaker babu is supposed to come for his census the whole family was expected to be physically present before him. If the babu did not see anyone their names would be taken off. That was why, out of sheer desperation, young girls and women had to present themselves in front of those babus in a near-naked state, wearing those saris. If it happened otherwise, the dole would be stopped. If anyone went out wearing those clothes to Raipur or even among the local population, there would be no trouble identifying which one was the refugee in the crowd. Out of desperate hunger we would go to the nearby village of the Chattisgarhis and work as coolies and labourers. After working all day we would get about 1 or 2 rupees. It was not possible to look for work further away, since we had to attend roll call in the evening.

One day we suddenly learnt that our camp would be cleared and we would be taken elsewhere. I thought, Where are they going to take us again, who knows what fortune has in store for us? Then we understood that we were going to be moved to an adjacent camp so more refugees could be brought here. A few days later we were taken to another field, where there was, again, no arrangements for living or water. But our tryst with tents was over; here, we saw poles supporting small tin roofs of thatched houses. But they were totally unfenced and unmarked. It took us a few months to make those

huts habitable. The rooms were about 10 by 10 feet in size. Two families were assigned to each room. The water problem persisted for a year. The field adjacent to ours was fitted with every convenience, so the government babus came and stayed there for a while.

The highest officer in charge, the chief commandant of all the camps together, was a Bengali called Colonel Shyamaprasad Bakshi. It was according to his wish that a higher secondary school was started at the Mana camp. Since I did not have a T.C. (transfer certificate) I could not join the school during the first year. When the school opened after the summer holidays in 1971 I gave a test and passed it to join the school. My mother and grandmother never recovered fully. Their condition continued to deteriorate until they reached Baradabhata; a few months later, both of them took eternal leave of this miserable refugee life, within fifteen days of each other. Now, it was just my elderly father and my younger sister. I would go to class every day. My father would work at a ration shop for 25 rupees a month. That would not be enough to run the family and spend some money on my education. Every Sunday I would get up early in the wee hours of the morning of that holiday, carry some dry rotis, and walk 10 kilometers to work as a coolie. I would work from 8 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon and get paid 2 rupees for it. That was the school budget for the week. This was not just my condition, but every other boy who studied at that school. The government would give us some school books and notebooks. As for uniform: they were that same kurta and khaki shorts. And girls were given that mosquito-net-like, translucent garment. The boys and I would sacrifice our shame and walk to school in those clothes. But the girls could not do it. There were some old clothes available to buy in Raipur city. They would get hold of those and wear them to school.

New refugees had already filled up places in West Bengal like Ambagan and Kathalbagan, but there was no sign of the flow stopping; so special trains were assigned and flights brought down from Russia to transport them to the camps Mana in the Dandak forest. Their plight is almost impossible to describe. No one could keep count of the numbers of the deceased every day. There was a big, open field situated between Barada and Mana. Their dead bodies would be taken there on open-backed lorries and dumped at one side of the field in a heap. Then they would throw some wooden sticks on that mountain of dead bodies, pour some kerosene on it and set it alight. Half-burnt, unburnt dead bodies would be ripped apart by jackals, vultures and dogs. It was a terrible sight! We would have to cross that field while walking to school, usually in a state of utter terror. Some days I would be unable to go.

A few months later, the government rounded up the strong, young men from the camps and created a Mukti Fauj (Liberation Army) out of them. They were given training in 1971 and sent over to fight the war against the West Pakistani Khan-ruled forces, who had tortured and driven out the Hindus from East Pakistan as a part of their policy of rule there. It was a horrifying war. The oppressive Khan rulers were defeated. They had to flee from East Bengal to West Pakistan. East Pakistan gained freedom. Its name was Free Bengal. Bangabandhu (Friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took over the reins of power in the new country. The refugees returned overjoyed to this Free Bengal. What happened after that? When the refugees had returned to the new Bengal the government started forcing the remaining displaced people to go to Dandakaranya. Some were sent too. Soon news arrived that if Bengalis were sent to Dandakaranya they would not survive there. It would have to be stopped at any cost.

In protest against these inhuman manoeuvres taken against the refugees, a sense of unity began to grow among them as part of their will to survive. A movement began. Then, on 23 January, 1973, on the birth anniversary of the great hero Subhas Bose, the *Udbastu Unnoyonsheel Committee* (Refugee Rehabilitation Committee) was established. The committee accepted unanimously the permanent President's role to be taken up by Sri Satish Mondal; the general secretary post was given to Sri Raiharan Baroi and the assistant to the President was chosen to be Sri Robin Chakraborty. Our chief advisor was Sri Rangalal Goldar, along with an assistant secretary from each transit camp. Baradbhata Camp: Sri Aurobindo Mistry; Shahidbhata Camp: Sri Modhu Malakar; Kurud Camp: Sri Kalinarayan Bose; Nowga: Sri Prafulla Mistry.

It was while working for the committee that the refugee movement began. Firstly, a general assembly was held according to a fixed date and time at each of the camps. Every member of the refugee population was asked to be present for these assemblies. The President of the Committee explained to everyone how imminent danger was for all of us. Every assembly saw thousands in attendance. At the assemblies, it was said, Refugee brothers and sisters, the same problem affects all of us. So, we have to get over our petty squabbles and organize ourselves. It is a matter of life or death. We have to start a protest movement in order to receive what is our right. This will lead to many troubles and obstacles coming in your way. We have to overcome all of that with firm resolve. What our next steps are going to be will be determined by our path-finding organization, The Refugee Rehabilitation Committee. We have to keep this Committee going at any cost.

It started with a protest rally demanding fairer means of rehabilitation. Each camp had a commandant's office. There was a camp commandant, a few sector commandants and other low-level

workers. Our rally made its way towards those offices and protested in front of them. Slogans were shouted, saying things like:

Who are we? -The refugees.

All refugees are brothers

We want to be re-settled in Bengal, etc.

Just a few days after this protest the chief commandant, Colonel Nandy, was transferred. In his place, Brigadier Das was brought. He may have been from the Odia community. As soon as he arrived they started shooting at the protestors, beginning at Kurud camp. In order to suppress the movement many shots were fired, many refugees died and many were rendered lame or blind. Many people left the camps in horror. Our movement also intensified after these shooting incidents. We protested desperately against the violence and gheraoed the chief commandant's office. We were told in the middle of our protests that we would have no choice but to go to Banabhata camp in Dandakaranya. As the police were forcibly putting the refugees on vehicles, arguments broke out between them, then fights, and eventually, bullets were fired. Who could keep count of how many died? On that day Manabhata camp was renamed as Shahidbhata Camp.

Even after this violent incident our movement did not lose any momentum. In fact, it grew more intense. Now a hunger strike was taken up in every camp. A date was fixed when five camps would go on a hunger strike protest together. Every 24 hours a new member would take the place of an earlier fasting member. It went on for a month. Then a fast until death was taken up. Along with the president of the committee, a resident from each camp was included in this fast. After two or three days the state authorities began to employ different tactics to break up the hunger strike; but when they were unable to do so, a team of leaders arrived from Delhi, led by Samar Mukherjee, who gave us false assurances about having 'agreed to every demand of ours', and broke our fast within 7 days. But none of our demands were met later. Soon, the movement began to take a new form. Every camp started holding another round of meetings of the Committee.

On 8 September, 1974, the refugees of Shahidbhata were inhumanly fired upon. In order to investigate the police firing, a delegation arrived comprising of Prankrishna Chakrabarty, Suhrid Mullik Chowdhury and Samar Mukherjee. These great leaders had castigated the police for firing at the

refugees. Samar Mukherjee said in a determined voice, The Sunderban demand has brought these police depredations upon you, but when we come to power we will absolutely fulfill your demands.

In December, 1974, Mana's neighbouring town Bhilai hosted a massive people's assembly when Jyoti Basu was visiting. Jyoti Basu had personally written an invitation to the refugee leader Satish Mondal to ensure the refugee presence at the assembly. Indicating our fate, he had said at the assembly that until they came to power the conditions of these refugees will not change. Once we come to power, your rightful demand for re-settlement at the Sunderbans will be immediately met. I was also present at this assembly at Bhilai. Due to the support and encouragement of these well-known political leaders, our movement also gained more influence and power.

In May, 1975, a three-day long All-India Refugee Conference was held at Mana. People participating in this conference included Ram Chatterjee, Kripasindhu Saha and the then General Secretary of the All-India Forward Bloc Party, Jambuvant Rao Dhote. They also supported our demand for re-settlement at Sunderban.

Around the middle of the year 1974, the Committee decided that we would abandon the camps and make our way towards West Bengal. If needed, we'd walk there. But we had to go. According to the decision, everyone put their names and lists of possessions down and gathered at a meeting hall in Mana. The Committee took a count of the number of things that were handed over to them. The Committee also resolved- and it was unanimously agreed by the others- that a group of volunteers should also be selected. They would lead the way for the refugees towards West Bengal. The refugees of the Nowga camp would leave first.

There was something going on with the refugees at the Nowga camp, and I should explain that here. When some refugees were sent back after the victory of East Pakistan and its subsequent independence- either due to the fact that they had several generations' worth of ancestral land and property there or were just attracted by the plaintive call of Bengal's soil and water- some of the refugees who had arrived many years before us had also gone over to East Bengal. But there was no point responding to such plaintive calls from the land, because misfortune was written in their destiny already. They could not find a place in Bangabandhu's free Bengal. The place they left behind was not empty, so they were chased out of free Bengal once again. When they were driven out of the new Bengal, the Indian government did not want to re-settle them again; but they survived without any state support, and in a terrible condition, in several nooks and crannies of West Bengal. Their numbers were

also increasing every day. The government thought these large numbers would create a new problem for them, so they transported all of them to Nowga camp, within the larger Mana camp settlement. But the most unfortunate thing was the rule that was imposed on them: no one from any of the other camps was allowed to go in and meet them. If anyone violated this rule, they would be thrown out of the camps. No one was brave enough to go see them. But their condition was terrible then. They would get a little bit of money along with the dole, but there no provisions for rations. When the Committee's movement gained strength, these restrictions lost their power to deter us.

It was the refugees in the Nowga camp who wanted to go to West Bengal first. So, on the appointed day, they abandoned the camp and set out with some of the volunteers. They went to the Raipur Railway station and took every passenger train that was headed towards West Bengal that day. Meanwhile, the Madhya Pradesh government had informed the West Bengal and Central governments about these developments. As a result of that, the first station on our arrival in West Bengal- at Kharagpur- was filled up with armed police forces. These forces prevented the refugee populations from descending on the platform as soon as their trains reached the station. Another special train had been arranged beforehand. The refugees were then forcibly taken off their trains, beaten up with sticks and put into the other train that was bound for Madhya Pradesh's Tawa Project. There they were made to build canals.

After this incident, Section 144 was imposed on Mana camp while the rest of the refugees were being packed off to Dandakaranya. Police forced people to get on vehicles. If anyone protested they were immediately thrown out of the camp. Fear of the law put an abrupt halt to the activities of the Committee. Everything was quiet. Each refugee camp was now accompanied by a CRP camp. Up to 3 refugees were not allowed to gather publicly. CRP forces entered our camps in groups and kept guard on us. Every day, hundreds of unwilling families were being driven out to Dandakaranya. From our Baradabhata Camp, most of the families had left. A few remained, along with my family members. These families were moved to another camp and Baradabhata Camp was shut down. Within a few months, all four of the other camps within Mana were emptied of the refugees and they were sent on to Dandakaranya. It was only in the Mana camp that a few people were allowed to live on as rehabilitated businessmen. The Committee's President Satish Mondal's family was included among them. And so, he did not have to leave Mana camp and go to Dandakaranya. Raiharan Babu had been cast out of the camps much earlier. Other workers of the Committee were forcibly sent to different parts of Dandakaranya.

According to the government's orders, my family was also called up for the Dandakaranya transfer. The situation then was such that we had no idea which part or province of Dandakaranya we were going to be sent to. Those who were in charge of us- who kept regular contact with us, and were also originally from East Pakistani refugee families- were unwilling to give us any information. When asked they would say, We do not know anything, but we can tell you this much- that you will be taken to a rehabilitation site. You people have to go to Dandakaranya. Those who refuse will be driven away from these camps. In the year 1976, possibly, we were taken to Dandakaranya.

The distance from Mana camp to Dandakaranya's Malkangiri zone would be around 6 or 700 kilometers, if I had to guess. We got on an open truck at Manabhata (Shahidbhata) camp. Along with all of our possessions. After packing us on the back of those lorries like goats and cows, 15-30 of those open-backed vehicles began to make their way in a line towards Dandakaranya. After 2 days and 2 nights they reached Malkangiri. It was about 12 or 1 o'clock at night when we reached. The trucks went inside a forest and stopped. Orders came that we should get off the vehicle there with all our belongings. It was a dark night, and there was no light anywhere. Initially, a few young men got off the trucks. We saw it was a dense jungle- there were no people or habitations anywhere around. We picked up our courage and asked some of the drivers where we were supposed to go in this darkness with our boys and girls. They said, We do not know anything about that. We have been asked to drop you off here. You have to get off. If you don't do it willingly we will have to use force. Feeling helpless, we took our things and got off the lorries. No sooner had the last object been taken off the vehicle than they turned around and fled. There were a total of 52 families there with us. We got together at a spot and built a circle of fires around us- so that animals could not attack us. We spent the night like that, sleeplessly. No one ate anything that night. The children soon began to cry in hunger. We could not find water anywhere nearby. As soon as some light appeared in the sky towards the morning, we set off to look for water. After walking about 2 kilometers we saw a waterfall. We took collected some water from there and returned. Not having had anything to eat for about 2-3 days, people were beginning to get agitated by hunger. When we brought some water and people had consumed it, it seemed like they had been rejuvenated. Then we used that water to cook some food under the trees, on cookers made from stones and sticks; after which, we fell asleep. Late in the afternoon a truck came and left us a torn tarpaulin sheet. There was a babu sitting in that truck, beside the driver. We made our entreaties with that babu. We said in desperate voices, Babu, we do not want anything. Just take us somewhere where there are other people. Then we will at least survive. The babu shouted angrily, You will not be taken anywhere! You will have to stay here for now. We are giving you tents to stay in. Put those tents up

neatly. You have nothing to fear. We will come occasionally to check on you. Then they showed us the place where we had to put those tents up. The land was cleared of the trees, but the stumps, as high as, four or five feet, were left intact and the ground was full of smaller shrubs and bushes. It took us a few days to clear that ground while we lived under the trees. Then we used whatever materials we could from the forest- like branches and vines- to construct some huts and began to live there.

A few days later, a few babus came on a jeep along with the chief officer. We ran to their vehicle. After offering our greetings we stood in a circle around them. A babu took me to a side and pointed to someone, saying, That is the chief officer, Arrow shaheb. If you have anything to say, do it politely and ask him. So I greeted him again and said in a deferential tone, Sir, how are we going to live in this jungle? Bears, tigers, jackals- all sorts of fierce animals come out during the night; please take us someplace where there are other inhabitants. There is no proper arrangement for water here either. How can live here, sir? Please have mercy on us- please save us, sir. The officer was not a Bengali, he was possibly from South India; so he spoke to us in broken Hindi, to say that we had to stay there and clear the jungle by ourselves. Once the forest is cleared out, this land will be handed over to you for settlement. Until then you will have to stay at this work camp and clear the ground of roots and shoots. You will be given wages for your work. When the land is cleared, government babus will come and measure the area of the land that has been worked on; then they will pay you according to official rates. More families will be brought here. If a lot of people stay here together you should not have anything to fear. But for the present, you will have to stay and work here. And whoever refuses to do this will be chased away.

Having no other option, we took his word to be our command and started working.

Living in these conditions for a while we began to get used to the environment and also met some of the local inhabitants. The locals were *adivasis* belonging to the Koya tribe. Their language was incomprehensible to us. They also wore practically no clothes. The girls would tie a small knot below their waists and appear in front of us. They had no needs outside their community. Their food was the fruits of the jungle, along with roots, insects, birds and beasts. They had not learnt farming yet. Initially, they would fear us. Soon, after associating with us for a while, they understood that we meant no harm to them and weren't their enemies; so they started mixing with us more freely. They acquired a taste for our food too. And they started wearing clothes that were similar to ours. Their lifestyle, social organization and habits had still not advanced to a civilized stage. But one could still say that they were neither fierce nor crooked. They spend most of their time looking for food on the hills and mountains



nearby. They had constructed a hut with whatever materials were available in the forest, so that they could gather there for shelter during a heavy spell of rainfall. They are now our neighbours, our relatives.

The refugees who had come earlier, that is, those who had come in since 1964, were settled in Dandakaranya in the following manner: One village was about 15 to 30 kilometers apart from the other village. Villages were planted in various spots within the jungle with no roads connecting them even until we had arrived. The land that was given to them for cultivation was surrounded by tall mountains on all sides; The dense jungle full of trees below them had been cut down to four or five feet lengths, with many trees still standing as they were. The ground was uneven, raised near the center and inclined all around it. It was stony, sandy and speckled with laterite; with very small stretches of cultivable soil. Water from rainfall would immediately flow down to the sides. As an appropriate crop for this soil, *mesta* (a kind of jute) was being grown. After the rains, *mesta* seeds would be ploughed into the ground. Those rains would either help grow them or not. Their economic condition was three times worse than those living below the poverty line. Even if they manage to grow a crop after all that hardship, there was no way to sell them. The only market nearby was at Malkangiri. Some villages could be as far as 100 kilometers away. There was no provision for transportation. So, they had to take it to the market themselves in whatever manner possible. They made small bullock carts to carry the rice in containers for the few days it took to reach the market at Malkangiri. The market sat on Tuesdays. It could not be sold on any other day, therefore. After doing all this to reach the market at the right time, there would be 2 or 3 buyers. They would pay whatever they desired to buy the goods from us. 8-10 Rupees per *mon*, whatever they quoted we would have to agree. If someone protested nobody bought their goods. I saw many people throwing their goods away and returning to the camps in tears.

I went to see how they were living after having been rehabilitated. Tin shades had been fitted as roofs on rough, jungle-sourced material like vines. Some had enclosures, others did not. If you went to their houses they would welcome you in a heartfelt manner. They would give you a palm-leaf floor-spread to sit on. If you sat, they would fetch a glass of water for you. They would sit next to you and talk to you about your life. Where we were living in East Pakistan, etc. After a few moments of sitting and talking, they would say shamefully, sadly, and with a strain of tears in their voices, You are our close relatives! We are people of the same country. But I cannot give you some red tea to drink. God has not given us even those resources anymore. Do you know, brother, that we had everything once? One day a man got up in tears and went inside his hut to fetch a broken smoking pipe, along with some *tendu*

leaves for tobacco. He picked the leaves while sitting next to us, rolled a *beedi* with a stray string from a worn towel (*gamchha*), and presented it to us as part of his hospitality. Bengalis from Bengal are affectionate towards their guests. We asked them, How do you make ends meet? They answered, It has been 10-12 years since we were settled here; the government gave us two bulls then. When it rains we farm. We sow *mesta*. Some years there will be a harvest, sometimes there would not be one. There is no labour work around in this country either. The fruits and flowers of the jungle are quite sour. Sometime we even eat boiled seeds of the *mesta*. What can I do brother, it is a struggle to survive with our women and children. When you arrived we found some strength in our minds. Hearing us talk someone extended a foot outside the home then immediately went inside after taking the briefest glimpse of my face. I could not even see what they were wearing.

The Odisha government did not provide any medical facilities at Malkangiri at the time. For basic medical provisions there was a hospital at Malkangiri that was set up and administered by the Dandakaranya Project. Apart from the 24 villages that were close to Malkangiri no one else could visit it.

Malkangiri also had the only high school in the area. Most of the villages barely had a school that went up to the first grade. Those who were rehabilitated with land and the bulls were not given anything after that by the government. Those of us who were still living at the work camps were given some dole money at the end of each month. They had to do the work of a coolie, inevitably.

When we were brought over from Mana camp, there was an Emergency going on in the country. Section 144 was imposed on Mana and its neighbouring camps and refugee leaders were prevented from meeting each other by putting them in jail in Raipur. Once the camps were cleared out the leaders were given bail. When they were released on bail, the leaders began to gather news about all the areas within Dandakaranya and even visited many of them to see for themselves. Then they spoke about our appalling conditions to other political leaders from Bengal and elsewhere in the country especially those who had shown some sympathy for the refugee cause.

While we were suffering every day like this, fearing for our safety and our futures, news came from the Committee members that a delegation of leaders and ministers from West Bengal were coming to see our living conditions in Dandakaranya themselves, and make suggestions for our further rehabilitation. Soon this news spread across all the regions of Dandakaranya. The refugees seemed like they had been re-invigorated. The Committee even sent us a letter confirming the date of their arrival, and other instructions for organizing the assembly on that day. On the appointed day, 16.1.1978, the

Committee President Satish Mondal came with the Honourable Ram Chatterjee (State Minister for Civil Protections in the CPI(M) government) and the Left Front Advisory Committee's general secretary Ashok Ghosh to supervise the conditions in which the Bengali refugees had been living outside their state in Mana, Dandakaranya and elsewhere. These leaders tirelessly toured the many areas where the refugees had been settled- from Madhya Pradesh's Paralkot Zone, to Maharashtra's Chandrapur, Andhra Pradesh's Kagojnogor, Odisha's Malkangiri, Umarmkot and other regions- until 19.1.1978 and saw the horrifying state in which they were living, and heard the terrible stories they had to tell about their suffering. They spoke at several general assemblies.

The refugees settled across Dandakaranya would tell their tragic stories with a heavy heart and break down in tears. All of them spoke clearly about their most pressing demand, even if it was delivered with tears in their eyes, to say that they did not want to live there anymore and wanted to be taken back to West Bengal and resettled at Sunderban. Please save us from this exile, they said, please protect us.

I was present at two refugee assemblies at Malkangiri. One was MV7 No. and the other was MPV 23 No. They were about 35-40 kilometers distant from each other. I went on a cycle, carrying its owner pillion-style on the same vehicle.

In his remarks, Ram Babu said, We have to come to change your situation here. No one can survive like this. And we will certainly change the conditions for you. Change is imminent for you. You should maintain your unity and get ready. Stay together and stay alert. When we summon you so that you can change your life, you must be ready to leave immediately. I was with you in the past, I am with you now and will be with you in the future.

Ashok babu said, It was during Congress rule that Bengali refugees were brought out of Bengal. We tried to prevent them. At the time, Prime Minister Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and the West Bengal Chief Minister, Bidhan Chandra Roy, had given us a written understanding that the Bengali refugees would be humanely resettled outside the state, where a second Bengal would be established for them; their education, social practices, culture, language- every opportunity would be given to maintain these. But when we came here we saw that none of that humane rehabilitation took place, in fact the reality shows an opposite truth. The refugees are being exploited, neglected, unjustly treated and are full of agony and suffering in their daily lives. We want to change this situation. For the promise that was made by the Congress government has not been fulfilled. We not tolerate this torture and

oppression. Then he said in a louder voice, We, the five crore people of Bengal are here with our ten crore hands to be with you! (**CHECK!**) We will always be by your side and voice your demands in the loudest possible manner. We will protect you during your worst days. Your Committee President Satish Babu, and the General Secretary Raiharan Babu, had presented us with a demand for re-settlement at Sunderban in 1974- and we still have it with us. I am telling you once again, the summons will arrive soon and you will have to leave immediately when you hear from us. Do not lose time weighing your options when the summons arrive, that is my only request to you. I hope for all of your well-being.

When such tall and respected political leaders from the West Bengal government came to these huge refugee assemblies and forcefully backed our demands, telling us that a summons from the state is imminent and our proper settlement at Sunderban was practically guaranteed, the refugees found strength to work through their present miseries and, in a few days, began to make their way towards Sunderban.

At Dandakaranya's Malkangiri there was barely any roads for walking. The Dandakaranya Project had used their rehabilitation funds to create a small track on which a car could just about travel from Jaipur to Motu. Before that, the Odisha government had not created any roads in Malkangiri. Whatever happened was crated out of the re-settlement funds given to the Dandakaranya Project. Before the refugees arrived, there were some locals who lived in the area- but I did not know which state lists they were subjected to. After clearing the forested lands, the Dandakaranya Project used their funds to buy some of it for the refugees, but that land did not include an inch of the fertile, cultivable soil that was otherwise present around it. All the good land went to the *adivasis*. Even after spending crores, the Dandakaranya Project appeared to be helpless. As if even an empty coffer would produce the same results from the powerful officers who ran the Project. This was one of the main reasons why the refugees wanted to leave Dandakaranya. The local government's step-motherly treatment, instigating the *adivasis* against the refugees and enraging them against us- there were several such small and big reasons for our move. The harsh, unfavourable environment was also a major factor.

After struggling through unimaginable odds, the refugees of Malkangiri started making their way towards Sunderban. Almost every rehabilitation camp at Dandakaranya was filled with one of our relatives or friends, so news spread very quickly. We learned that thousands of families from the work and rehabilitation camps had decided to leave their settlements behind and go to Sunderban. I also found out that thousands of families had already reached Basirhat in 24 Parganas' Hasnabad district.

Towards the beginning of March, 1978, Malkangiri was almost totally emptied of refugees. A few camps or villages contained about 2-4 families that could not leave due to personal difficulties. Some had very elderly members; others had pregnant women or women who had just delivered children. These families were eager to go as well. At this moment I also left with my family. Malkangiri was between Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh) on one side and Andhra Pradesh on the other. We walked until the border of Andhra Pradesh and crossed over. Then we hired an auto to reach the Waltair Railway Station. After waiting for the right opportunity for a few days some of the families finally got on to a passenger train one night. Along the way some police and Ticket Checkers tried to de-board us, but they failed to do so in the face of our determined resolve. Because by then we had become desperate. Wading through one obstacle after another, we somehow reached Howrah station and got off the train. Then we walked to Sealdah and were forcibly put on a train to Barasat, and then Hasnabad. The journey from Malkangiri to Hasnabad took us about a week!

When the train halted at Hasnabad I saw that there was no place to stand on the crowded platform. I got off somehow. There must be some shelter nearby. After searching for a bit I found some of our friends and familiar faces. They had made small shelters out of polythene sheets, so they took us there. We ate something at their place and stayed there that day. We found out how and where we would have to live. They said, You will have to buy a bamboo stick and a polythene sheet. In those parts there were no crops growing on the fields at the time, so the harvested, open fields were completely covered with polythene-sheet shelters. Two families went together to the house of a local to plead with him to sell us a bamboo stick, which we paid 20 rupees for. We split that into two. Then we sliced it further into five or six strands. Then we took it to the harvested fields. There was no space for the first kilometer and a half. Beyond that I found some clear ground where I bent the sticks into a semi-circular form and dug two of their heads in. Then I put the polythene sheet upon it. There it was: a refugee house had been constructed. Now, all that was left was a holy home inauguration ceremony with the whole family.

Soon the roads, fields everywhere around us were full of people. Thousands of people using the open fields as their toilet rendered the environment hellish. Food shortages began to take place. The local people were getting agitated by our presence. The leaders of the Committee became concerned. Unable to decide what course of action to take, a delegation of representatives for the refugees went to meet the honourable Minister Ram babu. Ram babu came and saw the conditions in Hasnabad. Then he sat for discussion with the refugee leaders in a tent. It's not possible for me to say what decision was

arrived at there. But another delegation led by Rangalal Goldar babu went with Ram babu to meet Jyoti Basu at Writers' Building. When they returned we learned that we would have to reach Sunderban somehow. The volunteers were quickly told that we would cross Ichamoti river and go to Chor-Hasnabad on Friday. We would have to overcome any obstacle that came in our way.

The Committee arranged to have some large boat owners on the other shore of Hasnabad paid a large amount of money, along with rental fees. We had already arranged among ourselves who would cross the river from where. But on the day before we were supposed to go, Thursday, the government announced on a public speaker, Tomorrow, Section 144 will be imposed on this area. Everyone is warned, if the law is broken appropriate action will be taken against those who break them. But we were firm in our convictions, and focused on what we had to do. No obstacle could stop us.

The date was probably 7 April, 1978- a Friday. In fear of the state's law or retribution none of the boat owners who had received advance money from us appeared with their boats. Even the regular passenger boats that plied on the Ichamoti River and the launches that operated up to the Sunderbans, ordinary boats, fishing boats- every form of river transportation had been ceased. Several officers employed thousands of police to prevent the refugees from crossing over, but they failed. The banks of the Ichamoti were full of refugees, covering the entire slope. Everyone was shouting slogans- Who are we- refugees, refugees! We are brothers- we want to be rehabilitated at Sunderban. You cannot call us and then betray us, no that cannot happen! We may die but we will not go back- we will not go back, etc. Thousands of refugee women began to make ululating sounds. Armed police were standing on the side of the Ichamoti. Some young men were carried away by the strong current in the river. I don't know if they survived. Others forcibly acquired a few passenger boats. Then a few thousand youths crossed over first. They went and returned with the boats that had been paid for earlier. Then the crossing started. Within 2-3 days thousands of families crossed over to Chor-Hasnabad. Soon, Chor-Hasnabad's harvested fields were filled up with refugee shelters.

Then the journey to Sunderban began. First, those boats we had snatched carried people over to Kumirmari, right opposite Marichjhapi Island on the river path. Some walked, while others used other means to reach Kumirmari somehow. When a few thousand families had gathered on Kumirmari, the local residents helped them get to the island of Marichjhapi. Between Kumirmari and Marichjhapi the Korankhali River flowed. It wasn't a very large river. You could cross over in a few minutes. The locals helped out with their own boats and we could get to the island quite easily.

For the moment, the refugees' hearts and minds began to dance with joy after touching the sacred ground of Marichjhapi- just as a child feels overjoyed when returning to their mother's lap after a long time. It seemed like we had re-discovered our mother after ages. Soon, a few thousand families reached the uninhabited island of Marichjhapi. The Committee members called an Emergency meeting and created another group of volunteers. They were given orders to see that everyone made their huts in a line along the river. Right opposite Kumirmari, with the Korankhali in front of us, we began to build those shelters. They were divided into a few sectors. Thousands of families used whatever building material they could find from the forests to build their huts in each sector. The huts were eventually built along a straight line, with a passage road in the middle.

Our first problem was the unavailability of drinking water. The river water was too salty to drink from. In fact, we could not put that water to any use. We took the help of the local residents again, used their boats to cross over to Kumirmari, drew water from the pond there and brought it back in our pots and pans to survive desperately. But there were too many people gathered there. Soon the ponds around Kumirmari began to dry up. Those who had some money went to the Mollakhali Market where they bought wheat, broken grain, cheap varieties of rice, and some others bought other essential goods to bring back and sell them. A small clearing was made in the jungle for the market. Soon, many families became penniless. They had no means to get food anymore. But it did not diminish anybody's mental resolve. Some started catching fish to sell them in the market, while others cut sticks into shape to sell or exchange in the neighbouring island for some food.

The Committee called for an emergency general meeting. At this meeting a member from every refugee family was asked to attend. It was a huge meeting. There our committee leaders discussed in detail what our actions were going to be in the future. They said, Whatever the depths of this struggle, however many lives we may lose, you cannot lose your determination. We have to establish a settlement here. So, the plan of action that we have organized is going to be discussed with you now. They are:

1. Constructing an embankment
2. Arranging for food and drinking water
3. Arranging for medical facilities
4. Arranging for educational facilities

Firstly, we must begin by focusing on these four essential tasks; and whoever is capable will be given jobs accordingly, so they must perform their responsibilities as well. For these four tasks four separate volunteer groups were created. Each group had its own administrator. They would be responsible for directing the activities of the group and keeping in touch with the more senior leaders at the higher organizational level. Most importantly, we unanimously named our new rehabilitation center 'Netajinagar'.

Aside from these four essential tasks, there were other things to do as well; like constructing boats for our use, making a wooden barrier to collect the water in the embankment, making space for newcomers so they could build their own shelters, building a market- and other such things were on the list. The Committee President Satish Mondal took charge of constructing the embankment, and the general secretary Raiharan Baroi was responsible for arranging the drinking water. The job of arranging for medical facilities was given to Dr. Samir Samaddar.

A competition for finishing our assigned tasks began. Who could fulfill their responsibilities in the most impeccable manner? Each family had to send at least one member for the embankment construction. Raiharan babu and his group of volunteers were working all the time to arrange for stable food supplies. The work on the embankment construction was also going ceaselessly. Samir opened a small medical treatment facility. His assistant doctors and attendants were Dr. Atulkrishna Ray, Dr. Pratul Dewan and Jogen babu. A small factory for manufacturing boats was established. Workshops were opened and a bigger market was constructed. All of this happened quite quickly. Within a few days Raiharan babu got the help of a few friendly souls and installed some deep tube-wells. The drinking water problem was somewhat solved. 15-20 factory workers were slaving away at constructing new boats and instruments that could help build the embankment. They were making various other useful implements too. Potters were making clay pots and vessels. Over a hundred carpenters were working tirelessly at constructing boats, factory parts, school buildings and furniture for the small nursing home. The market now had establishments for making rotis, *beedis*, sweetmeats, clothes, tailoring and several other useful shops. People from the neighbouring islands would come to see us. Sometimes they also came to sell vegetables or fish at our markets. They have really adopted us as their own. Local political representatives like Pradip Biswas, Prafulla Mondal and other sympathetic leaders would come frequently to Netajinagar to ask after our well-being.

Now let me come to the main responsibility that was given to me- that of setting up educational facilities. I started a school in some small, thatch-roofed buildings. On the very first day about 500



people turned up. Where should I arrange for them to sit? After spending some time in the school I let them go- declaring the end of the school day. Then I tried to figure out how to put in rooms where they could sit. So I started work on constructing rooms. Within a few days I had managed to erect 7-8 buildings using wooden poles and large, rounded leaves from the forest for roof. Another teaching aid and I took down the names over the next 2 days or so of those who were going to the school and admitted them. Now we had need for teachers. But then I thought that a committee of directors or advisors was necessary too, for administrative guidance. I held discussions with the Committee's President and the General Secretary. They advised me to call a meeting as soon as possible and form this guidance committee with those who could do the work. As directed, I called an emergency meeting at the school the next day. Several important members from our community, along with the President of the Committee, were present. At the beginning of our discussions our permanent President Satish Mondal said, The school's principal teaching member will be Nirmalendu Dhali. My name was written down immediately. Even though my educational certificates and proofs showed my name as Nirmalkanti Dhali. But I could not reject this name that was handed down to me that day. Following this, our discussions were about setting up an advisory committee for the school. That committee was comprised of:

Sri Rangalal Goldar (Chief Advisor)

Sri Nirmalendu Dhali (Principal Educator)

Sri Arabinda Mistri (General Secretary)

Sri Atulkrishna Ray (Joint Secretary)

Sri Samir Samaddar (Treasurer)

Sri Sripada Mondal (Member)

Sri Birendranath Gyne (Member)

Sri Dwijendranath Mistry (Member)

Sri Arunkumar Ray (Member)

This committee of members were present when the teachers of the school were selected. All of them were already part of the volunteer corps. They swore an oath that they would teach in that school for free for as long as it took.

These teachers were:

Sri Nirmalendu Dhali (Principal Educator)

Sri Rabindranath Mondal (Joint Principal Educator)

Sri Amitkumar Mondal (Assistant Teacher)

Sri Bhabanath Mondal (Assistant Teacher)

Sri Rabindranath Ray (Assistant Teacher)

Srimati Kanika Biswas (Assistant Teacher)

Sri Gobindalal Mistri (Assistant Teacher)

Sri Binaykrishna Mondal (Assistant Teacher)

Srimati Kalpana Goldar (Assistant Teacher)

Srimati Parul De (Assistant Teacher)

Srimati Snehalata Mallick (Assistant Teacher)

Srimati Gitarani Mondal (Assistant Teacher)

Sri Sukumar Pal (Assistant Teacher)

Sri Sunil Haldar (Assistant Teacher)

We started the Netaji nagar School (*Vidyapeeth*) with these teachers. Each teacher handled their responsibilities well. The numbers of our students crossed 2000. Students would sit on the ground and we would teach standing up. When school was over in the evening we would take a clay vessel and go with the students to the market to beg. From 1 naya paisa to 2 or 5 naya paisa, we would collect whatever people gave us and use the money to buy slates, pencils, paper, pen, chalks and notebooks to run the school with. Many children came to the school hungry. Some puffed rice would be bought for

them with that money. Many sympathetic people from West Bengal had come to see how we were living there and had donated a lot of foodstuffs to us, like rice, wheat, grains, medicines, clothes, schoolbooks, notebooks and pens, chalks and dusters, blankets and many other things. Apart from them, a lot of relief organizations would secretly send us aid in spite of the government ban on doing so. The school teachers would be occasionally given 1 or 2 kilos of wheat to help them get by. We consulted the Principal of the school at Kumirmari for administrative and educational advice and, accordingly, adopted the West Bengal Educational Board syllabus, which was taught up to the ninth standard in our school. The Principal of the Kumirmari school said that students going on to the tenth grade could move to the Kumirmari school and give their Madhyamik board exams with them. He would come frequently to see how our school work was going, and was usually quite pleased with our arrangement. Many educators in West Bengal would come to see our school and show their appreciation for it.

There was a big playground next to the school. The students and the teachers together cleared that ground of mangrove, gora tree and other plants and wild overgrowth to make that field. A library was built, and we put chairs, tables and cupboards in them. The classrooms were fitted with desks, benches and chairs for the teachers after much effort. We were struggling on through want, penury and every other obstacle that could be imagined to keep the Netaji nagar school running. The journalist Jyotirmoy Dutta had come to our school several times.

Our Honourable Committee President had been conducting the work on the embankment with considerable expedition. Thousands of people had carved it beside the river. Sometimes small canals were being attached to the structure or wooden machines were used to control the level of the water for storage. The boat making factory had produced over a hundred dinghies by then.

While our conditions were becoming somewhat tolerable- which meant that we were now half-starved as opposed to fully starved and struggled together, while losing many lives, to make that uninhabited island habitable- suddenly the mood of those who had been such friends and sympathizers of the poor and the dispossessed refugees began to change. Those who had openly professed their sympathies with the refugee cause and had protested against their being sent out of Bengal with the help of fiery speeches were now suddenly bereft of that enthusiasm after achieving state power. They declared, The refugees of Marichjhapi have to be cast out. If it needed duplicity, strength or manipulation to achieve these ends let them be used.

The first step towards ejecting the refugees was taken at the Left Front's Kumirmari regional body meeting of its local ministers. These were representatives of the RSP. The Kumirmari region belonged to them. Receiving their orders from more senior leaders the regional leaders of Kumirmari quickly organized a meeting. Refugee-sympathizing ministers sat with them for discussions and said, You are helping the refugees settle in at Marichjhapi I heard.

They said, We are not helping them at all. We are not torturing or harassing them either. The minister said, You should know that the government is determined to drive them out of Marichjhapi. So you should start doing things that will lead to an easy way towards driving them out. But the leaders of Kumirmari region did not carry out these unfair orders from the minister. They did not behave badly with the refugees at all.

When news of these events spread, many kind-hearted intellectuals from Calcutta came to Marichjhapi to see our living conditions. It is worth mentioning a few of those. The Honourable Saibalkumar Gupta came with his wife to Marichjhapi, so did Pannalal Dasgupta, a few vocalists, journalists and many others on a packed launch boat. Saibal Babu took up the post of Chairman to visit Dandakaranya too. Pannalal Babu also stayed for a long time at Dandakaranya and did much work to improve the living conditions of the refugees there. They got together for a meeting. That meeting was chaired by our Committee President, Satish Mondal. At the beginning of the meeting people asked Saibal Babu to describe the conditions of the refugees in Dandakaranya as he had seen them. Saibal Babu got up to speak but was soon overcome with tears and after sobbing like a child for a few minutes, sat back down, shaking and unable to say a single word.

Pannalal Babu described those conditions at length, however, because he had toured almost all the regional camps at the Dandakaranya Malkangiri zone several times. Most of the refugees from the Malkangiri camps knew Pannalal Babu well, as a result. Panna Babu had even started a Tagore Society at Malkangiri, whose work was almost entirely carried out by him. He had done several improvement projects around the area like creating drinking water sources or founding small educational institutes, and other such things. No one at Malkangiri would ever forget the services done to them by Pannalal Dasgupta.

The concluding part of the meeting was taken up by the Honourable Satish Mondal, who spoke in detail about the future courses of action that needed to be taken by the residents of Netaji nagar.

After wishing for the sympathy and support of the general population in West Bengal, the meeting came to an end.

When the leaders who had professed sympathy for the poor were unable to get their way through the politicians of Kumirmari, they rejected their masks of sympathy angrily and assumed their true forms. Now began the deceptions, shows of strength and manipulations that would pave the way towards evicting the refugees. They started making false allegations against us. The sympathy-wielding politicians began to make use of police force. They called their subordinated underlings and secretly conveyed to them their own wishes and commands. And these underlings accepted these orders as sacred edicts and got down to the business of evicting refugees immediately.

On the opposite shore of Netaji nagar (Marichjhapi) was Kumirmari and the Bagna Forest Office. A few police caps were set up there. The police began to conspire about how and when they could come over and commit some atrocities on us.

While clearing the ground we would find the roots and other parts of trees and vines that we would carry over on our boats to some neighbouring islands to sell. That was a major means of securing food for us. One day several of our boats were going to sell roots. In the middle of the river a group of policemen used a number of launches to strike against those boats, break them into pieces and sink them into the water. There were almost 60-70 boats and everyone who was on those boats drowned to their deaths. The boats, of course, went as well. Who could keep count of the number of people who died that day? We stopped taking the boats out, so we stopped getting food as well. After this murderous incident several journalists from Kolkata had wanted to come to Marichjhapi to see the state of affairs for themselves. But the police had not allowed it. It was only Jyotirmoy Dutta whom the police could not stop. He had pulled the wool over their eyes and got into Marichjhapi stealthily. He saw things for himself and heard what he had to hear; then he published it in the newspaper. The intellectuals and political representatives of Kolkata found out about this inhuman atrocity from that report. In spite of the police forbidding it, many opposition political leaders from Bengal's Vidhan Sabha came to the island, including Kashikanta Maitra, Haripada Bharati, the journalist Sukharanjan Sengupta, and others. Kashi Babu assured us by saying, I have witnessed the tortures being visited on you myself. I will absolutely ask questions about those actions in the Vidhan Sabha. On the way back Kashikanta Babu and others were detained by the police. Sukharanjan Dasgupta had anticipated the police's intentions and had concealed himself somewhere. The next day, the people of West Bengal read about these incidents in the newspaper. Kashi Babu asked at the Vidhan Sabha, Why have these refugees been called

over here and then refused any help or sympathy, while police depredations are being unleashed on them? It was not just him, but many other assembly members who made their protests and demanded answers. Finding no excuses, the sympathy-wielding leaders told a stream of lies in the name of the refugees and attempted to suppress its own inexcusable behavior. It did not hurt their conscience. They told everyone at the Vidhan Sabha:

1. They are conspiring with foreign enemies to set up their own free state at Marichjhapi.
2. For this objective, there are people being trained with weapons over there.
3. National treasures are being smuggled out by them.
4. They are challenging the sovereignty of the government.
5. They are destroying protected forested areas.

Now the question arises, how did they find out about all this? They answered, the detective department has drawn up a report that suggests these things. We did not know how a governmental detective division could produce such a pack of lies. Since the day the refugees first entered Marichjhapi until the last day before they were evicted, all sorts of people had entered Marichjhapi, including journalists, intellectuals, political leaders and ordinary people. I don't know if anybody knows about this kind of incident.

Since the boats were broken many men left Marichjhapi to look for work to feed themselves, leading the male population on the island to decrease somewhat. The embankment had almost entirely been constructed by then. Plenty of prawn was being farmed there. If we sold it in a few months we may have got up to 2 lakh rupees for them. Once the boats were broken the people's spirit was shaken too. Horrifying depths of starvation began to show themselves. Starving, half-starved, we were somehow surviving and struggling to fight our last fight. Every day several innocent children died. Parents who had lost their children could not find any time to grieve them as they worked nonstop on the island. According to the instructions of the Committee, the work on the embankment, land clearance, children's education and other tasks were going on unimpeded in spite of all our deprivations.

The police force appeared in their new garb as the loyal underlings of the political leaders, and following the latter's commands started a ritual killing of the refugees. All public and private launches

were seized, and Section 144 was imposed. From 29.1.79 onwards Marichjhapi island was completely blockaded. The police force's economic blockage prevented any chance of food or drinking water supplies from reaching us. Starvation began to rear its ugly head in every household. Armed police guards were keeping watch all the time. Due to the lack of food supplies some people had to resort to boiling a coarse variety of salty grass and eating it. Initially, we would get some crabs or fish to boil and eat. But soon it became impossible to fish for those under the vigilant eyes of the police. The grass that we had to eat then was locally called *jodu* grass. We lovingly renamed it as 'Jyotipalong' (Jyoti Spinach). This was our way of commemorating our dear Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu. Meanwhile, the blockade had led directly to the death of 27 people. The government's position was that if we did not return to Dandakaranya we would be steadily killed off in that manner. They did not just stop at the blockade. When the parents of starving and crying children could not bear their suffering anymore, they went over on 28.1.79 from Netaji nagar to Kumirmari and a few other islands to beg. The cruel police force struck against their boats mid-river and sank them; they also shot tear gas at them. Seeing so many mothers of young children treated in such an inhuman manner the people of Kumirmari became restive. So the police fired tear gas at them too. In this situation a few mothers reached in a state of near-death. On 29.1.79 they cut off our fishing boats and canal routes. Breaking the canals in the embankment structure, which we had worked so hard and for so long to build, led to some of us arguing with the police. Later, from 2 pm onwards the police threw a barrage of tear gas at us. This led to a lot of us getting seriously injured. On 30.1.79 police launches repeatedly came to our shore to exhort us to leave for Dandakaranya. We refugees shouted at them together, We will die, but we will never return to Dandakaranya! This led to the police increasing their intensity of harassment and they continued to tear gas us late into the night, whenever they felt like it.

Since the morning of Wednesday, 31.1.79, the police atrocities increased in intensity. They were firing tear gas at us since the early morning. Agitated by hunger and thirst, some refugee women were taking a dinghy out to secure some food and water. The police struck their dinghy as well and drowned it, while keeping their tear gas firing intact. The women had to swim and reach for safety on the shores of Kumirmari. Even there they were tear-gassed by the police. This inhuman torture once again moved the locals of Kumirmari to anger and impatience. They came out together in groups and stood in a line along the shore. Even though they weren't refugees they could not bear the depredations of the police anymore and were forced to protest against them. After 3 pm the police started to fire at them too- both from the river as well as from land. Tear gas was used as well; two rounds had already been

employed at Netaji nagar. On the shore of Kumirmari they expended close to 30 rounds- so 32 rounds in all were fired that day. People of all ages were violently lathi-charged too.

At the time, the police also entered a local resident's house and shot a woman who was carrying her child on her waist. The child survived because the bullet did not hit it. When the woman's other son became angry at seeing his mother shot dead before him the police started beating him up and forcibly pushed him into their launch-boat, preparing to kill him too. But then an officer forbade it and he was simply kicked out of the launch and thrown into the river.<sup>1</sup> Then the police stepped on the neck of five-year old child and choked him to death. In their indiscriminate and inhuman tortures and firing, close to 30-35 people, including refugees and locals, died. Those dead bodies were transported by the police launches to the Sandeshkhali station, where their stomachs were slashed and then the bodies thrown into the Bermojuria River. We found some of those dead bodies later floating in the Kolagachia River.

This deadly incident went unreported in the newspapers, because the police had not allowed any journalists or 'outsiders' to enter Kumirmari or Netaji nagar.<sup>2</sup> Apart from a few residents of Kumirmari no one knew about this. The next day, on 1.2.79, Kumirmari's local residents held a protest against the killing of their fellow-residents and the harassment of the refugees by gheraoing the police camp at Bagna. Against this context the police- with the help of their women members of the force- arrested over 150 refugees and put them in jail. They were jailed in Dumdum and Alipur.

8-10 days had passed with them in custody when one of our volunteers, Debabrata Biswas, took the help of a lawyer from West Bengal to lodge a written petition against these injustices in the courts. Within a few days the courts told the West Bengal government that their blockade on food and water supplies to the refugees was illegal and ordered them to lift it immediately. Even if the government agreed to these directions they maintained their depredations and blockades.

But the blockade was loosened nonetheless, and when the court's orders were published in the newspapers lots of journalists, intellectuals, political leaders and ordinary people visited Netaji nagar. They gathered all sorts of information and offered us their sympathies. Once they returned to Kolkata news of our atrocities began to be published in their media outlets. Several representatives demanded answers from the government at the Vidhan Sabha too. But the refugee harassment did not stop, and

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<sup>1</sup> Meni Munda's son Balaram, of course, did not mention being kicked out of the launch. He said that the police had hit him with the butts of their rifle, so he fell unconscious and was not put on the launch.

<sup>2</sup> There was something published- but it was entirely based on police reports and sources. It was far from the truth. It has been discussed in the Chapter 'State's war and the death of the innocent' in this book.



the drive to push them out went on unabated. The police repeatedly appropriated boats full of food, medicine and other stuff that were being sent to us by charity organizations; they prevented our access to relief and snatched away supplies of clothes, blankets, school books, stationery, etc. All of this happened. A thousand lies cannot conceal these facts. In these dangerous conditions the refugees had to live, terror-stricken, through the months of February, March, and April. In spite of their inhuman tortures, no one lost their spirit.

Then came that cursed month of May. In the very first week of that month a few thousand armed police entered Netaji nagar. Netaji nagar, or Marichjhapi, was surrounded by launches full of police. They had completely taken over the island. They went on parade marches through our streets with rifles, stenguns and all sorts of weapons. It is impossible to describe all the performances they went through. It seemed like some hostile foreign country had attacked and they were preparing a military reaction. There was this war footing that was imposed over Netaji nagar that day. Then, after some calm, they took over our school buildings, medical facilities, playgrounds and other empty spaces to set up police camps.

Medical services stopped; education stopped. From morning to evening the police performed a variety of manoeuvres to impress us, and it's impossible to describe all of it if you haven't seen it. 8-10 days passed with us watching them performing their strange actions. Then came that horrifying night of 13 May, 1979.

It was late at night. Perhaps later than 2 am. I used to sleep in my friend Samir Samaddar's house every day. It was the same that day. Suddenly, some banging noises on the door woke me up. As soon as I opened my eyes I saw torchlight being flashed all around me. I got up properly and saw that they were the police. One of them pushed me aggressively and said, Hey bastard, come with us! The fucker seems to be sleeping peacefully in his father's zamindari property. Let's go, bastard- with another hard push. I said, Let's go where we have to go. But don't push me around. I was bare-chested, wearing only a lungi. When I got out of the hut in that state I saw and heard cries emerging from every household. Just crying noises and people shouting, Please save us! Wherever you are, please come and save us! I went ahead and saw little fires burning everywhere. The market was caught in a major conflagration. There were cries of death coursing through Netaji nagar. No one knew where they were running in the dark either. I walked beside the river towards the school. The police held both my hands as they accompanied me. I could hear people running and jumping into the river around us. The police were saying, Where will you fuckers escape? Today we'll finish everything. They had brought some

goondas too and they were indiscriminately harassing the refugees all night. They were picking up women, our daughters and wives, and running away with them. After torturing people they were being taken and put on the launches, where the police helped them. Most of the young refugee men had fled, and those who were caught by the police were put on a separate launch. Soon I realized I was being taken to meet one of the senior officers of this operation. The chief officer was occupying the school that I had built with my hands, and sitting on a chair that I used to sit on. I went and stood with my naked body in front of him. After looking at me for a while, he said, Oh, the master has come. Listen to me, master; all of you must leave, and leave today. The government will not allow you to live here any longer. He even praised me a little bit for being a teacher in that school. He wanted to provide something for me on the side as well. He said, Take your family and leave. I am giving you a launch. I said, I do not need these privileges. I will never leave Netaji nagar willingly. Then he got angry and said, Take him to the launch! As soon as they had their orders, the police held me aloft and put me on the launch. On the launch I saw there were other young men from Marichjhapi who had refused to leave willingly. I stood on the launch and began to witness the terrible events that were unfolding before my eyes on Netaji nagar. All of Netaji nagar was burning as flames appeared to consume every inch of whatever we had built on it. I could only hear the cries of those who were dying. Please save us! They were being beaten up and shoved on to the launches. There was no accounting for who was being put where. No one knew where their children were, or where their parents were being taken.

Our launch took off as soon as it was morning. We went along the river, then we were taken off and put on a lorry, which dropped us off in front of the Basirhat courts. We sat there all day without food. At 10 o'clock in the night we were again put on trucks and taken to the Dum Dum Central Jail and locked up. Meanwhile, after leveling the island of Netaji nagar with continuous fires that burnt for a day and a half, nothing was left on it except for some burnt dead bodies. Our journey of eviction came to an end. The good news was soon conveyed to the refugee sympathizing, friend of the dispossessed, political leaders. Marichjhapi had been cleared of refugees. Standing over the burnt dead bodies the executioners proudly declared, The ease and beauty with which we dispatched these refugees, even the military would not have been able to do it!

My elderly father had to run around for a month, consulting a lawyer of his own age, and using the money my wife begged on the streets to get hold of, to secure my bail. We returned to live in the execution chamber of Dandakaranya.

If a just government ever comes to power in West Bengal, one that worships truth and idealism, and believes in the struggle of the refugees, then these murders, inhuman tortures and deadly incidents would find recognition in the public sphere; and it might lead to justice being served against the real criminals in the state. If that were to happen eventually, the martyrs of Marichjhapi would find some consolation for their hungry souls.

*After getting off at Marichjhapi the parliamentary representatives stopped in their tracks when they saw the naked, dead bodies of 4-5 children arrayed on the mud and the grass below. Prasannabhai Mehta looked questioningly at the people around him. He was told that the refugee children who had died of hunger or without medical treatment were the ones whose bodies were laid out here.*

### **The Bloodbath at Marichjhapi**

#### **Radhikaranjan Biswas**

Before I can tell the events from my memory of the bloodbath committed upon Bengali refugees at Marichjhapi, I am always assailed by questions about what should be said first, what should be said later, what should be written about or what should not be written about- questions to which I have to provide some answers. Marichjhapi is not just the name of an island today; it is a symbol and it is a crucial part of a massively unfortunate history. It is also the history of my life. The greatest mass killing of refugees in independent India took place at Marichjhapi first. In the year 1979. It is almost impossible to find another episode of such cruelty taking place anywhere else in the world.

Under the leadership of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee's (*Udbastu Unnoyonshil Samiti*) Satish Mondal and Rangalal Goldar we left Dandakaranya and reached Marichjhapi in the month of April, 1978. The idea for settling refugees and building habitations at Marichjhapi first came to the Left-leaning organization, The Regional All-Refugee Council. Later on, when the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee was formed at the Mana camp, their demand since 1974 has been to ask for the refugees to be re-settled at Marichjhapi. West Bengal's Left Front leaders had been in touch with them since these early stages of planning; their leaders, such as Jyoti Basu, Ram Chatterjee, Ashok Ghosh and others had continuously provided their support and encouragement to these Refugee leaders and had promised them that once they came to power in the state they would certainly decide what to do about re-settling the Dandakaranya refugees. The Left Front came to power in West Bengal in 1977. The Committee leaders got in touch with them. Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister, had said to a delegation of representatives for the refugees, We cannot find the funds for securing your rehabilitation; but if you were to come to West Bengal somehow, our police will not beat you up and chase you out like Siddharta Shankar Ray's police did.

Feeling hopeful after hearing this comment from the Left Front leaders, we began preparations to leave for Marichjhapi under the leadership of the Committee. Several refugees from various parts of Dandakaranya began to leave for Marichjhapi, in early 1978 itself. After going through several incidents, we began to reach Marichjhapi early in the month of April that year.

Around one and a half lakh refugees reached Marichjhapi. Their first task was to prevent the use of the salty local water by attempting to build a clay embankment around it. With a lot of enthusiasm and hard work we built that embankment and also constructed our own houses out of whatever materials we could find from the forests around us, and made the place inhabitable. From the very beginning we had no expectations of receiving any help from the government so we decided to survive on our own struggles and merits. So we found ways to make products like *beedis*, bread and various wooden implements and crafted items in our small manufacturing units to sell outside the island and draw a regular income. A daily market was also set up. Many people set up shops there and started doing business. There were several kinds of shops there- from sweetmeat places to iron workshops. One of the volunteers from the Committee, Santosh Karmakar, ran one of the most popular sweetmeat shops in that market.

We felt a great need for an educational institution at Marichjhapi. A school was soon established next to the market. Netaji nagar Vidyapeeth. It's worth pointing out here that everyone who

was on the Committee, including Satish Mondal, Rangalal Goldar, Raiharan Baroi and Arabinda Mistry- were devoted to Netaji. The Committee had always adopted Netaji's rebellious idealism since its inception. On the top section of our Committee's official letter pad was a picture of a bust of Netaji in martial attire, with three words written down that were frequently mentioned by him: 'trust', 'unity' and 'sacrifice'. That was why the school was also named after Netaji. The settlement that we had built at Marichjhhapi was also called Netaji nagar from the very beginning. At the school, one could study up to the eighth standard. The role of the Principal or headmaster was taken up by my longtime friend, Nirmalkanti Dhali. Before coming to Marichjhhapi we lived close to each other at Malkangiri. I had become close to him due to our shared interests in acting in community theatre and *jatra*. In the unfavourable environment of Marichjhhapi Nirmal da tried his best to impart some education to the children. The other teachers and assistants also tried their best to do their jobs well in that school.

Dr. Samir Poddar was another friend ours. We had set up a small medical facility at Marichjhhapi under his supervision. The ailing residents of Marichjhhapi would find some relief in that medical facility even though our resources and capacities were very limited. Apart from this facility, some doctors had opened their own, personal chambers next to the canal lines that ran by the market. I don't remember all their names, but I remember a young doctor called Pratul Dewan.

Due to everyone's efforts Marichjhhapi was soon transformed into a lively, peopled, habitation. A youth army was created under the leadership of Pabitra Biswas. Those young men had an excellent sense of discipline and enthusiasm for their work- it was quite memorable. Their jobs included keeping the streets of Netaji nagar clean and helping out the residents in whatever way they could. I remember the names of a few of those youth army boys: Sunil Haldar, Modhu Malakar, Barish Goldar, Abani Mondal, Fani Mondal and others. Modhu Malakar was also a working member of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee. There was a distinct psychology at work among the refugees of Marichjhhapi; they would imagine this place to be their final address. This is where we would have to struggle and survive. So, we employed all of our collective strength towards establishing Netaji nagar as a habitable place.

Beside Marichjhhapi, on the other shore of the Korankhali River, was the village of Kumirmari, settled over a hundred years ago. Their residents were so impressed with our work and resolve that they had hoped against all hope that we would be able to stay on at Marichjhhapi. A deep relationship grew between their residents and the refugees of Marichjhhapi. They tried to help us in many ways. That was why when the Left Front government forcibly evicted us, they were among those who were

most shocked by the events. The way the police visited their tortures upon the refugees of Marichjhapi, and killed many of them, left a deep impression on their minds.

Anyway, after going to Marichjhapi our first few months went well. The people had established schools, markets and roads, and were trying to focus on making their ends meet. In order to farm prawns, they worked tirelessly to create 28 fish pool enclosures around the embankment. But things changed in the month of August. The police launches began to arrive frequently down the Korankhali River and keep guard around the island. The West Bengal government began to spread propaganda about the refugees of Marichjhapi. Jyoti Basu himself had taken initiative in these measures. The allegations leveled against us were, that we were destroying forest resources, carrying on smuggling activities across the international border, and that we were trying to install a separate homeland in Marichjhapi with the help of an armed insurrection. In fact, Jyoti Basu also said that the refugees of Marichjhapi were conspiring with foreign states to undermine the sovereignty of West Bengal.

We had responded to all these charges in a memorandum that we released publicly. The General Secretary of our Committee, Raiharan Baroi, would have his signed memoranda generally prepared by me. So I know a great deal about what was written in those releases. When the three-member parliamentary committee had come to make their investigations at Marichjhapi, we had handed over some of those memoranda texts to their leader, Prasannabhai Mehta.

Since the establishment of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee in 1973 Jyoti Basu and many of his other Left Front colleagues had been in close contact with members of that committee and had himself allowed the refugees of Dandakaranya to dream about an escape to Sunderban. So there is no reason to assume that he did not know anything about the true activities being carried out by people like Satish Mondal, Raiharan Baroi or any of the other refugees. The most penurious, lower caste peasants from places like Khulna, Barishal, Jessore and Faridpur comprised the majority of the refugees who had been sent to Dandakaranya. Almost 95 per cent of these people were totally illiterate, their illiterate leaders were Satish Mondal, and the half-educated Raiharan Baroi; Rangalal Goldar was somewhat better educated, but physically disabled; the other refugees from Dandakaranya were starving and struggling to stay alive. How this band of unfortunates could have been conspiring with a foreign state was a fantasy that only a great leader like Jyoti Basu could confabulate.

Since August the police had increased their harassment and threats upon the ordinary people, exhorting them to go back to Dandakaranya. Appropriating refugee-made boats from the Korankhali

River, beating up refugees indiscriminately: these activities became normal. But the refugees did not lose their spirit. On the playgrounds of the Netaji nagar Vidyapeeth, we staged a play that I had written, titled 'The Sacrifice of Freedom'. The headmaster of the school, Nirmalkanti Dhali, the doctor at the Marichjhhapi nursing home, Dr. Poddar, a leader from the Committee, Aurobindo Mistri: they all took part in the performance. As a child artist, Rabindranath Paik sang a song during the *pala* performance; he now lives next to the railway line at Madhyamgram. During the horrifying police operations at Marichjhhapi later my manuscript of the play sank with a boat that was drowned, and disappeared. People had come from Kumirmari to see that *pala* performance that day.

As the days progressed through August, the police presence on the Korankhali River went on increasing as well. They began to harass those boats that were going out on business to places like Sandeshkhali, Najat, Chhoto Mollakhali and other neighbouring places. They would seize those boats, including whatever goods were on them, and beat the people up on a regular basis.

And thus arrived January, 1979. On 24 January, Jyoti Basu decided to surround the island of Marichjhhapi to impose a blockade and starve the refugees to death. On that day, all river routes leading out of Marichjhhapi were blocked. River crossings, food, drinking water supplies, medical supplies were all stopped from entering the island. The police kept a vigil on the Korankhali River so that no refugees could cross it. Within a few days our food supplies began to run out. Starving children began to fall sick. Lack of food and medical treatment led to many children dying. When the blockade was not lifted even after 7 days, it was time for the refugees to enter into a period of coerced fasting. Unable to bear their hunger, the people began to consume the wild grass, *jodu* spinach, leaves from the coconut tree and whatever else they could find at hand. The details of these sufferings, like the death of the children, the police's inhuman cruelty, suicides committed by those unable to bear hunger, young women who were raped by the police- we had compiled all of these incidents into a report with evidence and witness accounts that was signed by Raiharan Baroi and sent on to the intellectuals and media machinery of Bengal. It is not likely that the people of West Bengal knew nothing about us then. But we still do not understand how the people of Bengal remained largely unconcerned even after a blockade was imposed that pushed Bengali refugees towards their death and the mass killings that were unleashed on 31 January.

On 31 January, a group of refugees, unable to bear their thirst and hunger, were crossing the Korankhali River to secure some food and water supplies when the police opened fire upon them and killed about 40 of them- and this incident has been described by others too. So I'm not going into a

detailed description of those events here. 2-3 days before that event took place I went to Delhi with a friend on the orders of Raiharan Baroi. The refugee sympathizing leader, the late Samar Guha (who was a parliamentary leader of the party), told us that he would introduce us to some important politicians, especially those in the ruling Janata Party, if we managed to get to Delhi. As a result, the events taking place in Marichjhapi could be relayed to New Delhi, according to him.

We were on the train to Delhi when those horrifying incidents took place on 31 January, 1979. We must have reached Delhi on the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> of February and then heard about that shooting incident. I do remember that once the news of police firing in Marichjhapi reached New Delhi the political atmosphere heated up around us. Opposition leaders demanded a discussion in Parliament about the events that took place in Marichjhapi.

The academic Samar Guha was then living at 14 talkatora Road. We were staying at his house. He wrote a letter and sent us to meet some important people with it. We described to them the events that had taken place at Marichjhapi and also handed them the memoranda written by our Committee members. I remember meeting leaders like the Minister of Civil Aviation at the time, Purushottam Lal Kaushik, who was a minister from Madhya Pradesh, the Defense Minister from Janata Dal, Jagjivan Ram, and others. I think we gave a letter to the minister from Maharashtra, Jambuvantrao Dhote, too.

Professor Guha told us that the incident of police firing at Marichjhapi would be discussed in the Lok Sabha on 7 February. As a result, these matters were discussed publicly and it was decided that a parliamentary delegation would be sent to investigate these events at Marichjhapi. When they returned with their findings, the Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, would decide what to do.

Due to the arrangements made by Professor Guha we were able to accompany this Parliamentary delegation. The three-member delegation reached Marichjhapi on 22 March, 1979. The West Bengal government tried to stop their launch from reaching Marichjhapi- as newspaper reports subsequently suggested. Since we were accompanying this delegation, I also saw an unreported incident that I must talk about here. When the leader of the delegation, Prasannabhai Mehta, was getting off the launch with his two fellow-members, Lakshminarayan Pandey and Mangaldeo Bisharad, the tide had forced the level of the Korankhali River water to recede. So the launch could not get as close to the shore as possible. It dropped the members off some distance from the shore, so they had to wade through some mud to reach solid ground. Mid-way, they stopped in their tracks when they saw the



naked, dead bodies of 4-5 children arrayed on the mud and the grass below. Prasannabhai Mehta looked questioningly at the people around him. He was told that the refugee children who had died of hunger or without medical treatment were the ones whose bodies were laid out here. I could clearly see tears in Prasannabhai Mehta's eyes. When he had taken his rounds of the island to see what they had to see, he spoke before the refugees and said that he had no idea that the refugee problem was still such a burning issue. He apologized for his ignorance.

When the delegation returned to Delhi and submitted its 303-page report, there was not a single word in it that was against the refugees. Still, the depredations being committed upon the refugees could not be stopped. The calculations of political reality did not allow a Janata Dal government to endanger their support from the Left Front party; so Morarji Desai could not take any action against those events and remained silent.

Then those horrifying series of events took place. After 12 May, the police brutalities increased even more at Marichjhapi. On 14 and 15 May, police came with cadres of the CPI(M) (who wore red neckerchiefs) and set all the huts on Marichjhapi alight, cruelly beat people up, even kicking pregnant women in the stomachs and threw many children into those burning fires, killing most of them. Refugees were being herded like cattle and put on launches headed for Dandakaranya. Marichjhapi was completely surrounded so news could not travel outside while the operation took place. Apparently, Jyoti Basu's people had sent the refugees back after explaining their advantages to them. A kind of 'explanation' that landed at least 500 injured refugees in the hospitals of Koraput and Raipur.

I still don't quite know how I managed to escape with a few companions- through the forests of Marichjhapi with our lives hanging in balance, across the Raimangal River, spending a night in a house next to the Kagmari Market, then walking to Taldi Station to catch a train to Calcutta.

In the end, I want to say just a couple of things about the murder of the refugees at Marichjhapi and the truth about its brutal history, before I conclude. Recently, I noticed in the Bengali Daily Statesman and its English-language counterpart, The Statesman, some pieces written by the former Police Superintendent of the then undivided 24 Parganas, Amiyakumar Samanta, on Marichjhapi. His essays made the primary claim that no major tortures were committed on the refugees at Marichjhapi. He completely dismissed the brutal events that took place on 31 January and claimed that only 1 person died in police firing.

In the context of Amiya babu's statements, it must be said that the ordinary people of Kumirmari, who witnessed those events, their village Panchayat members, the Panchayat chief, along with many famous and ordinary journalists of Bengal, such as Sukharanjan Sengupta, and other intellectuals and politicians have all agreed about the ferocious treatment meted out to the refugees of Marichjhapi. But Amiya babu has dismissed all their accounts. Amiya babu was not present during the mass-killings, so what proof can he present to support the accuracy of his statements? That proof came in the form of a police report written by one of his former subordinates. It was according to that report that Amiya Babu could assert that only 1 person had been killed that day.

I ask, would even illiterate people believe that a fascist, authoritarian, people-killing government would leave a trace of its own murderous actions recorded for posterity?

We have a single demand for the central government. An impartial investigative commission should be set up to investigate the events that took place at Marichjhapi, which would ensure the protection of all witnesses and reveal its findings openly, on a public forum, so that the 'truth' can finally come out. Until a commission like this is formed that can accurately investigate the terrible events at Marichjhapi, none of us will be free of the burden of truth.

*'It was certainly a war-like situation. We were holding spears, lances, sickles, bows and arrows. Those were our weapons. They were carrying sticks-shields-rifles-tear gas'. We fought all day. Robin Joardar was shot first, at about 10 or 10:30 am. Santosh was shot in the afternoon, around 3-3:30 pm.*

### **The State's War and the Death of the Innocent**

(Madhumoy Pal's transcription of a few recorded interviews)

The residents of the island of Marichjhapi could tell that there was a conspiracy afoot to detach them from the outside world. It is not such a difficult task after all to isolate such a remote island. The island was practically isolated by its environmental characteristics as well. And the refugees of Marichjhapi were economically and socially marginalized to begin with. In the words of a poet like Subhas Mukhopadhyay these people were "the offspring of gleaners"; while Shankha Ghosh would say they had "a slab of stone pressed upon their forehead of fortune". The events of Marichjhapi in the past and Lalgarh today prove that the lives of the socially marginalized- especially if they are lower caste- do not affect the thinking of urban intellectuals. Thinking about them might slow down the eternal chariot of progress, whose long-term fruits they have become used to. At most, they may sign a letter/petition after thinking about it for days.

But the police forces of 24 Parganas had to show a lot of courage to disperse the refugees of Marichjhapi that day. Seizing the launches at Hasnabad, disallowing the people of Marichjhapi who had gone looking for work to places like Hasnabad-Basirhat and other islands from returning home, lodging false cases against them, creating an environment of terror, having the armed police parade all day, etc.- all of it came together to create such a war-like environment. Since the day Amiyakumar Samanta arrived to take charge of the district police station on 18 August, 1978, the state began to bare its teeth and claws. This had happened under Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's orders. Amiyakumar Samanta tells us that when he took charge, according to their detective department around 32,000 people were living on that island. But the island was part of a protected forest zone. Let alone setting up habitations there, even entering that island was a crime punishable by a Forest Law of 1927. On Lot 144 of that island the Forestry Division had cleared some land to set up a coconut plantation with a few thousand coconut trees. The newly-arrived strangers were not just living around those parts but also further south on the island, where they had cleared more land. They must be sent back. This was a problem for the West Bengal government, but more specifically the police forces and district administrators of 24 Parganas. Amiya Babu also heard that the strangers were cutting the trees in the forest for wood, catching and selling fish from the river and the canals and working on nearby islands as temporary daily-wage labourers. The government does not want any hostilities with the refugees- they must simply be made to understand and sent back to where they came from. (*Marichjhapi: A fragmented country and its fragmented histories*, pg. 247-48) Amiyakumar Samanta is a very capable police officer. Even after 30 years had passed, he has relied on his memory of events (aided, as he has informed us, by notes) to narrate an account that has stuck close to the routine accounts of the state administration as well. For instance, he has called the refugees who had come from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi 'strangers'. The word 'stranger' is probably meant to conceal a series of historical events- like how the refugees were promised rehabilitation in Bengal, so much so that some leaders even went there to summon them. The word is just another form for suggesting 'outsiders'. Whenever the so-called Left Front government uses its state machinery to crush any opposition voices without mercy, they usually brand them 'outsiders'. However, in an English article he has used a different word as a synonym for 'stranger': 'inmate'.

According to Amiya Babu's narrative, the strangers were "convinced" to go back to where they came from since the September of 1978. That is, within fifteen days of Amiyakumar Babu taking charge of the station. The Chief Minister Jyoti Basu had himself appointed Amiya Babu to carry out the task of "convincing" the people. In the responsible and calculated statement written by the officials of the undivided 24 Parganas police station, this fact has been concealed. He has written, 'Towards the early

part of September 1978, the Chief Minister held a meeting in his chambers and took stock of the situation at Marichjhapi; he then asked us to make arrangements for putting a stop to illegal woodcutting in those forests. On the morning of 7 September we got the news that a large group was carrying wood on boats to Hasnabad. There were about 100 small and large boats together. It is not new for people to carry illegally cut wood across the river like this- the locals had frequently seen such things before. Police and Forest Division officers have also seen this happen before. Everyone stayed calm in order to avoid trouble. But on that day we decided to stop that group. A few senior officers and constables were waiting on a launch outside the police station at Sandeshkhali in order to apprehend them. Initially, when a police launch tried to stop them, they ignored it and tried to get ahead. When 10-12 police launches began to appear from around the bend in the river, however, many of them got frightened and jumped into the water to escape, while some others tried to drag their boats to the shallow waters- where the police launch could not go- and escape over the bank. Anyway, eventually all the boats were sized- except two, which crashed with our launches and sank with the wood it was carrying. Long before that crash could take place, the passengers had leapt out of their boats. There were lots of people watching from the shore, they witnessed what had really happened. No tear gas or bullets were used at this stage, simply because there was no need for them. There were about 80-85 boats of all sizes.' After this, Amiya Babu has informed us, 'During these events I was present on a police launch outside Sandeshkhali station- all of this took place on my orders and in front of my eyes.' (*Marichjhapi...* pg. 253) This police statement tells us partially about what was entailed in their acts of "convincing" the refugees. The actual operation, in fact, went on for 3 days. The dates were probably 6,7 and 8 September, 1978. The operation was supposed to start on the 7<sup>th</sup> so they began to seize all the passenger-bearing launches on the river from the day before that. This was to cut Marichjhapi off from the outside world. No one should be able to enter or leave Marichjhapi during the operation. No journalists, no sympathizers, no photographers, no charitable organizations. There are so many dangers that come about, after all, when one has to "convince" people! The island was surrounded on the 8<sup>th</sup> too to keep news from going out. But then people like Jyotirmoy Dutta, Ajit Chakraborty and Sunil Gangopadhyay reached there along with a photographer. They had come from Hasnabad, braving the tempestuous waters of the Raimangal River in full flood. Jyotirmoy Dutta was then working as a journalist for the daily 'Jugantar'. But it was almost officially forbidden for Jugantar to carry any stories about Marichjhapi at the time. The news editor of Jugantar at the time, Amitabh Chaudhuri, has said, 'Jyotirmoy Dutta began to send fresh reports (on Marichjhapi) then. But the invisible presence of censorship forced us to stop publishing those reports.' (*Behind the News*, pg. 128) *Anandabazar Patrika*

was seemingly unaffected by this 'invisible presence of censorship' because they published a piece by Sunil Gangopadhyay on the issue. Of course, it was not a proper report or article, but a letter that was addressed to the editor, on 11 September, 1978. Sunil Gangopadhyay wrote, 'On the heart of the river near Marichjhapi a veritable naval battle took place. On one side were the tall, strong bodies of the police forces- none of them below 5 feet and 9 inches high- and on the other side were the weak, helpless, bare-chested bodies of the Bengali refugees. The police forces were on motor launches, while the refugees were riding on boats that they had made. There has been no report that has published the number of refugees who died that day, although we did hear that about 9 policemen, including an assistant-superintendent, had died. 50 refugee boats sank, although I hope the people on it did not eventually drown as well. The refugees were carrying arms as well...When the tussle with the police forces started, the refugees were carrying wood on 50 of their boats for the purpose of selling them. Earlier, each would go alone to sell some wood on the other side of the river. When they were being stopped from doing that, they decided to go together and go armed. All their boats sank that day. If they are not allowed to sell that wood they were carrying that day, there will be no need to fire them with bullets or tear gas, for they will die inevitably of hunger.' (*Marichjhapi...* p. 64-67) These attempts to starve the islanders and forcibly evicting them were part of their efforts to "convince" the people. Hunger was turned into a weapon and it compelled the people to leave Hasnabad for the forests of Dandakaranya. As for those who were trying to establish themselves in Marichjhapi with their own labour, the government decided to attack them with the same weapon. Sunil Gangopadhyay has written that the refugees were 'armed'. What kind of arms did they possess? When I asked a couple of people who were involved in the 'war' much later, they said their weapons were 'sickles, spears, bows and arrows and sharpened sticks made from mangrove stems. How could they be compared with the fiery weapons carried by the police? 'If we are prevented, we will struggle' was the motto that pushed us to carry these simple weapons. They were primarily meant to make us feel somewhat capable.' Was it possible that the sickle and lance-carrying people would swim through the waters after being thrown out of their battered boats and injure the stick, shield and gun-toting police? It is not believable at all. That was why the newspapers were fed the report that 9 policemen, along with an assistant Superintendent, were killed. Amiya Babu's essay, however, does not mention any police deaths. But he had raised doubts about the number of refugees who were killed at this 'naval battle'. Raiharan Baroi said that 2 refugees died that day. In Ross Mallick's account the number was increased to 128. It is true that it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of those who were injured or killed that day, because the state had prevented any way for ordinary people to find out. They managed to cut the island off from

the outside world with some dexterity, not allowing any news to filter out to objective, third parties. And the refugees who were involved in the battle that day were not organized in any recognizable manner. It was not like a count was taken before the leaders led them out to battle and then returned with the exact numbers of those who were killed in the battle. It was simply not possible. Those few hundreds of people who had jumped into the river, in fear of their lives, barely knew each other. They had come from various parts of Dandakaranya searching for shelter. In a truly remote place like Marichjhapi, where almost 40,000 people were living as refugees scattered across the island, it was hard to tell who was dying of hunger, or snakebites, or for not receiving the right medical treatment; it was practically impossible to find out for certain. So there will always be room for doubting exactly how many people died during the operation on 7 September- whether it was 1 person, 2 of them or 128 people. Later on, Raiharan Baroi made his own enquiries and updated the number of refugee dead to 15. It was presented as a memorandum to the Parliamentary delegation that came to Marichjhapi. According to the district police officials, however, Baroi's list was considered a 'false' one. In this context, should we trust the man who was in charge of both carrying out the operations as a representative of state power and concealing the truth about those events too? Sunil Gangopadhyay showed some hope when he wrote, 'Not all the passengers on the 50 boats drowned that day.'

In March, 1979, the revolutionary Sunil Das wrote in an essay, 'The government has begun to obstruct their (refugees') journeys. They prevented a group of unarmed, harmless and impoverished refugees of the Harijan community from travelling on 7 April, 1978. They ordered the boatmen to not let them cross over from Hasnabad to the other side. But it did not help, and the refugees did manage to cross. On 19 August, 1978 (a day after Amiyakumar Samanta took charge as the district Superintendent) 20 launches full of armed policemen tried to create an obstacle and force them to surrender. But these were among the most hardened poor, strengthened by generations of social oppression- because they were from the Harijan community- so they mustered their great will to survive and overcame these obstacles. More trouble arrived on 9 September, 1978, when 200 small boats full of passengers and foodstuffs was battered by police launches and drowned. After destroying all the food supplies gathered by the most impoverished, socially marginalized, group of people the government showed its sense of priorities.' (*In the Shadow of Marichjhapi*, Jayasri, Falgun 1385)

The blockade went on at Marichjhapi. The Chief Minister's orders for the refugees to return to Dandakaranya were 'made clear' to them. Of course, this blockade was not announced publicly. Those who went outside the island for work, were not allowed to return. If they tried to return, they would be

arrested. The residents of Kumirmari were threatened. In order to get some of the refugees on their side, they even promised them a place in the city or new jobs. Supplies of rice-dal-wheat and other essential items were practically forbidden. Even medicines were forbidden. A medical doctor at Marichjhhapi, Dr. Samir Samaddar informed us that a CPI leader from Ashoknagar called Sadhan Sen would arrange for some medicines for the refugees. One night Dr. Samaddar and his friends were chased by the police when they were getting medicines from Sadhan Sen. They had to take a long route to find their way to the island finally. The intrepid refugees were perpetually challenging the police and administrative state officials in their efforts to survive!

It was becoming impossible to subdue the refugees. Meanwhile, the Chief Minister's orders were taking a lot of time to get carried out by those who were supposed to do the 'convincing'. The Left Front government, possibly under the advice of the current Police Superintendent, imposed Section 144 on 24 December, 1978 and stopped all passenger and goods-carrying launches from plying. Amiyakumar Samanta has informed us that the date was 26 December, 1978. The *Anandabazar Patrika* wrote, 'The government has initiated its first stage in eliminating the ways in which the refugees can make a living. A spokesperson for the state department said in a general assembly meeting on Sunday, We have stopped the refugees from moving about on the rivers around Marichjhhapi. A government mouthpiece said, After imposing Section 144, six boats have been captured on Saturday and 7 refugees have been arrested. After these events all was calm- and there no further clashes with the police- until the morning of Sunday. He said, Along the banks of Korankhali River to the north of Marichjhhapi, the number of the armed battalions of the Bagna Police camp have been increased. The District Administrator and the Police Superintendent were both present at Bagna. It has been learned that the state government has forbidden the movements of the refugees from Marichjhhapi to anywhere else, including other settled refugee spots. Since Marichjhhapi fell under protected Forest Acts, it was made clear that the Forest Department's permission would be needed to ply on the rivers around that zone. The imposition of Section 144 had added its own set of strictures as well. When the police detained some refugees along with their boats on Saturday, the government alleged that they were exploiting the resources of the forest and had entered the area without any legal permit.' (*Marichjhhapi...* pg. 137-38)

This historical tragedy of destroying a group of people with no nation with the weapon of hunger shall not be forgotten. Food was forbidden from entering Marichjhhapi, and with it, drinking water and medical supplies. The state declared war on 40,000 helpless people. The island became rife with the noise of people crying in hunger. The refugees ate what they could find from the forests- like



wild grass, *jodu* spinach, the flesh of coconuts, berries from mangrove trees, even resin from trees. The doctor at Marichjhapi, Dr. Samaddar, could not help being agitated while narrating such facts. During one interview he told me, Please don't remind me of those days. I still shiver. A nightmare chases me around. There is no accounting for how many people died that day: of starvation, from eating inedible roots or fruits and without medical aid. They were even forced to eat whatever insects or fish they could find in the swamps and silt, left behind by the river. They died suffering agonies of hunger. I was unable to give them any medicines. There were corpses all around us. I would not believe it if I did not see with my own eyes how a democratically elected government could be so inhuman, cruel and so degenerate.

A researcher on Marichjhapi, Tushar Bhattacharyya has informed us, 'There were only two taps at Marichjhapi then. It was impossible to service 40,000 people with two taps. So, people had to fetch water from Kumirmari. During the blockade, the I.C of that area, Gangadhar Bhattacharyya, would keep guard from his launch 'Debjani'. He would instruct the drivers of his launch about how to batter the boats that were carrying food and drinking water for the refugees. They sank 163 boats and looted the possessions of 113 people. They were accompanied by thugs in the service of the police and cadres from the CPI(M). The launch driver, Sunil, was promised a job in the police if he managed to do that work well. Later on, that same Sunil Das was ostracized by his fellow launch drivers from the Sareng community... At some point, some young men were desperate enough to take their boats out to Kumirmari for food, in violation of the unofficial blockade. As soon as they reached that island, the police opened fire and shot down 40 refugee bodies... The bodies were later kept at Rabi Mondal's courtyard near the Wednesday Market of Kumirmari. Rabi Mondal was working as an informer for the police at the time. The police came and picked those bodies up on a launch, then dumped them somewhere deep in the river. The driver of that launch, Yunus, later absconded. As the only witness, the police may have killed them.' (226)

That was on 31 January, 1979. 5 days- or 3, according to some accounts- after the blockade was imposed.

In order to find out what happened on 31 January, we went to meet someone who had lost a leg during the battle on that day. His name is Santosh Sarkar. He lives now at South 24 Parganas' Ghutiari Sharif. One of the most important leaders of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee, Rangalal Goldar, had established a settlement here called 'End of the Road'. He had taken the economic support of people like Saibalkumar Gupta, Pannalal Dasgupta, Gourkishore Ghosh, Shibnarayan Ray and Jyotirmoy Dutta. Rangalal Goldar eventually died here. Since he had given the name 'End of the Road'- it all felt

very significant and poignant. When freedom had snatched a country away from some people, the leaders of that group of people fought until the end to find a new country for themselves, and it was an ending of that struggle too. Santosh Sarkar runs a volunteer organization at 'End of the Road', which is one of the Committee's spiritual successor organizations as well. Santosh had been unable to bear the sufferings of the young and old on the blockaded island, so he had risked his life to swim across the Korankhali River on that day. Our interview with him took place on 27 June, 2010.

Santosh was not a refugee from Dandakaranya. He had come from Nainital, in Uttar Pradesh. He was living in the Dineshpur Rambag Colony there. He came with three friends to Marichjhapi after the blockade had started. Of course, they had to enter secretly, avoiding the police guards. Let's hear what he has to say about that day.

Since the blockade was imposed on 24 December, drinking water supplies had also been forbidden. The Chief Minister said at the Vidhan Sabha however that water supply has not been stopped. There were tube-wells on the other side of the river, they said, and why should we stop them from getting water from those wells? Actually, two tube-wells were dug outside the police station at Kumirmari. There was no great purpose behind it. They would simply catch whoever came to fetch water there. They could be arrested, framed on false charges and put in prison. And that is what happened inevitably- there would be no warnings or notices, simply arrests and imprisonment. But one needed to survive, after all. How do people survive without water? Around 8-8:30 am some women were sent out on boats. As soon as they reached Kumirmari the police tried to prevent them from getting on land. They used their sticks, but when those did not work, they jumped in to capture those women. At 9 am we got together in a group and went to confront the police about these events. This would not have happened if the women were allowed to return with water. They fought over the issue of water at Karbala- this was another Karbala. It was already a war-like atmosphere. We had spears, sickles, bows and arrows and sharpened, wooden sticks. Those were our instruments of war, so to speak. Their included sticks-shields-rifles-tear gas. The battle went on all day. Robin Joardar was shot first, around 10-10:30 am. Santosh was shot around 3-3:30 pm.

Santosh's uncle would practice with sticks, spears, lances and arrows. He would frequently intervene when village disputes broke out. Santosh had seen him since he was a child. So he got trained in using those weapons at an early age. Of course, he never had to use his training for any events before or after the incidents at Marichjhapi.

Let me come back to Santosh's testimony. There were at least 400 refugee youths taking that journey that day. The inhabitants of this island were enraged when they heard about the police jumping on the women to arrest them. They started shooting arrows at the police, as well as some of the sharpened sticks. But these were no match for their superior firepower. We just wanted to show the strength of our presence with those arrows. Those who had come to the riverside were holding drums, conch-shells, which they were beating or playing on to make noise. The women were ululating. There was an attempt to drum up a frenzy. In an unequal fight such things mattered and even had an effect like a weapon would. Seeing the situation take a turn for the worse, the police opened fire around 9 am. Robin Joardar was shot in his hand and Arun was shot in his right leg. Blood streamed out of their bodies. The ground began to float away, dissolved in their streams of blood. The police started shooting to protect themselves, this is true. But it would not have come to that if they had just allowed the women to fetch the water. The Chief Minister and his lieutenants (that is, Amiya Samanta and his troops) were determined to not let us live. But we were equally determined to survive. After seeing Robin and Arun shot like that we could not keep our sense of reason. WE covered ourselves in their blood and started to chase the police. The police ran away. We shot arrows and spears towards them. None were life-threatening. Meanwhile, others were fighting in the river. The war noises continued along the shore. Our religious red flag was flying. The police were firing tear gas and we were aiming for them and throwing our own spears and arrows at them. On the shore of Kumirmari, all the houses had their doors and windows shut. They were frightened of the battle raging outside. We began to bang on those doors and ask for rice and dal and any other food- and that they had nothing to fear from us. WE had not eaten anything for 3 days. No one in our homes- our wives, children, parents- had had anything to eat. Give us whatever you have. They opened their doors after a while. They were shocked to see our blood-covered faces, and our hands that were holding crude weapons. It took us some time to explain that we had not come to attack them. But we also knew that there were some among them who were working as police informers. They understood our situation and attempted to help us. I also remember a saffron-clad Swamiji, but I can't remember his name now. He helped us a lot. Rice, dal, salt, potatoes were being loaded on our boats soon. Some boats managed to cross over to our island too. The police launch broke some of the boats again. Samiran Ghosh fell into the water and his legs were severed by the propeller of a police launch. The river began to run red. Wiping the tear gas off their eyes and faces in the water, some of the desperate refugees attacked the police. Ropes were tied to trees across the river to break a police launch. The police then attempted to flee and it made the refugees extremely cheerful! There was no chaos here. A group of people want only a bit of land to survive in their

homeland; they are not asking for the government's help, they have built their own settlements, created jobs for themselves, and have only asked that the police not employ their thugs to displace them; these people then learned that the government has, in fact, declared war on them, have conspired to kill them by depriving them of food and water, have imprisoned their neighbours and friends on false charges, have insulted the honour of their women- all of this would have provoked anyone to make a stand. Where is the chaos in that? No one could have foretold how insidious a government could turn out to be against its own subjects. Then we heard the news that the police were coming through Bagna. We heard the sound of guns firing, and those noises continually approached us. The bullets rained on interminably. We understood that the volunteers we had sent to different villages to seek help were being apprehended by the police. New recruits had been brought in. I hid in a pile of hay and waited for the opportunity to strike back. Suddenly, a boy who was standing beside me fell down after taking a bullet. The police heard his screams so they came and found us in our hiding spot. They shot me too, and the bullet went into the top-part of my right leg. Later, the whole leg had to be severed by a doctor. Look here...

Saying which, Santosh showed us his severed leg. In the fading light of a late afternoon in June, Santosh's severed leg appeared to challenge the analysis and narratives presented by Amiyakumar Samanta. A retired IPS Officer, Rachpal Singh, had said in a Vidhan Sabha General Assembly Meeting (16 February, 2010), that 140 rounds of bullets were fired on 31 January, 1979.<sup>3</sup> Rachpal was then the SDPO of Diamond Harbour. He heard the message on the radio. After reading the report I called Rachpal Singh. I asked him, Can we find the record at Alipur Headquarters? Rachpal answered, 'They have definitely concealed that document. They are masters at this game. But if a high-level investigation takes place it might come out in the open.' It is true that it will be hard to prove how many bullets were fired that day. Many political formations stand in the way of unvarnished truth from time to time. But this severed leg and Santosh Sarkar's descriptions tell us that the government has not been truthful about the matter.

Santosh said, Even after I fell from taking the bullet the police wanted to fire more shots and kill me there. But he stopped when an officer shouted at him. I found out later that the officer belonged to

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<sup>3</sup> The Daily Statesman published this news item on 16 February, 2010: 'Humanity wants an investigation into the Left Front Government's acts of anti-humanitarianism'. The report said: "According to his (Rachpal Singh) experience, it was during the economic blockade that had been imposed on Marichjhapi in January, 1979, by Jyoti Basu's government, when some refugees were carrying rice-dal and other foodstuffs on boats to Marichjhapi, that the police fired 140 rounds at them. 3 boats sank, but in the darkness no one could tell how many people drowned. Some of them did swim to safety, but we do not know how many died. The fact of 140 rounds being fired is recorded in the police's official diaries at Alipur station in 24 Parganas."

a DSP rank. He asked, Who ordered you to shoot? Why did you shoot? I couldn't get the DSP's name. It was because of him scolding the police constable that I survived that day.

Santosh Sarkar was taken to Hingaljanj Hospital, along with another man who had been shot. He lived for another hour or so, then died on the deck of the launch. Santosh does not know what happened to him after that. Santosh was admitted to R.G. Kar Hospital. He heard from the nurses that his leg was going to be operated on. So the operation took place, and when he revived consciousness he saw that his leg was gone. He spent a month and thirteen days at the hospital. Then he was kept at the Dum Dum Central Jail for two months. He would be taken regularly to the Basirhat court in a van full of people and brought back to the jail. There was no justice as such, only harassment.

We had merely asked for some land to live freely by ourselves as children of the country, as its citizens. The administration gave us no opportunity to doubt its own intentions, however- which was to show us our place. People of menial status like us have to be happy with what we get! This is what Santosh said.

One day Santosh began to scream in the court, Tell us why we have been locked up? Give us justice! If you want to keep us in jail you should also put our parents, wives and children in jail. They are dying of hunger outside. If your justice has any real power summon Jyoti Basu right now. Let him say what crimes we have committed. We will also say how he has wronged us. Santosh did not have to stay in jail for long after this outburst. Before any judgments could be passed by the court they all received bail.

Meanwhile, another deadly incident took place in his life. His mother, Kaminibala Sarkar, used to live on the Dum Dum Cantonment Platform. She had begun to lose her mental stability after hearing about her son losing his leg. One day she was cut down on the railway tracks. People had shouted to warn her about the oncoming train- but she did not hear them in time.

2 months after the incident, in March of 1979, the revolutionary Sunil Das wrote in an informative piece, 'The state government became desperate to evict these innocent refugees and began their efforts in earnest from 24 January, 1979. A 'total war' was declared against these homeless, lower caste people. With 50 launch boats and an excessive amount of policemen they imposed such a stringent blockade that not a single morsel of food or a solitary drop of water could reach the unfortunate refugees. This has resulted in the inevitable. The blockaded refugees of Marichjhapi released a list of 43 names of those who had died from starvation and thirst. There was a further list of

19 names of those who had died of various other diseases. Dying of starvation, the refugees desperately tried to stave it off by eating leaves and roots from the forests around them. Moved by thirst, a few women tried to escape the blockade on 28 January and reach Kumirmari; but when they did so the police launches battered their boats, sank some of them and fired tear gas at them. This was continued the following day as well. The number of tear gas shooters increased on 30 January and on 31 January it fell like heavy rain on innumerable men and women. Those who had braved the blockade to secure food and water were not just attacked on their boats and sunk, but also fired with tear gas to emphasize their miserable condition. It was not just tear gas that was fired that day either. The refugees claim that normal bullets were also fired- leading to the death of at least 30 people. And among those who were forced to dive into the water to save their lives- almost 128 of them are still missing. A list of their names and other details have been published by Marichjhapi residents too. They alleged further that among those who had been thrown into the river, 4 women had been seized by their hair, pulled out of the water and taken to the Bagna reserve forest camp, where their honour was insulted.' (*In the Shadows of Marichjhapi*)

Regarding the 31 January incident, the government sources only acknowledged the death of 2 people. Meni Munda and her son. Both were residents of Kumirmari. The government statements made no mention of Marichjhapi residents who had been killed. These statements were prepared by the local police, or, to be more precise, by the District Police Superintendent. It was done to conceal the truth. If the truth came out it would cause trouble and resistance within the Left Front alliance, and the CPI(M) would be placed in an uncomfortable position. The other Left Front allies had not become as ineffective then as they are today.

One can find the reasons for arriving at such a judgment.

1. On 9 February, 1979 (8 days after the incident) the Chief Minister Jyoti Basu said at the Vidhan Sabha, 'The government had taken some administrative measures to stop illegal activities and disorder that was being spread by those destroying valuable forest resources at Marichjhapi. I want to say clearly that the West Bengal government is not organizing any economic blockade against the refugees, nor is it contemplating any such measure. The things we have had to do to stop such illegal activities and those who are encouraging them have the support of the well-meaning people of the state.' (*Marichjhapi...* p. 259) In other words, the Chief Minister is denying any allegations of 'economic blockade' or anything of that kind. Later, Amiyakumar Samanta said, 'Entry and exit from Marichjhapi was not totally blocked- so their contact with

civilization was never severed.' (p.259) These statements are far from the truth. And deliberately so. All witness reports indicate that the blockade had been going on since before any announcement. There were even decisions taken to stop the supply of drinking water or destroy existing sources. The revolutionary Kamala Basu had visited Marichjhapi during the blockade. She saw the conditions there herself. She also wrote about it. We took an interview with her. She said sadly that she could not believe how people could be so cruel.

2. Where the truth of the blockade is totally denied how can one expect an admission of the numbers of the dead? In spite of that, why was Meni Munda and 2 others' deaths acknowledged? That was because Meni Munda was a local resident. There would be general unrest if they denied that news. The local RSP leaders may get into trouble. The RSP had the strongest organization there at the time.
3. The foremost leader of the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee Raiharan Baroi stated that 15 people died in the events of 31 January. Amiyakumar Samanta only admitted the deaths of 2. Because they were inhabitants of Kumirmari. Were the rest rejected because they were 'strangers'? Jyoti Basu called them 'refugees', but in the language of his subordinates, they were 'strangers'. Since strangers have no fixed addresses, they have no deaths either. Since the state is not obliged to recognize a 'stranger', their accusations, and even the allegations of murdering them can be claimed to be 'untrue and imaginary'.
4. During the blockade two young men- Sufol Haldar and Debabrata Biswas- crossed the river at night and escaped Marichjhapi for Kolkata. They contacted the lawyers Niharendu Dutta and Shakya Sen and lodged a petition at the High Court against the blockade. On 8 February, the judge Rabindranath Sen declared the blockade to be illegal. He asked for an investigation into the allegations made by both sides at Marichjhapi. The public defender was, as usual, absent during the investigation. When the lawyers representing the refugees- Sakya Sen and Niharendu Majumdar- went to investigate on the island plainclothes policemen were employed to keep a watch on their movements and actions. Shakya Sen and his partner submitted their reports on the investigation but it turned out that the next hearing in the case was arranged not under Rabindranath Pyne but Bimal Chandra Basak's court. He said in his judgment, Marichjhapi falls under the protected forests zone, so the presence of the refugees is illegal. There was no mention of Shakya Sen's report in the 31-page judgment. This might surprise you but it was true. Was the invisible hand of the Left Front government working behind the scenes to suppress the

truth and prevent any information from coming out. Did the district police play a role in this?  
We can only find out if there is a full investigation.

*Anandabazar Patrika* carried a report on 1 February, 1979 that said: 'Shooting at Marichjhapi: 6 Dead, 5 injured'. This was not a reliable report. Due to the imposition of Section 144, no journalists were present there. The remote island of Marichjhapi could not be reached easily even from Basirhat at the time. One would have to take a police launch to get there. Arrangements for news gathering were also fairly outdated at the time. Otherwise, why would an event that took place at 9 in the morning be reported only in the evening? News reporters would have to wait for police sources to confirm their stories. And police sources would state, a few thousand refugees took a few hundred boats and attacked the police camp. The police were forced to return fire. The conflict took place 'sometime before evening fell'. The sources initially identified only 1 dead, but the district police super later turned the figure into 2. There was another significant section in the report, which said, 'About 3000 refugees from 73 families have submitted a request with the police to transfer them to Dandakaranya. In that request, they have said that they will allow the police super to come ashore on the island safely for discussions regarding the matter. The police super responded by asking the heads of those families to meet him on the launch.; Amiyakumar Samanta has also written about some refugees wanting to go back to Dandakaranya. That was apparently the hidden motive behind their attack on the Kumirmari camp. 'There is no doubt that they had lost hope when the strangers began to demand that they leave Marichjhapi. It can also be said with certainty that there was an attempt to create such a disruptive event that the situation could be dramatically worsened. The decision to attack the police camp by crossing the river came from a place of deep helplessness.' (p. 261) What we have heard from those unfortunate, dispossessed 'strangers', only confirms the fact that the police's attempt to murder them with the weapon of starvation was then concealed by the blame of their 'attack'. The fact that Amiyakumar Samanta and *Anandabazar Patrika's* sources were the same could be put under doubt, however. Amiyakumar Samanta writes, 'Why did the Committee leaders plan such an attack? I did not get a chance to speak with the leaders or the leader-like volunteers who worked there.' Why did this not happen? Did he make an effort to find out?

After the incident at least 150 people were arrested. They were kept in prison for over two months. There weren't any big leaders among them, but several small to mid-level influencers. They knew why they had gone together to Kumirmari's shore that day. The bullet-wounded Santosh Sarkar



was in police custody. The police could have easily found out what their 'plan' was. Actually, the idea of concocting a 'plan' belonged to the police. They wanted to spread the disinformation quickly. Even they knew this allegation had no substance to it. All sources have confirmed that the refugees went to Kumirmari in search of food and water, so this fact is as clear as daylight. In order to conceal this truth, they created the lie of the refugees' attack- and this motivation can hardly be called fair-minded. The most recognized RSP leader of the time from the organizations at Gosaba and Basanti was Ashok Chaudhuri who said in an interview, Before the events of 31 January, 2 CPI(M) leaders Hemanta Ghoshal and Shankar Gupta went to Kumirmari. Possibly to see how the blockade was going and if the refugees had been seriously affected or not. They saw that the general confusion was transforming into a more coherent form of hatred, so they left Kumirmari in the afternoon itself. Ashok Chaudhuri said, The conflict took place over a 2 kilometer area that day. Which makes it almost impossible to say of certain how many police launches were present in the area, how many policemen were there, how many bullets were fired or how much tear gas was employed. Nor was it possible to say how many had died or were missing. Personal experiences provide us with partial narratives of the event. The conflict was not of the same intensity everywhere either. Thus, all the different people who had seen different aspects of the conflict had different stories to tell. But this much could be said without doubt that a few hundred dinghies belonging to the refugees were certainly broken by the police launches. They had gone looking for food and water. They were carrying bows and arrows, lances, spears and sharpened sticks. It seems like they were carrying these weapons to fortify themselves and frighten their tormentors somewhat. But how could their weapons be any match for the police guns? Apart from that, it is also worth remembering that the police had been regularly firing at the refugees and provoking them for days before the 31<sup>st</sup> arrived. Thus, the refugees grew unconcerned about how they appeared. Amiyakumar Samanta may not have known any of this at all. At the Bagna Forest Office's police camp the police would spend their time getting drunk and hatching plans to harass the refugees. The orders for firing guns came from there too. Desperate to evict the refugees, the police had become inured against the moral or legal challenges of indiscriminately firing at the refugees. It is possible that Amiyakumar Samanta does not know the full extent of such events. Even if he knows he won't be able to talk about it, because it might create trouble.

*At the Bagna Forest Office Police camp the officers would get drunk, have fun and order their subordinates to go out and shoot some people. The police launch would be taken out for a joyride along the Korankhali River while the police fired a few rounds at the people. This was how the people were provoked. The refugees would fall into their traps and shoot arrows at them. They had no superior weapons. Bows, arrows, lances, sharpened sticks- these were their weapons.*

## **The Body of Marichjhapi**

### **Ashok Chaudhuri**

Overnight thousands and thousands of people had appeared. Via Basirhat-Najat, or Chor-Hasnabad or Gosaba. I have heard that the police tried to stop them. But how could they stop them? It was a tide of humanity. The old, the young- everyone had come together in groups. If they were stopped many could have been injured or they could have died. The Left Front government will certainly not move towards that objective. The Leftists can't walk the same path as Congress-ites after all. At the time, the path of the Left was the people's path, following the people's ideology to serve their best interests. The bright image that the Left had in those days can barely be guessed today. Our party leaders at Kumirmari informed us that the sudden appearance of thousands of people were causing some problems. There was no drinking water supply on Marichjhapi island, simply because there wasn't supposed to be any. How will so many people live? Where will they find drinking water? How will they make a living? Where will they buy things? When demands are outstripped by supplies of labour certain problems crop up;

labour becomes cheaper. Older labourers find it harder to get jobs. This results in a conflict between the older workers and the newer groups of unemployed.

I went to see the conditions for myself and landed at Kumirmari island. I went to the side adjacent to which Marichjhapi island was situated. I saw many people had come over from that side fetch water. I spoke to a few of them and understood that they had come here expecting further hardship. In Dandakaranya their future looked dark and they were just hanging on for mere survival. Their children were getting ruined. Whatever struggles lay ahead, they were happy to eat even a single meal a day if they were able to build a permanent settlement on Marichjhapi. They will establish these settlements by their own labour. These words were impressed with the dreams fed to them by their leaders. But it was also apparent that they were highly resolved. I asked them, How will you live here? They said, We will figure it out. Water- for drinking or washing- was usually sourced from Kumirmari on boats. The people of Kumirmari had provided all that. The refugees made a lot of their own boats and dinghies later on, but their initial helpers were the people of Kumirmari. Otherwise they would have been in greater trouble. Actually, both the residents of Kumirmari and the refugees were members of marginalized communities. If one was in trouble how could the other not help? How could one live happily by leaving the other in pain or suffering?

The Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, did not understand this. He called the local RSP leader Prafulla Mondal and scolded him. Why are you asking them to stay there? Why are you helping them? They will not be allowed to live there. This is the government's decision. Marichjhapi is a Protected Forest zone, so the government is bound to evict them. Prafulla Mondal was then the Kumirmari Panchayat chief. He had replied, Even if you order us we won't be able to chase them away. They will take water from our island, and food. This cannot be stopped. Are they dogs or cats that I can call them at my whim and chase them out at another whim? Even if they are staggered across the state, the Bengali refugees can be settled in Bengal. You can jail me, imprison me for life or even hang me, but I cannot send them away. Prafulla Mondal had told me afterwards, What kind of a Chief Minister is this? He doesn't want to listen. He scolds, threatens; what kind of rude behaviour is this? Prafulla always spoke his mind. Even if I felt bad hearing these words he had said what he wanted to say without any prevarication.

I went to the island of Marichjhapi twice. They had set up small houses from whatever wood and foliage they could find from the forest. It is probably more accurate to describe them as hovels, rather than houses. It is impossible to imagine how much suffering you must be willing to bear every day in order to live in those habitations. They had also raised the ground around them to cut a path along it.

The schoolroom was long, with a partition in the middle. There were a few blackboards. Perhaps some charitable organization or outsider had donated them. There was also a doctor's chamber that regularly saw patients. Medicines would be bought from Hasnabad-Hingolganj. They would also get some of those medicines freely donated to them.

This was what had happened, and they had just come to stay there. They were moving ahead with such plans of settlement and some thinking about their future. The refugee leaders had been informed about the goings-on at Marichjhapi, perhaps some of them had even visited the island themselves. It is still not clear why the government so cruelly sought to remove them. Was it because they had refused to join the banner of the CPI(M) party? Our organization is quite powerful in the 24 Parganas district. When the Communist Party had disassociated themselves from the Tebhaga Revolution we had stood beside the helpless peasants, keeping their struggles alive. We also developed a good relationship with the refugees who had come from Dandakaranya. This could be another reason for their eviction.

The police and the state administration have behaved inhumanly with the people of Marichjhapi. The Chief Minister gave out his orders, and the District Administrator Indrajit Chowdhury and the police super Amiyakumar Samanta carried them out. Amiyakumar Samanta and Indrajit Chowdhury can be blamed equally for the atrocities. Amiya Babu is a skilled and honest officer but he will not be able to be honest about what went on at Marichjhapi. He has some obligations too. It is also the case that he does not know about many things that happened at Marichjhapi. At the Bagna Forest Office Police camp the officers would get drunk, have fun and order their subordinates to go out and shoot some people. The police launch would be taken out for a joyride along the Korankhali River while the police fired a few rounds at the people. This was how the people were provoked. The refugees would fall into their traps and shoot arrows at them. They had no superior weapons. Bows, arrows, lances, sharpened sticks- these were their weapons.

On 31 January, 1979, it was the police who started fomenting trouble. It was forbidden for people and goods to enter Marichjhapi. A blockade was imposed. Food, medicines, even water was disallowed. At this time, many children died of starvation or from having consumed inedible stuff on the island. No one will know precisely how many died. On 30 January the police fired bullets all day into the island from their launches. On 31 January some residents of the island became desperate enough to brave a crossing to secure food and water. The police smashed their boats and sank them. It was after this that a war-like atmosphere was created. It was an unequal fight- spread across a 2 kilometer area.

Many refugees were killed. We cannot even estimate how many rounds of bullets the police fired. We still don't know why someone entered Meni Munda's kitchen and shot her dead, nor do we know who ordered it.

Meni Munda's death caused a lot of unrest at Kumirmari island. A general meeting was called there on 5 February. Amiyakumar Samanta came to fetch me from 124 Dharamatala Street at 5:30 am. Three ministers spoke at the Kumirmari meeting: Kamal Guha, Debabrata Bandopadhyay and Binay Chaudhuri. About 8000 people had attended it. Prafulla Mondal was presiding over the meeting. The ministers expressed their grief at the news of the police shootings. Binay Chaudhuri asked for forgiveness. Due to the state of things being as they were I was forced to stay back at Kumirmari.

By provoking the people, angering them and pushing them to the edge of hunger and thirst the police allowed the events of 31 January to take place. Even though the Minister asked for forgiveness at the meeting the police continued to visit their depredations upon the islanders. We will never find out the precise numbers of those who died of starvation, or from eating inedible stuff or from lack of medical treatment. We don't even know how many died on 31 January during the police shooting on the river. It will also never be found out how many people died during the operations of 14-16 May, or how many were injured. The administration was able to suppress this mass murder somehow.

I saw the burnt houses from the Korankhali River on 18 May. I had received news that the CPI(M) had pushed 2000 of its cadres through Sandeshkhali-Hingalganj and into Marichjhhapi. They were the ones who started the fire. I went to see this on a steamer boat from the Hamilton estate. The fisherman said we could not go any further. A gang of crocodiles were coming our way. To eat the bodies. They were thrashing around in the water with those dead bodies. Marichjhhapi's body!

*(The writer was part of the organizing group for RSP at 24 Parganas. He's a former political representative from that party. This text is based on an interview conducted with him.)*

*Manab Babu was taking his boat into the mouth of Chilmari when he said that he had heard a slogan raised by the refugees. 'Dandakaran is the way of death; we are not going back to Dandakaran'. It was such a frightening struggle that kept them in Bengal. They are people from a water-borne country, from the land of shades. To them the Dandak forest appeared like a land-locked plateau. Rough, uneven ground- how could that make somebody feel at home? Debu captured the embankment, concealed by grasslands, with his camera.*

**Cold ashes, hot tears**

**Shyamaprasad Baidya**

5 December was a Sunday. I was waiting expectantly for the Bali boat. It was at the Dayapur Boat bank. Debkumar was striking his foot on the ground. Mukunda da was going into the market and coming out to check if the Bali boat's head could be seen approaching the bank. He kept saying to me, Shyama, do you see the head of the Bali boat? I would say, No. Let's wait for 10 minutes, then we could go on an engine van maybe. When we could not see the Bali boat's head even after 10 minutes I grew dispirited and said- No, let's go. The Bali boat won't come today. Let us leave on the engine van.

So we left on the engine van. Within 30-34 minutes we reached the Satjelia regional office, got off the van, paid for it and ran. We ran to the Malmelia River's bank, where we saw the tide was coming in. The water was dancing ecstatically. The Garal River was on our right hand side. On the other side of

the river was a dense, mysterious forest. On the northside, if we follow our nose straight-ahead, runs the Hentalbari River. Gomor was on the left. We were supposed to reach Kumirmari via Mollakhali.

We got on to the special boats and waited. Mukunda da was constantly exhorting the boatman to get going. He was saying that we had to go very far. The boatman asked, Where are you going? Mukunda da said, We're going to Kumirmari. The boatman said, But you can see Kumirmari from here. Why are you being so impatient?

Soon, the boatman started the engine of his mechanical boat and we were off. We reached Mollakhali in 5 minutes. Then, a van stand. Upon reaching we said, Brother, we want to go the ferry dock at Palamari. The van driver asked how many we were, so I said there were three of us. The driver said, You'll have to pay for 4 passengers.

Why?

We don't get any return passengers there.

Mukunda da said, Okay we will give you the fare you are asking for. How much is it?

The driver said, Fifty rupees.

I said, Okay, let's go.

Debkumar took his camera and other belongings and lay down flat on the van. Before getting on to the van, Mukunda da told the driver, Look brother, we are submitting our possessions and lives in your custody. Please take care as we go. We will get off wherever you ask us to do so. But don't get into anything too risky.

I said, Brother you are talking about protecting our possessions and lives. On our public buses and trams I have seen them write that you should protect your life and possessions. Why have you reversed the order by asking him to protect your possessions and then your life? Mukunda da said, I don't know about all that- go and ask Mujtaba Ali. I asked, Where will I find him? Mukunda said, Either in heaven or hell. And if you're afraid of searching in either of those domains you can just come to my house and borrow my copy of Ali saheb's book *Deshe-Bideshe (At Home and Abroad)*. While we were talking about such things, the van driver said, This is the crossing for Banikanta. We will take a right turn. On the left we will leave behind a small road that goes towards Mollakhali. 10-15 minutes later our van reached a road by the riverside. We got off the van, paid him the fare and asked him where the ferry dock

was. The driver said, You have to walk south for a bit, and you will soon arrive at the ferry dock. Excellent. It was a wonderful environment. The boatman at the ferry dock was wearing a black coat and staring at us. His boat was also mechanical. But it's hard to imagine more than 100 people crossing on it every day. When we got on the boat we saw an old man curled up in a corner of the deck. And there were three of us. I asked the boatman, When will your boat leave? He replied in a gravelly voice, How can I go if there aren't a couple more passengers coming on? That was true. But why have to attached a motor to your boat? Could you not use a hand-pulled lever? There was no reply from the boatman. Debkumar said, Shyama we have all become very mechanical. Would you have paid him if he was just pulling an oar? I did not respond to Debkumar's question.

Mukunda da got on the boat and began to rush the boatman. Come one boatman, he said, we have to go far. The boatman asked, Where? Mukunda da said, Near the Bagna Forest. The boatman said, Then you'll have to pay me for 7 passengers. Mukunda da said, Yes, I will give you that, but please let's leave as soon as possible. The boatman set off. Our boat reached the Palamari jetty soon. Mukunda da asked the boatman, What is the name of this river? He said, Sarasa River.

And the one to the right- that is going into the forest?

Kanksha.

And what is the river that is flowing by Kumirmari?

The boatman said, Babu that river is called Kurankhali. If you walk along the shore of that river on Kumirmari, past its fisheries, you will get to see Marichjhapi.

The boatman had an assistant. A school student. His home was at Kumirmari. He got off the boat and started walking with us. I asked, Aren't you a boatman's son?

He said, No.

Then?

I go to school.

Which school?

South Kumirmari High School.



Which class?

8.

Oh okay. Then you must know which one is Manabendra Mondal's house?

No I don't. Where will all of you go?

We are going to Manabendra Mondal's house.

He hesitated for a bit. Then he said, I don't really recognize-

I said, There is a primary school. The Durga Puja is celebrated there.

He said, Come with me. You will have to take the road that I am going to take as well. We felt relieved to find a guide there. Mukunda da and Debu had already figured out the boy's name. It was Deepu; Deepu Mondal. We were walking with Deepu by the side of canal. Mukunda da said, Tell me Deepu, what is the name of this road we are walking down, by the side of the canal? Deepu replied, Kali's canal. And what about the neighbourhood- what is it called?

Deepu said, Hemnathpara.

The sky was covered lightly with clouds. A streak of sunlight could peek through here and there. Through the gaps in the houses of the neighbourhood I could see an enormous field. Crops were growing on it. People had started appointing labourers for harvesting or tying up the crops for collection. Some were bringing the tied up bundles of harvest to their homes. The sky began to look ominous, as if it were about to rain or break into a storm. It would ruin our visit.

White cranes were flying over a field that was tinged with yellow. If there was sunlight they would have been gleaming. Today it is misty, instead. I asked Debkumar, Will your camera work? Debu's responses sounded listless. Meanwhile, I saw that the boy who was accompanying us had shown us the way and crossed over to the other side of the canal. We left the village and took the paved path that went through the field. People were working on either side of it. I asked, Brothers, can someone tell me how long it will take to reach the South Kumirmari Primary School? They said, It won't take too long. Debkumar said, That's what we have been hearing for a while now. But we have been walking for hours now. But no, it really did not take us much longer to reach. Within 10-12 minutes we reached Manabendra Mondal's (or, Manab babu as we called him) courtyard and fishery by the river. WE were

standing on the river embankment. Manab babu came up from a small sandbank and said, Come let's go home. Have some refreshments. You have come a long way.

I said, I will have some water, but not food. We wanted to take advantage of the tide. If it receded we wouldn't be able to utilize the camera. And then there was the ominous-looking sky too.

Manab babu said, Okay then come with me and have some water. We got down from the embankment and went into his house. His family was engaged in cooking. His wife was a beautiful, resourceful woman. There was a darkish tinge to her skin. She could be said to be dark-skinned. She came out of the kitchen and made place for us to sit. She gave us water too. Meanwhile, we had found out what her name was and where she was originally from. She was from North Kumirmari's Bhurolia neighbourhood and her name was Geeta Mondal. I began to rush Manab babu and said, Please, let us make use of the tide. Geeta boudi (sister-in-law) said, It's almost afternoon. Don't you want to eat something before going- even a bit of spinach? I said, We'll finish the work first, then eat. We took Manab babu across the sandbank and pushed a boat out into the Korankhali River. Manab babu said, Let's go along near the Bada forest. The reverse tide is still in force on the other side. I said, Let's go. I told Debu, You keep an eye out through the camera. Begin shooting as soon as we see Marichjhapi. Take some pictures of the Korankhali River and Kumirmari too. Debu started his work.

Soon we reached the Chilmari canal. There was a huge launch boat belonging to the Forest Office anchored right next to it. Manab babu said that we will need someone's permission to enter. The young master is there, he will let us in. Mukunda da said, Of course, we were not going to enter without anyone's permission. I agreed with him, because one can't override such authorities. We went closer to the boat. As soon as Manab babu shouted out for the young master a young man, about 25-30 years of age and looking like someone who worked on the boat, came outside. The young man informed us that the young master was not in. Where did he go? Apparently, he had gone patrolling. I said, Brother, we just want to take some pictures of the Chilmari canal and that road that goes through the forest. The man said, That sounds fine- please go ahead. But don't go into the forest. We saw a tiger walking about yesterday. We said, We'll just need a few shots from the boat.

Debu took the pictures. Our boat turned around the Chilmari canal bend. I forgot to mention, but when we were turning the boat around at Chilmari, Manab babu said that he had heard a slogan raised by the refugees. I was studying in class 7 or 8 at the time. I asked, What was the slogan? He said, the slogan was: 'Dandakaran- the way of death/ We are not going back, to Dandakaran'. My mind was

struck as if by a forceful wind. What a desperate resolve the refugees had shown to remain in Bengal. They are folks who inhabit the water-borne lands of Bengal, and the shadier parts of it. For them, the Dandak Forest was an unyielding table-land. How could that rough, infertile ground become theirs? Then I asked Debu to look through his camera's viewfinder. Debu took pictures of the embankment at Marichjhapi, covered in grass. We went further along the Chilmari canal. We could see a group of boys from the village coming along the river from the other side. Manab babu said, the village boys are showing their city friends around the river and forests.

We left the water that was flowing along the Chilmari canal and entered the Korankhali River, moving slowly towards the east along the edge of the bank with the forests right next to us. Branches hanging out of the trees on the bank were lightly brushing our boat as we went along. The splashing sounds made by the oar also seemed to accentuate our solitude. Debu was still looking through his camera. On the Marichjhapi embankment I could see a variety of citizens from the world of trees arrayed on it: banyan, fig, jujube, neem, shrubs, including prickly shrubs.

The boat stopped when we went into Shorokkhali. There was a banyan tree in front of us. Beneath the tree was a dilapidated shrine to the *Bonbibi*. The idol had been recently installed. The room was probably constructed around 1978. The villagers would worship *Bonbibi* then go out to fish or hunt crabs in the forest. Of course, they would take permissions from the Forest Office beforehand. Debu asked Manab babu, So, was this embankment made by those who arrived in '77-'78? Manab babu said, No, this is the plantation's embankment. They had just put some clay on it. I saw the time on my mobile phone, it was 1:25 pm. No more, I said. Now let's head back home. We will have our lunch and begin our work here. The tide had started to pull the Korankhali River already. It seemed as if we could just sit with the oars in our hands and the boat would flow towards home on its own. Manab babu was then pointing out to us Meni Munda's house.

I said, We want to go to Meni Munda's house. Who is living there now?

He said, Her six sons and one daughter.

What is the eldest son's name?

Balaram Munda.

Okay, we will interview him in the evening. Manab babu said, Okay, let's go back home now.

2.

It was five minutes past 2 in the afternoon. There was no rush to get a bath, everyone had taken theirs already. We were served unripe bananas and bitter gourd mixed with fish-head in a vegetable curry. Then dal was given, followed by fish prepared in a potato curry. Geeta Devi was not just beautiful, but highly skilled in cooking. We were very satisfied. We were feeling a bit lazy after the meal but decided not to lie down. I didn't let Debu take a nap either.

We left Manab babu's house at 2:45 pm. We tried to be polite and asked Manab babu to take rest. Meanwhile, we were going to finish our work at the Bagna Forest. Geeta Devi would not allow that. All sorts of people are here together- let him be with you too. Besides, Bagna Forest is hardly nearby. It's on a far corner of Hemnagar. We did not object anymore. We saw Meni Munda's house on the way, as well as Panchanan Mondal's. We were noting the names as we walked along. These people needed to be interviewed. There were several broken houses on the way too, mostly around the river's sandbanks. It was a long way. It gets late, but the road doesn't stop. I don't know what misfortune we brought with us- but there was no sight of the sun. As if the sky refused to smile all day. I asked Debu, Can you find the Bagna Range Office? He said, Only obscurely. I asked him to take the picture nonetheless. We were walking ahead, and we needed Jhila, Raimongol and Hemnagar.

Mist was slowly enveloping the whole landscape. We went to stand near the Jhila River, so that the Range Office was on our right side. Bagna Forest office was on the left, along with the BSF Camp. And in front of us was the eternal, wide expanse of the Jhila River. If you looked to the left you would see the strong, loud and almighty force of Raimangal. It was mingling with the waters of Kalindi and entering the sea at its mouth. In the distance one could see what appeared to be a white sari, tinged with a thin, green linear border: that was Hemnagar. Evening hadn't quite fallen yet. I took the camera from Debu's hand and ran through the sand banks towards the forest to take a picture of the Range Office, but failed to do it. Debu said, Let it be, Shyama. We can try again in the morning tomorrow. I tried to capture the Jhila River as well. And the Raimangal, which flowed past Hemnagar. Now we were standing by the Jhila River, about to go into the Bagna Forest. There was an office there and we began to

sidle slowly towards it. Debu took a shot while entering the office. Mukunda da and Manab babu went to meet the young master. The young master had apparently decided not to say anything about Marichjhapi. He said, Whatever it is you want to know, you should find out at the Field Director's Office at Canning. So, they did not bother him with any other enquiries.

Then we went to Tapas Ray's house. I had heard that Tapas Babu's parents had come from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi in 1977-78. Looking at Tapas Babu's age, it seemed like he had only heard of Marichjhapi from his parents. He did not experience any of it himself. But I saw that when we were going to speak with Tapas Babu at his house a few people, including Ashutosh Mali, had also gathered in his courtyard and were sitting on jute mats. They made place for us to sit. Ashutosh Babu was a very eager man. He came forwards and said, What can Tapas tell you about '77-78? I am an old inhabitant of this neighbourhood. My name is Ashutosh Mali. I have seen how the harassments took place. The police would give us 30-40 rupees per day and take us with them.

I asked him, Why?

Ashutosh Babu said, To break the houses of the refugees. One day I also went to break their houses. A woman rushed out of her house to attack me with a sickle, so I ran away. Our Ranger at the time was Mohanty Babu. What can I say brother, many of our people had become refugees then.

I asked, Who were they?

Can you give me a few names?

He said, Why not? Dhiren Biswas, Paresh Mali. Many people came from Kochukhali too. And from Jhingebaj.

Why did they come?

They were greedy for free land. Many people were even eaten by tigers then. No one made a hue and cry about it. And the people who had come from Dandakaran were very resourceful and self-reliant. Soon enough they established metal forging workshops, bread-making factories, secondary and higher secondary schools.

If they had started a workshop where did they get the raw metals from?

They would get it from the Mollakhali market. They would steal wood to build the boats. They had even made boats out of bamboo sticks.

Others started talking around him. I'm representing a snatch of what they were saying. One of them said, God, what a horrible smell would come from the shore opposite Kumirmari. We could barely breathe!

What smell was that?

The smell of their shit and piss. The smell of dead people. Someone else intervened suddenly to say, They would steal and rob frequently! Another one protested this and said, What else were they supposed to do when they were starving?

They had no faults?

Then why did the government remove them?

Another man said, Of course they were removed, because they were destroying forest resources. They would take the coconuts from the trees in the plantations. Someone shouted beside him, Why should they not! You have imposed section 144- how will they find anything to eat! How can this be a part of their faults?

I asked Ashutosh Babu and found out that 500 launches were employed to drive out the refugees. About 100 boats were sunk in the water. Many people died at the time. The rotting corpses of people would float up and down the rivers Raimangal and Jhila.

But we could not tell when the village panchayat turned up as well. They said, Who are you? Why have you come here? Who is behind you and why are you collecting these documents? There was a lot of heat in their questioning style. We calmly responded to each of their questions. We said, We are also ordinary village people like you. There is no one behind us other than hardworking ordinary people like you. If you feel like answering our questions you can, or you do not have to. We are not forcing anyone. The panchayat head became calmer and told us about his personal experiences. He told us his name was Kalipada Barman, his house was at Kumirmari and that he was the elected panchayat head there. He said, We were very young in '77-78, when the refugees were inhumanly tortured- and I remember it vaguely. We greeted him and left the place.

We went to Panchanan Mondal's house after that. It was 7-7:30 in the evening then. He was preparing to retire for the night after his dinner. Manab babu asked him to stay up. He said, They want to talk to you for a bit. So, he came forward to speak with us and said, My name is Panchanan Mondal, my father was Chuni Mondal. Everyone called him Chuno. We were at Dandakaran.

We asked, What is your current profession?

He said that he sang the Ramayana. I go to Kolkata for work- this is my profession.

I asked him, You were all at Dandakaranya. Who brought you here?

He said without hesitating, Ram Chatterjee, Satish Mondal, Raiharan Baroi.

Which month did you arrive in?

Panchanan Babu said, We came in Chaitra or Falgun (Between February and April).

How did you come to Marichjhapi? Did you have boats?

Panchanan Babu said, No we did not have boats. We took a few by force from boatmen around those parts and came down the Raimangal. Others chose to walk here. The reached Kumirmari then crossed the river into Marichjhapi. I used to always stay at Kumirmari.

Why?

I did not like it. My wife's name is Lakshmi. My stepmother's name is also Lakshmi. My stepmother was a very nice woman. She never saw me in any negative light. A few years ago she was caught by a tiger under that banyan tree near the Shorokkhali. She had gone to catch fish. She did not have any children- I was the only one.

I asked, When did the police start harassing you?

Panchanan Babu said, It was very sudden. On the fifth day of Magh, I saw the police had started firing. I was very shocked. What was this about? Before that Jyoti Basu had held a meeting at Mollakhali Mangalchandra School's courtyard. He had said, Find a way to starve them to death. (?) Then people were killed like birds. They were put in sacks that were loaded with bricks and sunk into the Raimangal. They had dragged pregnant women and women who had just been through delivery forcibly onto

launches. I ran away and stayed with Lakshmi's father. Later I got married to Lakshmi. I have a daughter. I got her married to someone in Kumirmari too.

I asked, Why did you not return to Dandak?

Panchanan Babu said, For the simple reason that I did not think I would survive the stress of the journey; or rather, my body would- considering it was almost worn away by starvation. Many people died on the way there too.

When we were preparing to leave his house after greeting him, his wife told us, Is it enough for you to just listen to what your brother had to say? Do you have nothing to hear from me? We said enthusiastically, Yes, of course. Please tell us, how old were you then?

She said, 9-10 years possibly. I went with my father to see Marichjhapi as it was built up by the refugees.

Why?

We were selling jujube fruit. I remember my father bought a sickle at their iron workshop. He also bought bread from Naranthakur's bread factory. I have even played with the kids from that island. I don't understand why the government ultimately evicted them.

We greeted her and her husband again and stepped out in the darkness. Panchanan Babu's last words were still ringing in my ears: We have wanted to live on Bengali soil.

Now, we were going to Meni Munda's house. The darkness of the night was closing in. I had written all this down when Mukunda da suddenly said, Panchanan Mondal named three people: Satish Mondal, Raiharan Baroi and Ram Chatterjee. Tell me what state they were in when they returned. Yes, we were making a mistake. He corrected our mistake. We had asked Panchanan Mondal, Were Satish Babu, Raiharan Baroi and Ram Chatterjee standing with the refugees until the very end? Panchanan Mondal said, Satish Babu was made to wear a sari and leave through Satjelia in disguise. Raiharan Baroi and Ram Chatterjee had to leave much earlier than that. Then I remembered something the panchayat head had said earlier when we were talking to him at Tapas Babu's house. He had said that they had prevented a leader from coming to the island at the time. The leader on that launch may have been Raiharan Baroi- that is what our understanding is.



Now, let me come to the matter of Balaram Munda, Meni Munda's son. He had gone to sleep. Our guide cum friend (I should call him a friend, because we wouldn't have been able to do this much by ourselves) Manab babu called him awake. Everyone knew Balaram Munda as Bolai. When he shouted his name a few times a 50-55 year old man came walking out of the house. He was wearing a dirty jacket. Manab babu said- These people have come to talk to you. He brought out a jute mat and made place for us to sit in his verandah. We asked him to sit as well. He squatted near a corner of the room. We said, Your mother's name is Meni Munda.

He said, Yes, my mother's name is Meni Munda.

You are her elder son.

Yes.

How many brothers do you have?

We are six brothers and two sisters.

You are the eldest?

No, my sister is the eldest. Her name is Akali Munda, my younger sister is called Geeta Munda. The brothers in the middle are called Jairam, Ram, Lakshman and Bharat Munda. My youngest brother is called Sarat Munda.

Your father's name?

Bhushan Munda.

Why did the police shoot your mother? You people weren't part of the refugee communities.

Balaram Munda said, The district secretary (for RSP) at the time was Mihir Debnath. Refugees would come on this side and return. There were no restrictions. But one day I saw the police were coming in through Sunil Mridha's house. And there were police all along the stretch until that concrete house that you see over there. Just full of policemen. Suddenly I saw a policeman enter our house- my mother was then inside. He shot her through the window. I almost went crazy and started shouting at the man. So, the police beat me up. Then they took me beside the fishery and tied me up to the gum tree. I was in tears then. There was a small straw room next to my courtyard and some refugees came and took shelter there; there were old people, young, all types... I'm telling you God's truth, then I saw

the police picking refugees out of the straw stack and kicking them in the stomach or pressing down on their necks with their feet. And the people were just turning over dead, immobile. I saw all this myself. Then Sunil da heard from somewhere that Bolai (my nickname) had been killed. So, he immediately picked up his rifle and 150 rounds of bullets and rushed towards our house. When he saw me he asked, Tell me who tied you up! I was crying then. Sunil da untied my hands and cut the ropes that bound me to the tree. Then my elder sister, Akali ran towards us. She said, We live here. Why did they kill mother? I saw the police was about to press the trigger and shoot her as well- so I immediately kicked him in the waist. The policeman fell into a hole near the embankment. After he got up, he came towards me and began to hit me with the butt of his rifle. I fell unconscious. When I came to- I saw there was just my elder sister Akali behind me and no one else. She was handing over our ration card to the policeman. The policeman looked at the ration card and whistled twice. A lot of the other policemen gathered together hearing that. They were dragging my mother's body to the launch, meanwhile, which was called... I think... Bir Hanuman. We started pleading with them with our folded hands... and said, Please leave our mother with us. We want to perform her last rites. We will not lodge any complaints or accusations. Please leave her body behind. But they did not listen and carried her away.

I'm still ashamed to describe to you how badly they behaved with the girls. I feel like crying when I think about it. They would strip them and shoot them in their chests. They killed many people like that. Then Sunil da took me... to his house. We sat there and had almost a go-down full of grain ourselves. Sunil da had instructed us not to step outside. And he told everyone that if anybody needed to enter his house they must do it after 4 in the morning.

Afterwards, the government offered us 2 bighas of land but we refused. We could not drink our mother's blood and survive like that.

Then Prafulla da (Mondal), Pradip da (Biswas) told us- here you go, Bolai. This time we are giving you 2 bighas of land. They were the village elders then.

Okay, where did the police barricade stretch across?

From Sunil Mridha's house... to the South Kumirmari Primary School.

We came out of Balaram Munda's house. The night was getting denser, darker, and everything was in a hush. But our affectionate sister-in-law Geeta Devi was waiting for us with prepared food. We felt a bit like criminals... We sat down to eat without speaking. She looked after our needs during the

meal. There were different kinds of dishes, including a country-reared chicken dish. Mukunda da said, Sister-in-law! What have you done, this is simply too much to eat. She said with a smile, It really is not. Please eat your fill. No, give me a piece of the chicken and some curry, and keep the rest away. In spite of that, I saw her pouring the whole dish into his plate. Meanwhile Debu was telling me, Shyama I know you are mourning your parent's death. Will you eat chicken? I laughed and said, I tend not to include chicken in the list of non-vegetarian dishes! Now I must talk about a man without whom this would not have happened- Manabendra Mondal. We have referred to him as Manab babu so far. He is incomparable. We wouldn't have been able to do anything without his help.

Manab babu's mother's name was Amela Mondal. His father's name was Dhirendranath Mondal. Amela was then quite old, about 80-85 years of age. She said, Son, what can I tell you about the refugees! It is hard to describe how inhumanly they were harassed.

I asked, Can you tell me where they would get money for food etc.? She said, Whatever gold and jewellery they brought they had to sell or pawn at local shops to get money for food. They would also bring wood cut from the trees in the forest and sell them at cheap rates to make a living.

Now tell me, did the refugees ever harass you people?

Amela Devi said, No they never harassed anyone.

Did they thief or steal?

Amala Devi said, I don't know about that. They did not steal anything from here, at least... Then the cops came from Lalbazaar. They killed most people. When they were taking them away they told us not to step out of our houses, so we stayed in.

Now I want to come to Geeta Devi. We had asked her for a photograph. She instantly agreed and gave us one. Then I asked, Sister-in-law, when the refugees came here how old were you? She said she was around 10-12 years old. I remember quite well, the stories of the police atrocities. We started taking notes as she spoke. Geeta Mondal's original home was on the banks of Bhurolia, Kumirmari. She was 10 or 12 years old at the time. She had seen the inhuman tortures through her young eyes.

*The DM came for a meeting. He said, Anyone who can manage to break or drown those boats will be given an additional bonus of 1000 Rupees. Think about how much 1000 Rupees meant in that time of '78-79! The refugees were crossing Raimangal to fetch drinking water. It was a rough crossing. Nanda Janah's launch went and struck the boats. The people were in the water, trying to swim to safety. They were being hit in the head with the wooden oars.*

### **A ray of sunshine through scattered clouds**

#### **Mukunda Gayen**

[Mukunda Gayen is from the island of Satjelia. Village and Post Office: Dayapur, South 24 Parganas. The book *Marichjhapi: Chinna Desh, Chinna Itihash*, in his words, digs deep into his heart and causes his pain to freshen. He is a devoted reader of Jibanananda Das. He travels the countryside like a wanderer, absorbing all its sights and sounds. He writes it down in his memory, or in notebooks. He rues the fact that the rivers of Sunderban are losing their youthful, full bodies before their time and becoming a sickly, old Brahmin aunt. He heaves a deep sigh when the forces of progress build a paved road through

the country. He becomes angry when he sees people getting used to the daily humiliations meted out to them. Resorts and Tourists annoy him. He lives in a clay hut, where you can hear a leaf dropping. He writes poetry, stories- whatever he sees and understands, he writes something about them. He couldn't help call me after reading the book *Marichjhapi...* He was roused by the pain it caused in his heart. The pain of partition, the suffering caused to the rootless, lower caste Bengali Hindus who were forced to survive like they weren't human at all; the betrayal by their political leaders, it all added up to a history in the book. He told me that he had gone to Marichjhapi himself. He was a young man then. He has some experiences from that time. We asked him to write down those experiences. There was going to be a second edition of that book. He had said something else that day, A country can never become one's own. I did not understand what it meant then. Then I understood that lower caste people (derogatorily, *chhoto lok*) can never expect a country to own them fully. What kind of country could such 'low people' need? They survive at the whims and compassions of their overlords- living where they are asked to live, eating what they are asked to eat and sleeping where they are asked to sleep. The country belongs to those overlords. They give speeches, they make promises, they lend and take interest for their loans, they take taxes and run the country as they wish; and if you dare to disobey, you'll be killed or chased out. Chased out from East Bengal to Dandak Forest, then chased out to Marichjhapi, then chased out to a spot next to the railway lines or some other hell. Even those who had crossed over from East Bengal much before the partition and settled the forest lands are now mouldering, their soils corroding. Mukunda Gayen thought it was more important to describe the people of Marichjhapi and Sunderban instead of his own experiences. These seven interviews conducted by him are actually Marichjhapi's own words. -Editor]

#### Interview 1: Debdas Bala

If you listen to the Left's speeches all the time you will be forced to feel the deepest hatred for right wing politics. Jyoti Basu and his comrades would give radical speeches from the Opposition bench, exhorting Bengali people to return to Bengal. Then Ram Chatterjee and many Left cadres would go to college campuses and refugee habitations explaining to them sweetly about how they should come back to Bengal where they belonged. This rough, empty land is not made for you. You are people from a water-borne land. You have all grown up in the dark, cool shades of abundant vegetation and rich soils, so this treeless, infertile desert is not suited to you. Let's go back. The refugees could not tell that this was merely a means for them to increase the size of their vote-bank, Debdas Bala says. At the time, he

was a First-year student at Odisha's Dhenkanal College. They had also brought a few people over with their leadership. But then they saw that the ones who had so lovingly invited them had turned against them. Their group were asked to go back by the police in Bardhaman. Even then, Debdas and three of his friends managed to evade the police and go to Marichjhapi where they were shocked to see the conditions in which the people lived and the harassments they were subjected to. Police launches were on the Jhila River, they were also present at Kumirmari and Mollakhali's Domhani area. No one could send in any help. There was not even any drinking water to be had. The women were salvaging wild leaves and spinach to boil and eat. Even the children were being fed that. It was difficult to look at the faces of such desperate people. They looked like distant strangers in their own home. You could count the ribs on the young, starving men. The elder people would stare about confusedly, wondering if there was good news to be had from somewhere. But no, there was not. There could be no good news in Jyoti Basu's state.

Anyway, Satish Mondal had his own boat-army too. They had also blocked off the mouth of Jhil. But it was like putting up straw barricades in front of the police and paramilitary's superior firearms. A few hundred boats were sunk as well. And those who had tried to swim to safety after their boats were broken were smashed on their heads with wooden oars. The launches were driven over the bodies that were half-drowning in the water, making it look like a wonderful game played during Holi. Heavily booted steps of the police and paramilitary were ringing horrifyingly across the island as the refugees' meagre habitations were set alight. Many could not escape with their children and many ran away into the forest. Many were eaten by tigers.

Debdas and his people had also fled through the jungle. They walked for three days, and swam to the No. 10 sandbank where they reached Darik Mondal's house. After hiding there for about three days, they left for Odisha.

Interview 2: Sheikh Moniruddin Tarafdar

Mono, that is Moniruddin Tarafdar, is a salesman by profession. His house is in Gosaba. He had gone to Marichjhapi to sell things. He said there was almost nothing they did not think of building there- workshops, schools, sweetmeat makers, grocers, even a doctor's chamber. In his own words, The

educated women there taught the kids. They were great devotees of Netaji. Before school started they would sing this wonderful song: 'Kadam kadam baraye ja, Khushi ke geet gaye ja' ('Keep marching forward and signing songs of joy').

Moniruddin remembers how much the refugees struggled to establish their village. They were poor and weren't greedy. They were nice people, they did not fight with anyone else. So many of them died of starvation. But they never stole from or robbed anybody. They had dreams too. After the police troubles there I never went again. I heard that a lot of them were killed and the others were evicted.

But the police are claiming something else.

Police! Do you believe the police?

Why should I not?

I do not. They have forgotten how to speak the truth.

### Interview 3: Bablu Sarkar

Bablu Sarkar was the main driver of the launch Seagull, which belonged to the Tiger Project Reserve at the time. He said that the events of Marichjhapi have not been covered by the media as events are covered today. If it did, things would have been different. The police's unspeakable atrocities- I do not even have the words to describe them.

I used to drive the department's launch then. As soon as they saw a boat on the river they would batter it with the launches and sink them. Then they would hit the swimmers with their wooden oars. Some people would have their heads split open- and they would drown to their deaths.

Why?

Well, as they say- don't leave a fire, a debt or an enemy unattended for even a second! Don't you get it?

That's true.

Their drinking water supply was affected first. Then foodstuffs were forbidden to be carried to or from there. Instead of strangling them they just ensured their death by other means.

Tell me, were they thieves, louts or bad people of some kind?

How can you be sure of that! But I can still say that they were not that type at all. You can tell by the way they went about their business. But they would shoot arrows at us whenever they saw our launches. It was quite natural for them to do so. Their children were dying of diseases, hunger and thirst. Desperate, drowning men will even clutch at straws. If someone punches you repeatedly, surely you would want to protest at least. Would you not do that?

Yes, that is true as well.

Then tell me, should I now brand you as a thief or a lout forever? They were actually nation-less, landless orphans. They had to fight. What is their fight in the face of a great state's strength!

But there was a Janata Party government at the Centre then, led by Morarji Desai. They were not saying anything?

What will they say? They said that the mangrove cannot be destroyed.

Okay, according to the government's account there were only 2 deaths that day. Is this number accurate?

I can tell you countless people died. The people who were stuffed into the backs of trucks and driven to Hasnabad like cattle- how can I say if they were not killed as well?

Did you know their leader, Satish Mondal?

No, I did not know him. But I do know that he used to be a devotee of the Goddess Kali.

Where did you hear that?

Whenever I got off on that island, I would hear people talking about it.

I requested him for a photograph too. He said, Of course. I said, Brother, I forgot to ask where you live. He asked me to write down- 'Basanti'. He gave us a few more facts as well. He said he used to be the main driver of the launch 'Seagull'. It was the Tiger Reserve's launch. The police launch was called Jubbar. His house is at Mithakhali in Canning. He does not go out much these days, because he is old. The driver of the Hasnabad syndicate's launch 'Arnab' was called Nanda Janah. His house was at Narayanpur in Namkhana. He now suffers from paralysis. The DM came for a meeting. He said, Anyone



who can manage to break or drown those boats will be given an additional bonus of 1000 Rupees. Think about how much 1000 Rupees meant in that time of '78-79! Nanda Janah said he will do it. Section 144 had been already imposed by then. The refugees were crossing Raimangal to fetch drinking water. It was a rough crossing.

How many people were there in each boat?

Maybe 30 or 40 people were on each boat. Nanda Janah's launch went and struck the boats. The people were in the water, trying to swim to safety. They were being hit in the head with the wooden oars. The launches were churning the water in a mad frenzy. Many boats were struck and people drowned, never to be found again. I told Nanda Janah later, This was not the right thing to do. You are human, they are humans too. They are landless, country-less people, you should not have attacked them like this... After that Nanda had to run. There was the fear of the police, and apprehension because he had been marked by the general public. I get tears in my eyes whenever I have to talk about this, brother. I lose the ability to frame sentences. What is the use of remembering such forgotten things? Will it cause anything other than suffering? It certainly won't help anybody. Some women had just given birth, even their umbilical cords were not properly severed. They were dragged in that state on to the launches. Watching these things made the hair on my arms stand up in horror.

Interview 4: Bishnupada Barman

Bishnupada Barman is from Jamespur, in the Lahiripur region. He was a college student at the time. In '78/79 he had tried to enter Marichjhapi out of curiosity, but he failed to get in. He came until Satjelia then he was stopped by the local people. His relative forbade him to go too. He had told him, There is a lot of police oppression going on over there. They are not letting anybody enter. Section 144 was imposed. People who would go over to sell pumpkin or other vegetables were also not being able to enter the island. Many were getting detained or arrested.

He said, The elderly who could not walk properly were being dragged with ropes tied to their feet. Many men and women ran into the forest. They couldn't even find time to carry their children with

them. Many had also taken shelter in other people's homes in the village too; but I don't know if they ever found their family-members from whom they were estranged.

Tell me, were any of them involved in illegal activities- like smuggling or robbing?

No, they were not smugglers. They had merely responded to the call of returning to their land. They had even sold sawdust to make enough money for buying food. Think about it. They sold stuff worth 100 Rupees for 3 Rupees. Wood from the sponge gourd trees for 6 Rupees. Can you imagine that? People of Kumirmari, Mollakhali and Amtoli took advantage of their desperation and would barter their wood supplies for handfuls of rice, establishing their own houses very firmly in the process.

If there was any thieving going on, it would have been done by middlemen on this side. They would have bought things cheaply from the refugees and sold them at high prices outside. This could have happened too.

#### Interview 5: Raimoni Mistri

Now, let us consider the experiences of Raimoni Mistri. Her husband was Keshab Mistri, home at Lahiripur, and now she lives at Banikhali. She is about 80-85 years old. She started sobbing as soon as we mentioned Marichjhhapi. Son, you have come to rekindle a dead fire within me. She took a while to absorb her grief then she began speaking, I left three of my sons back in Dandakaranya. I could not see them or my husband ever again. A vehicle would come in the evenings to carry all the corpses away and bury them in a mass pit. Oh where did I leave my three children behind- saying which the old woman again broke down in tears. I sat there speechless. Time is the only thing that can heal such suffering. Raimoni slowly pulled herself together and began her narrative again. There were big balls of fire. They would throw the corpses of men and women into those rings of fire. And the fire would eagerly lick at the bodies of those dead people. You wouldn't believe it if you did not see it. It was like Yama's death factory in there.

Where did you live in Bangladesh?

Our house was in Chhutorkhali. When the Muslims started raising political slogans, the women of the Brahmin and Kayastha households were activated like sparks of fire and they plunged into the

river. We also moved towards Kalindi. People from the other side of the river would try to call us over by flying their towels in the air.

Why would they do that?

They would raise their towels and shout to us to go over to their side.

Did you go?

Of course we did. The village elders were all moving about. Whose directions were we going to wait for? Then the Khan armies started harassing and killing people everywhere... robbing women of their honour. What is the point of staying somewhere without your sense of honour? So we left mother Basumati behind.

Where were you taken?

We stayed at Hasnabad one night. Then we were sent straight to Dandakaranya. What can I tell you- rice tasted like sand, water, rice starch- everything tasted like sand. And the sun was terrible. It was very difficult to survive under that sun.

So who brought you to Marichjhapi?

Satish Morol (Mondal).

So, you've met Satish Mondal?

Yes, I have seen Satish Morol. He was a large man, and had a head full of curly hair. The colour of his skin was black. He used to devote himself.

How did he devote himself?

He would worship Ma Kaali.

Okay, I understand.

So, he brought us. He said to us, You are Bengalis, so let's go to Bengal. We have spoken to some big political leaders. You should come. Otherwise, you will find it difficult to keep your family alive here.

Do you remember any names of the big political leaders from Bengal?

No, son, I won't be able to remember their names. Grief and misfortune has wiped my memory clean of such details. If three young sons die what kind of mother will be able to bear it? I would just lie on the ground all day. My eldest daughter could cook a little bit. So I took her and the son who was on my lap and came here. You introduced me to Ajoy. So many people came over at the time with us. Almost overnight we had established some huts on the island and started living in them. There was a doctor's chamber, an iron workshop, a school. My eldest daughter got married. Then they chased us away.

Who chased you away?

The old woman hesitated for a while, then said, Are you sure you will not say this to anyone?

I said, No.

Then she whispered into my ear- Jyotish Basu. He came and held a meeting at the High school in Chhoto Mollakhali. Then the problems started. The first slogans were raised by your uncle (that is, Keshab Mistri). I took the boat they used to sell things outside and came to my brother-in-law's house at the corner of No. 13.

Who was your brother-in-law at the corner of No.13?

Why, Kinu Mistri... he is my brother-in-law.

Your daughter and her husband- did they not go with you?

No, they stayed. Then one day they ran through the pouring rain into the forest and escaped. Now they live at Peyali. They have a good spot of land there. They came and told me, We could not stay there anymore. Many could not even take their children away while escaping. It was hard to tell where anyone ran when they escaped into the forest. Please, son, don't ask me to speak anymore. In my grief and unhappiness I have somehow managed to keep the door shut against Yama for myself. I have lost my sons, I have lost my husband. I'd feel relief only if I died.

How did your husband die?

He went to catch crabs. He was caught by a tiger.

## Interview 6: Sujit Ganguly

Sujit Ganguly works at the Forest Department. He lives at Dayapur, although he used to live at Kumirmari earlier. He was born there. He informed us that twenty seven launches were employed by the Hasnabad syndicate to just carry corpses that could be dumped into the sea.

Why did they kill so many people?

They died because they would shoot arrows at the police launches after their food and water supply had been blockaded. One of the arrows hit an officer's thigh once. Since then the police were firing on them indiscriminately.

Why did they arrest Prafulla Mondal and Pradip Biswas?

Prafulla da and Pradip da were very daring people, even though they had as strong streak of sympathy for the people within them. They would disobey the police orders and provide food and water for the refugees. The police could not tolerate that.

When were the huts set on fire?

They evicted the people and set their huts alight. In order to beat them up and chase them out they also brought help from outside. The village panchayat leader from Sandeshkhali, Abu Bakar Naskar, sent about 400 people. You can still see the remains of the embankment they had tried to build. It's next to the Korankhali River. It was after these events that a Range Office was built at Marichjhapi, while they kept another Revenue Office at Bagna.

What kind of roles did people from other districts play?

Look, the people who came over from Bangladesh- most of them were our relatives in one way or another. The pain caused by their suffering was obviously greater for us than for those in other districts, wasn't it?

## Interview 7: Gokulananda Sarkar

The former head teacher of M.C. High School, Gokulananda Sarkar, told us that by the time he went to Marichjhapi everyone else had left. It was like a graveyard. The school rooms were burnt down, as were the huts. It looked like they had collapsed on their faces after being burnt halfway through.

Why did you go?

Because I was curious.

You became curious after they left?

I don't know, but I still went. Maybe it was just to touch the memories of those who had come.

And what did you see?

The embankment that they had made, their burnt houses. The burnt coal in their workshop, some scattered pieces of wood. That's about it.

Did you see any ruined coconut trees?

Yes, I did see a lot of coconut trees that had been hacked. When their food was blockaded they resorted to eating the flesh of the coconuts, for which they had to hack the trees.

What else did you see?

I saw the river Korankhali in ebb tide, looking like an old Brahmin woman. On the other side was the still, quiet village of Kumirmari. Under the blue sky I saw man's earth- paralyzed into unconsciousness. I started remembering the faces of those who had lost their country, their land, their children, their husbands.

